

Interview with Susan Sink

For HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies with Professor Satterwhite

Interviewee occupation: Owner/manager of Sinkland Farms in Riner, VA

Time and place: October 19, 2010 at 6:15 pm at Sinkland Farms in Riner, VA

Interviewer: Ashley Griffin, senior Interdisciplinary Studies major from Milford, VA

AG: Ashley Griffin

SS: Susan Sink

AG: Ok, will you state your name and your job title for me please?

SS: Yes, I'm Susan Sink, and I am owner and manager of Sinkland Farms.

AG: Alright, um...and can you tell me more about Sinkland Farms like how did it start?

SS: Sure. Yea. Ok. Um... Sinkland Farms...uh...began in 1980 with the purchase of this piece of property from an...uh...a dairy farmer, an existing dairy farmer, in the dairy business. My husband graduated from Virginia Tech, Henry in the College of Agriculture, and I graduated from Radford University in the College of Business. And as soon as we finished college, we got married. And he was from a home dairy farm and knew that that was going to be his life's occupation. You know? It's just simply like if you're from a farm and you want that as your occupation, it's sort of like in the blood. It's just like something that is...is just bred into you...[laughs] I believe. [laughs] um...but anyway...we were...um...looking around for farms in Montgomery County. Both Henry and I were from Rocky Mountain, VA in Franklin County, which is about an hour's drive from here.

AG: Ok.

SS: And...uh...we knew that we couldn't go back home...to...for him to join in with his dad on the home dairy because the home dairy was operated by his dad and his uncle. And between the dad and the uncle there were nine children, and Henry was not... he was in the younger group. And there was already two older sons in each family interested in continuing the dairy with the dad. So he knew and we knew that we would need to find our own place...uh... for our dairy operation. So we bought this farm in 1980 from Edwin Keith who was wanting to retire from the dairy business at that point in time, and he was looking to find a couple, like us, that would continue with the dairy business. Of course, he didn't want his property to be sold and developed.

AG: Right, okay.

SS: He was very interested in...uh...continuing the farming operation. So we bought the farm, the property, all the cattle, all the milk equipment, all of the tractors—everything. It was like a turn key process. In fact...um...Mr. Keith milked his last time in 1979 on December 31st in the evening, and then the ownership changed over for January 1st. So Henry, my husband, was to go out and milk the cows that morning on January 1st. Well we were in the house, which came with the farm also, that night. I guess that was New Year's Eve, and about 2:00 in the morning we were in the bed asleep. About 2:00 in the morning there was a knock on the door, and so

we both ran to the door cus immediately in the middle of the night you think if someone is knocking on your door there's an emergency—something not good as happened. And that instance was—we went to the door, opened it, and there was a deputy sheriff at the front door, and he was pointing...uh...out into the yard and down Route 8, which is the highway in front of our farm. The entire milking herd was out in the yard and walking, ambling down Route 8. So the past farmer, or Mr. Keith, uh, must have been so excited that was his last milk that he forgot to lock the gate. So that was our entrance into the dairy business.

AG: Oh, wow.

SS: And it's sort of indicative of times to come. Uh, and the reason that I say that is because the dairy business has been...uh...is a very difficult and hard life. Um, one of the hardest things in the production/agriculture business. And a lot of that has to do with because you milk cows 365 days out of the year, and it's a twice a day or three times a day operation. Our milking herd was milked two times a day. And so you always have to be here, and the two other circumstances that make dairy...uh... a difficult occupation is that you always have to rely on the weather for your crops for feed for the cattle, and Mother Nature can be very unpredictable. And also there's government pricing involved for milk products. And so we have no control over pricing.

AG: Um, I understand that your husband grew up on a farm, a dairy farm, did you as well? How was your family life back home?

SS: Yea, well...my husband and I met when we were in the eighth grade, junior high school. He went to a county elementary school, and I went to the Rocky Mountain, the town elementary school. And we met in junior high, in homeroom. We both, uh, we in the same homeroom. And we became very best friends. And, uh, my background is—I was more like the town girl and he was the country boy. Uh, he was from a home dairy production operation, and my dad also had property. We lived on about 95 acres, but it was more like a hobby farm. My dad had another occupation with the state government.

AG: Uh, let's see, what about your parents? What did they do for a living?

