

Internship report

I spent the summer in Grundy County. By the end of the summer, I worked in Monteagle on Mondays and Fridays, in Coalmont on Tuesdays and Saturdays and in Altamont on Wednesdays and Thursdays. The goal was to work in agriculture; each of the three places I worked produced or sold food. The internship let me experience farming and selling practices in an area near Sewanee from people who welcomed and taught me.

The Sweetons, Jerry and Tami, have a set of greenhouses, a mum field and garden where they live in White City, and a produce stand in Monteagle. Their business is called White City Produce. They mainly sell produce they buy from haulers in Chattanooga. The rest comes from Amish farmers in Kentucky, people they know, and their greenhouse and garden. They run the produce stand every day through the summer and fall -- One of the two works at the produce stand while the other hauls or works at the house.

At the beginning of the summer, I worked in the greenhouses, a bit in the garden, and in the mum field. The morning routine was to water the greenhouses, turn on the fans, and open the fern house. On Fridays, I went through Tami's list for the day after the morning chores since Tami was gone to the Murfreesboro farmer's market and Jerry was hauling fruit and covering the produce stand. I cut herbs to sell over the weekend, split plants in burlap sacks to repot, and other tasks. On Mondays, Tami and I worked together. We planted tomato and pepper plants next to the greenhouses and herbs on the ends of the garden because plants that did not sell went to the garden to sell the produce. The mums were an ongoing project. We started by sorting last year's mums to save the survivors, then took cuttings, started the cuttings in plug trays with root tonic, moved the plugs into pots and put them out for this fall's mums. The beginning of the summer was about greenhouse plants and mums.

Once most of the greenhouse plants went out or died, I started working at the produce stand. The routine was to load produce from the cooler next to the fern house, water the greenhouses as before on Fridays, and drive to the produce stand. At the produce stand, I

opened, set everything out and kept it stocked as customers came until Jerry came back from Chattanooga. Mostly I sold produce as people came to the stand. He, sometimes we, unloaded his truck and I stayed at the stand or went back to the greenhouses for the afternoon. I saw how customers interact with produce and choose what they buy.

Amy and Caleb Rae run Solace Farm in Coalmont. They own 90 acres with pastures to rotate cows, goats and alpacas in one group and chickens and turkeys in another. Closer to the house, they have ducks in a pen, houses for broody hens, a chick shed, and 3 gardens. I lived with Amy and Caleb, their son, Liam, and Caleb's brother, Owen, and drove from Coalmont to the other farms throughout the summer. I felt torn between staying there and spending days at the other farms and some nights on the other farms or in Sewanee. Solace Farm had the greatest emphasis on feeding the family with what they grew. They function as a family and homestead.

I would put work there in 5 categories: chore, indoor, garden, outdoor, and project. By chore, I mean anything that has to happen every day: fill cow and chicken water, check the electric fence, fill food and water for broody hens, collect duck eggs, collect chicken eggs, feed the dogs, and light the propane heater at night for the new chicks. Caleb and Owen did most of these chores. I did all of them at some point and was responsible for the broody hens and the chicks unless I was not there. Inside, Amy and I did things like peeling garlic, making soap, and wilting chard to freeze plus the other things that have to happen every day: cooking and dishes. Amy cooked most every meal. She taught me about putting meals together for a family. She also taught me how to can. I did not do much of the outdoor work except cleaning a fence line one day, chopping some thistle and helping move the cows and goats to new pasture. Caleb and Owen did most of what I call outdoor work. I did work in the gardens. Some of the tasks were to look for pests like hornworms and squash bugs, transplant sweet potatoes, sow corn, and mulch the pathways. Some projects I helped with were a solar dehydrator, a chicken cage, and a chicken tractor. Living there taught me the scope of work that has to happen on a farm.

Michael and Sherri Raines own a 40-acre farm in Altamont. He keeps a large garden and fruit trees, has about 100 chickens in 4 coops, and has pasture for 4 cows. People know him for the tomato house he keeps with his neighbor with 30-foot hydroponic plants. Like Tami, he spends several days a week at farmer's markets to sell. Like Amy and Caleb, his farm combines livestock with fruit and vegetable production. He taught me about the tomato greenhouse, row crops, and shop work.

I did work on my own and with Michael. During the day, I weeded and picked okra, tomatoes, peppers, beans and peas in rows much longer than I worked in until then. Like the Sweetons and Amy and Caleb, he also had daily chores. In his case, the chores were to feed and water the cows and chickens, collect eggs and feed the dog and cats. I helped with the chores in the evening. I started the summer by putting up a wire and string trellis for pole beans with Michael and Sherri. I ended the summer by picking blackberries in the cow pasture. In between, we put gutters and rain barrels on the chicken coops to supply water to the chickens, I learned how to mow and till and we delivered produce to McMinnville. I benefited from his sense of invention and tinkering.

I learned concrete skills as a result of the whole experience. When I started, I did not have a way to get from farm to farm, so I borrowed a truck from Nate, Sewanee's Domain Manager, for the summer. He and Jess, his wife, taught me how to drive the manual transmission at the beginning of the summer. Working at the produce stand meant I had to learn how to sell produce and interact with customers. It seems that selling is about making people comfortable. I learned about caring for children by living with Amy, Caleb, and Liam, who was about 10 months old when I came and a year old when I left. I learned more cooking and baking with Amy and Michael, especially preparing food for a family. I benefited from the official work time and the ability to live and eat with the people who hosted me.

What I took away from the summer was a feeling that home and family can work. We can be grounded and have full lives. I believe in working together, cooking together, eating

together, and living together, even with my insecurities and being split over different places. In all three places, I learned how to work with my sponsors. It was not a linear progression, but a set of moments throughout the summer when I saw how people can work together. The moments came when I calmed down enough to be comfortable with what I was doing. I needed to stop worrying to interact well with the people around me. I learned about relationships and interactions.

I thought of the summer as a way to test farming as an occupation. I came away thinking that I can do basic farming tasks, but not by myself. I think that farming requires a family. It also seems to require supplemental income. Jerry and Tami's living comes only from the produce stand but requires a lot of outside produce. Of the other two groups, Caleb works as a physician's assistant and Sherri works at the veteran's hospital. If I want to farm, I need another source of income. I enjoyed the work, but started to resent chores that had to happen every day. I need to solve that problem by changing my attitude, because repeated tasks will not go away by choosing a different occupation. I think that farming as a career should happen in a group that recognizes a need for money and encourages positive attitudes.

The most useful advice for future interns is to listen with great attention and intention. I found myself cutting off explanations, interrupting, or assuming that I knew what my host was going to say. I needed to listen more carefully and patiently. Internships rely on open communication because the intern is working on something that is not his own. Interns and their sponsors also need a clear understanding of accountability and hierarchy. Even when the sponsor does not directly pay the intern, the intern needs a clear sense that the sponsor will hold him accountable for his work and be in charge of projects. I encourage a lot of open communication.