

Clesi Bennett

Solace Farm Homestead (Coalmont, TN) & Sewanee Farm and Organic Garden (Sewanee, TN)

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This summer, I was chosen to be part of the Sewanee Summer Farm Team along with four other students. This internship was comprised of two parts. About sixty percent of each week was spent interning for a local farmer (Amy Rae at Solace Farm Homestead in Coalmont, TN) and about forty percent of each week was spent interning for the newly-hired Sewanee Farm Manager, Gina Raicovich, working on the Cheston Farm and the Sewanee Student Organic Garden. Work I did for both Gina and Amy took on similar structure and was in the field of sustainable agriculture. In both internships, I had day-to-day tasks that could take as little as a few minutes or last as long as a few hours, but I rarely had a task that extended over an 8-hour day. Since each farm was in a different level of development and had slightly different production goals, my responsibilities differed at each location. At Solace, the farm is a homestead, meaning the Rae's live on their farm and aim for sustainable self-sufficiency by performing simple, back-to-the-land practices (i.e., they are off the grid and city water, they do not have heating or air-conditioning, they built their house themselves, they grow all their own food organically, etc.). Solace Farm also focuses more on livestock-- although they do have modest vegetable, grain, and spices/herb beds-- because the farm is located on an old strip mine and the soil is not practical for growing crops. Solace Farm was established in 2008, so the development and building process is more or less complete. Because of these

things, most of my work at Solace consisted of keeping crops watered and rid of pests, harvesting crops, and watering, feeding, moving, and tending to animals. Amy also made soap, shampoo, and lotion, knitted, dried herbs and spices, and canned vegetables so I was also to help with those. The Rae's sold these items as well as eggs and some vegetables at the Cumberland Farmer's Market in Sewanee and the Tracy City Farmer's Market, and I was able to help prepare orders.

Much of my work done at Sewanee was developmental work. The Sewanee Farm is divided into two locations. One is a forty-acre pasture by Lake Dimmick called the Cheston Farm, where we tended to twenty beef steer while studying the possibility of future patch-burn grazing. The other location is about a half-acre plot behind the baseball field, softball field, and practice football field where we cleaned out debris, surveyed the land, bought tools and supplies, built raised beds, and planted our first crop. I also researched possibilities of the next phases of agriculture at Sewanee, such as more livestock, varieties of crops, student programming, etc. These responsibilities and daily tasks enabled me to learn many new skills and ways of thinking.

From Solace Farm, I was able to understand and observe how true sustainable self-sufficiency is achieved. I learned that dedication to this type of lifestyle must be unwavering and many sacrifices must be made along the way. This lifestyle is not easy and many people would see it as backwards. While on Solace Farm, I also learned many "old-time" skills. I learned how to can vegetables such as beets, tomatoes, and cucumbers using a pressure-cooker. I

learned how to milk goats and make cheese from that milk. I learned the arduous process of harvesting grains by hand, which includes hours of willowing, spinning, and grinding. I was able to learn many new recipes and how to cook in season. Lastly, and probably my favorite thing to learn, was how to make soap, shampoo, and lotion out of different types of oils, lye, cocoa butter, beeswax, honey, and water. At Sewanee, I learned how the planning and development process of a farm operation works. I learned that sometimes you have to take chances, hoping for the best and preparing for the worse. In the first part of the summer, there was a seriously drought that lowered the steer's watering pond significantly. To deal with this, we quickly had to find a solution. We ended up pulling water from Lake Dimmick into large troughs using fire hose. This drought taught me the importance of quick thinking and reacting as well as adaptability to changing conditions. I was also able to attend meetings of the Sewanee Farm Advisory Committee this summer where I learned the interworking and considerations of a farm and helped develop a future agriculture program for students at Sewanee. At both farms, I was able to learn the importance of making the best of what you are given because things are never ideal, especially in agriculture. In both cases, the land restricted many possibilities. At Solace Farm, the land was once used for strip mining, so the soil can't retain any nutrients for gardening. The Rae's make all of their own soil by mixing compost, manure, and woody debris. Most view livestock as degrading to the land but the soil is of such poor quality on Solace Farm that they are actually using their livestock (Scottish highland cattle, alpacas, goats, horses, chickens, ducks,

geese, and turkeys) to reclaim the land and return it to an improved state. At Sewanee, the size and location of the land is not ideal and acquiring more land or changing locations is very difficult. Because athletic fields surround the organic garden, we are competing for waterlines and must deal with old athletic debris thrown into the garden. The half acre also limits the amount of crops we can plant. Another thing I learned, while working both in Coalmont and in Sewanee, is the importance of sustainable agriculture and the need to get rid of or lessen the amount of industrial agriculture for environmental concerns, animal welfare concerns, human health concerns, and labor welfare concerns. The experiences that I gained this summer also contributed to my current career goals.

I went into this summer thinking that sustainable agriculture and farming was what I wanted to do in my life, but I learned that this is not exactly true. Although I love the homestead lifestyle of the Rae's, there is not much freedom. There is no sleeping in, no vacations, no days off. I enjoyed the manual labor at both locations but found it something that I could not do for the rest of my life. I am still fascinated by the world of sustainable agriculture though. I very much enjoyed the Sewanee Farm Advisory Committee meetings and researching future developments for agriculture at Sewanee. I am more fulfilled by constantly learning new things, acquiring new information and sharing this knowledge with others. Although I don't see myself working out in the fields permanently, I think I would enjoy keeping up a small, personal garden plot and working with sustainable agriculture by researching, developing, and teaching new policies and possibilities.