SS: Well, my dad was employed by the state of Virginia, and he was an inspector of agricultural operations in Franklin County until he retired. He also was in—he did many things...he was a hobby farmer; he raised beef cattle, uh, as well as...he also... was a contractor and built houses, as well. So he had many things that he did. My mother was a stay-at-home mom.

AG: Okay

SS: As many in my generation—the mothers tended to stay home at that point in time.

AG: Do you have children? And if so, what are their occupations?

SS: Right, I do; I have three children. Uh, the oldest is Lisa, and she's a Hokie—graduated from Tech in the College of Business—double majored in accounting and finance...and now she's a CPA a matter of fact. My son Curtis went to Bridgewater—graduated in the College of Business. He played football his entire college career, and he works as a facilities recreation manager in...one of the buildings at Radford University, and he manages the weight room, the intramural sports, and all the recreational programs for Radford. Then my youngest daughter, Leslie, is a

sophomore at Radford University. She's studying communications and, uh, child psychology.

AG: Have any of your children been interested or have they worked on the farm with you?

[Brief interruption]

SS: Uh...my children have, I guess the correct wording would be: they have associated with the farm. Of course, when they were growing up, we had them basically do some chores around the farm, but nothing that occupied their time consistently and regularly. In other words, if dad needed to have hay put up, he would call my son during the summer months, but he never had any one of the children go milk with him everyday, feed the calves, or do a lot of the daily chores. Um, you know, from the get go we knew...we learned very soon that agriculture is a very tough, tough hard occupation, and we felt that we wanted our children to do something other than retain and be on the farm.

AG: If your children were interested or someone else was interested in owning and operating a farm, what advice would you give them?

SS: Well, I would certainly tell them, uh, a couple of things. One, uh, farm life...having a farm and raising a family on a farm can be absolutely phenomenal, uh, for raising children because there's so much that can be learned outside of the classroom in just experiencing life on the farm. You see cattle birthing calves, going out and you're really one with nature and conservation, and I think that is truly a plus in today's generation. So my children have had that exposure, which, you know, is atypical today. Many, many college kids are not close to or from family farms, as agriculture had diminished over the years, and often times they don't even have a farm in their history—their farm background with their grandparents or great-grandparents.

[Brief interruption to speak with customers]

AG: Okay, what about a typical day on the farm? When do you get in? What all do you do? And when do you leave?

SS: A couple of things that I need to explain. Henry and I operated the dairy farm until 2005. We sold out of the dairy herd, and well....let me go back, step back. During the years from 1980 through the next few decades, we experienced a lot of hardship with drought because it seemed like once every three or four years, you'd have a horrible drought and we would have to buy feed, which was like tens of thousands and over a hundred thousand dollars typically a year to buy feed to feed your cattle when you can't produce it, um, because of lack of rain. So we experienced a number of hardships, and during the course of the years, we started doing extra things to diversify and give us extra income, to be able to pay the farm bills. So we experimented first with sweet corn, and we even still sell sweet corn here for the people in the community. We've done other things, like we've had a you pick strawberry patch for about 12 years in the late 80s and early 90s. We grew thorn less blackberry bushes, uh, we grew some Christmas trees for sale, uh, and then we started growing pumpkins for whole sale purposes. And the pumpkin crop was a great cash crop for us; there seemed to be a huge market for wholesale pumpkins. And, uh, so... let me tell you how we got out of moving out of actual

production agriculture into more of an agri-tourism business, which is what Sinkland Farms is known as today.

AG: Okay

SS: We are, uh, known widely in Southwest Virginia for our pumpkin festival. It's the 17th year, this year, and we started, again, 17 years ago, with a very, very small—and sort of on a whim. Henry and I had gone to a festival in Craig County many years ago, and we went through their experience and could not believe the number of people they had attending to ride a hayride and see some farm animals and pick a pumpkin. So we came back from that experience, the afternoon experience, and uh, and we both said “we can do that” because we both have an ideal location, being 2 miles from Interstate 81 and right smack dab between Virginia Tech and Radford University, with Roanoke, Salem, and the towns of Radford and Christiansburg and Blacksburg fairly, you know, fairly close with good roads to get back and forth to the farm. So the very next year we opened up very small with basically what we had seen the year before in the Craig County festival experience. We had a hayride to the pumpkin patch, we put some of our farm animals in this big barn down here, and um...we um...had our church come out and sell hotdogs and homemade goods for food, and we just started like that and grew and grew and grew over the years. And so did our crowds grow. We started out that first time, and we probably had less than a thousand people come the entire month of October. And as we began making a name for ourselves for the pumpkin festival and growing what we had—we added many things like: we were one of the earliest corn mazes in the state of Virginia. That corn maze is about 14 years old, and we were one of the first in the state to have a corn maze. We began adding other things...I've had craft and art vendors come in to sell their wares, uh, we brought in pony rides and carriage rides. We also began bringing music on the wagon stages right beside the ice cream shop. And um... even today we are thinking of different ways we can increase the experience for families when they attend on the weekends here. And new this year, we've added a couple of new things: we now not only have pony rides and carriage rides...we also have larger horses and offer a horseback riding trail ride on the farm. And that's been a hit with older elementary school, high school, and college kids. There's been entire families that's gone on that.

AG: I know, I've been looking forward to that too.

SS: That goes about every thirty minutes and takes about twenty minutes to go back and forth back over the property. Uh, also what we have started doing in the last few years is to add on additional experiences. I've had Hokie-tron come for an appearance every Saturday and Sunday afternoon that he's available. The music had increased over the years. We used to just have one band, and now I bring in two bands every Saturday and Sunday afternoon. And the music, of course from this area, particularly from Floyd is phenomenal. We had a band here this past Sunday that, I will tell you this lady is gonna be the next Allison Krauss. She was fabulous; they're actually cutting a cd. So this coming weekend we have the world champion Pumpkin Chunkin, team Carbo, visiting the farm from Raleigh, North Carolina. They're gonna bring their huge trebuchet, which is as large as what you see here in this ice cream shop, and they'll be doing hurling pumpkins from the trebuchet every hour.

AG: Wow, [laughs]

SS: And they tell me they will be going over 2,000 feet—hurling pumpkins over 2000 feet.

AG: That's exciting.

SS: Also, we have a special Halloween weekend coming up. There is a boyscout pack, or troop, where the different groups will be competing against each other. They will be building their own small trebuchets and have a competition oh hurling that Saturday of Halloween weekend. Then I'll have costume parades, pet parades, then I have storytelling on Halloween, Sunday afternoon plus we will continue with the music.

AG: Wow.

SS: So we have lots of extra activities going on to enhance the experience for the families, for visitors.

AG: Wow, that sounds like a lot. That sounds great. What part of the farm requires the most of your time?

SS: Well I should probably say that I've always had an off-the-farm job. My husband was here and worked in the production end of the dairy industry, and I've always had an off-the-farm job. So when you ask me what I would advise young farmers going into the business, I think you have to have an off-the-farm income to enhance family living because I've been able to be able to...we've been able to do things and have extra money because of my extra income that's not related to the farm. And so many... I guess the traditional farm family, both the husband and the wife, work on the farm, uh, that are my age and older, but any young couple going into the farming and agriculture, I would recommend that as one thing they should think about—one of the spouses having an off-the-farm income.

AG: Right, right, okay. Um...let's see, uh, if you weren't working this job, what would you be doing? Besides the farm and your Radford...

SS: Okay. Well let me tell you why I'm so heavily involved right now. It is that I lost my husband in 2007. He was killed in an accident, and so otherwise, he would be sitting here in this interview. So it was certainly a complete shock to the family and unexpected, and we decided, the three children and I, decided that we wanted to carry on his legacy here at Sinkland Farms. And that's why we've continued to build and enhance the Sinkland Farms reputation, just to carry on his legacy. I know he's up somewhere in Heaven smiling while...

AG: It's so big now, too.

SS: It's grown even more in the last three years because we've really tried to come together as a family and think about what all we can do to enhance the experience. So in other words, I'm sort of not here...I'm here in this position not by choice. It is only by circumstances, uncontrollable circumstances that I'm here in this position, but now I really relish this position. So I continue my full-time position, uh, in another occupation, off-the-farm, so that I can, um, have the extra salary to invest in the farm, so when I retire, when the time comes that I retire from Radford University, that I can...I will have an...a business already in operation, already noted, and, um, you know, a steady market already, which we do with the pumpkin festival. But I've also added several other things at Sinkland Farms that we will probably get into next.

AG: Can you tell me about a crazy experience or situation at your job and how you handled it?

SS: Well, I can tell you something that happened just this last weekend. We had, uh, a family go through the corn maze, or a teenager and a child. It was not the parent, go through the corn maze, and the teenager let the child run through the corn maze early, and, uh, lost the child. So the parents...all of a sudden everyone's looking for me...we've got a lost child in the corn maze, and I said "oh, don't worry. He'll find his way out somewhere." So sure enough he came...he came walking down the little gravel road here about ten minutes later cus he darted out of the corn maze near the top of the field. And so we found him with no problems.

AG: Let's see...what kind of personality requirements are there for working in like, um, a tourist business?

SS: Well, first there's several things. One, I think that you need to be extraverted. You need to be a um...in agri-tourism, when you're involved with events, you need to always remember that the customer is king. And I always think...I've been to Disney many times with our children and that was by virtue of me being able to have another position...an off-the-farm one...to be able to go there. Um.. you know I look at the way Disney is represented by their employees, and that's what I want here. I want smiling faces where you accommodate all needs and wishes, so that customer services is the number one priority.

AG: What is the best thing about your job?

SS: The best thing my job here at Sinkland Farms is to come out on the weekends is seeing families with young children smiling and laughing and having a great time. And that's what makes it all worthwhile.

AG: What would you say is the hardest thing about your job?

SS: Well, the hardest thing is carrying on two occupations. Right now, I am totally and utterly exhausted. The other thing...the hardest thing is realizing that, um, being perfect is a very, very high expectation. And I am, uh, a perfectionist. And I will walk around and I will see the tiniest pieces of trash, and I'll stoop down to pick it up because I want everything to be A-1, first class perfect. And often times, I think that is an expectation that many people don't have. So...

AG: That's hard to do, but it's worth it...

SS: Yes, it is. I think you're right.

AG: Um, where do you see yourself and/or the farm in 5 to 10 years?

SS: Well, we will be carrying on, and I just hope to continue enhancing and enlarging the opportunities here at Sinkland Farms for events and tourism. Uh, a couple of examples.

[Interruption for Susan to scoop ice cream for customers in ice cream shop where we were interviewing]

AG: Um, we were talking about the farm in 5 to 10 years.

SS: Okay, um so in the last...since Henry has been gone, there are a couple of other things that I've done. First of all, I have taken one of the older cow barns and renovated it into an events center. Um, over the last 5 to 7 years, we've hosted a number of weddings on our property...outdoor weddings. And I was thinking...we got more and more calls...and I was thinking I'm losing wedding business due to the fact that I don't have an area that is under roof in case it should rain. And as you

book your place, your venue, several months out normally, and again Mother Nature is very fickle. So...I'll take you down and show you the barn before you leave.

AG: Okay

SS: But I'm very excited about it. It was renovated about a year ago, and I was 80% booked this first season.

AG: Wow.

SS: And now I already have 4 weddings on the calendar for 2011. And in that building, uh, I've tried to retain the traditional feel of a barn. I haven't put drywall up, and it's not...you know...it doesn't look like a room, it looks like a barn. And I think that's very much appreciated by the people that are renting it cus they're looking for something extraordinary. And, um, also as you look around the farm, you can see that we've got a wonderful view of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the background and a pond, and we have several opportunities or places on the farm that are ideal...ideally suited for outdoor weddings, but now I also have a functioning area that's very pretty, very nice, um, for indoor facilities...at least for, if not for the wedding reception.

AG: Right.

SS: And I've also hosted a couple of music events, uh, a fireworks and music event this past July 4th, um, during that particular time period. I've also had numerous other parties, retirement parties, birthday parties for adults, and other receptions, so, in that big barn.

AG: In our class, in American studies, we've been talking about the American dream a lot. Um, what would you say your definition is and do you believe it's still real?

SS: Well, you know, the American dream, I think, um, for many is very materialistic. Uh, I think as I have aged and become more wise and have gone through this unfortunate situation with the passing of my husband, and becoming more wise in age as well, I know that, uh, life is not all about material things. And it's more about really...it's more about what you can do for others, and one thing that I'm very proud about that Sinkland Farms does is: it does provide a community service in the Riner area because we do employ a lot of students from Auburn High School. I employ not only students but adults from this particular community. And we offer an outing, a uh, an experience for families. It is very affordable, um, and in particular, offer an extra opportunity for families to enjoy themselves as a family here on the weekends—to have that family experience.

AG: Well, I was just gonna ask if I missed anything, but I think we're alright.

[end]