

*On the rolling pastures of Sand Mountain
three generations of Sumners have found ...*

Farming is an agreeable way of life

According to National Agriculture Statistics Service, Marshall County is home to 1,505 farms that produce chickens, cattle, pigs, vegetables, fruit and more. Farming is an essential industry. As the bumper sticker declares, "No farms, no food."

Beyond essentiality, farming is a way of life, and, more often than not, a family way of life.

That holds true at Sumners Farm near Boaz - in the Blessing community, to be more precise - where farming's been a way of life for at least three consecutive generations.

Andy Sumners partners with his father, Stanley, who lives nearby. Stanley's father, the late M.G. Sumners, grew row crops, raised beef cattle, sheep and turkeys. M.G.'s old home place is incorporated into parts of Andy's and Stanley's property.

They have 140 acres where 75 mama cows graze and this season gave birth to 60 calves. The Sumners also have two layer hen houses and, as of early August, two broiler houses. Gardening comes with the territory.

Stanley's wife, Helen, is part of the team. Andy's wife, Misty, a special ed teacher at Boaz Intermediate School, helps as she can. So do their two young children. Likewise for Andy's sister, Tisha, who has her own career, and her family.

"We've had public jobs," as Andy calls them, "but we always farmed. It's a way of life. It's bred into me." Their "Sumners Farm" sign could just as well read "Sumners' Way of Life."

*Some of the Sumners' South Poll cattle mosey across
one of their pastures. The cows feed strictly on grass.*



Story and photos by
David Moore

The Kawasaki Mule jostles over the hillside pasture, parting the tall fescue, Bermuda and Sudex grasses that the Sumners' South Poll beef cattle feed on. Andy drives, his dad, Stanley, in back. Andy tells a magazine writer, riding shotgun, that he recently resigned from AT&T after 15 years as a lineman. "It was a good job, but I never even think about it unless someone brings it up," he says.

Farming called. It's what he's always done, even while working full time elsewhere. He likes that, even with the continuity of three generations here, typical days don't exist on the farm.

"There's always something different to do," Andy says. "You just have to quit at the end of the day and start up again the next day."

Makes it easy to lose track of what day it is. Misty, he laughs, reminds him when Sunday rolls around.

Today, Andy says, he was out by 6 a.m., starting his morning with yesterday's leftover details. He checked on yesterday's progress – or lack of same – at two chicken houses he's building, then went to pay a man for rolling hay for him the day before.

By 7 he and Stanley were heading to Trussville, an hour away, to pick up a load of alfalfa hay then load the goose-neck trailer with chain-link fence for the ball field at the new family life center at the Sumners' church, Beulah Baptist.

When he got back from Trussville at 11:30 a.m., they returned to the new chicken houses to move two 6,500-gallon tanks into the well

shed there. Then the guy from the magazine showed up for an interview, which took a couple of hours.

Next they need to unload the fencing at the church to free the big trailer in order to move pasture fencing so the heifers can graze new grass.

"That hay the guy rolled for us



Stanley and son Andy talk farming. They live, and most of their farm is located, on the southeastern edge of Marshall County. Some of their land is just across the DeKalb County line. For more on Sumners Farm and South Poll cattle, visit: www.sumnersfarm.com.

yesterday needs to be stacked in the barn," Andy says, running out of fingers to tick off. "And I need to mow my yard."

"That's another thing," Stanley chimes in from the back of the Mule. "The baseball field needs mowing."

"Whether that gets done today is yet to be determined," Andy laughs. "We haven't eaten lunch yet, and it's 2:40."

Before quitting time Andy needs to hook the cattle trailer to his truck. In the morning the family heads out for Rosemary Beach in two vehicles. En route he'll drop his off his truck and trailer at a Florida farm, retrieve them on the way home loaded with six heifers.

Stanley predicts no supper before 8 p.m.

Schedules don't prohibit stopping

the Mule in a pasture for while to talk about what's near and dear to the Sumners. Doing anything other than farming, Stanley says, was never a consideration.

"I knew how to do what it took," he says. "Why not go into a field I knew something about?"

But know-how doesn't make farming easy.

"It's all hard work," Stanley says. "You have to be willing to be self-motivated, to get up and get after it and stay with it. You can't say, 'Ah, I don't feel good today. I'll just go to the lake.' You gotta' do the work. When the work is done, you can do something else."

Farming requires commitment to the lifestyle, which is a double-edged scythe.

"Sometimes it doesn't pay too good," Stanley says. "The years I was home with

the hens picking up eggs seven days a week, Andy and Tisha were right there in the chicken house with us."

When work was done, he tossed baseballs with them or took them fishing.

"I wasn't making a lot of money," Stanley says. "But I was paying the bills. And I was at home raising two kids."

That, he insists, is worth a lot.

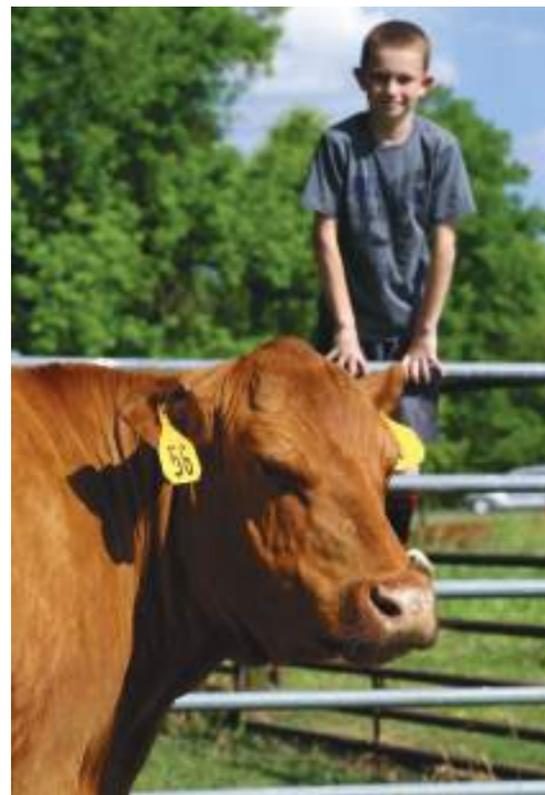
That Andy is also to the farm born gives his dad a sense of satisfaction. Validation, if you will.

"It can't help but make you proud when your son is doing what you do," Stanley says. "That he thinks enough about what you've done and accomplished to want to do the same thing, to follow your footsteps.

"But I wouldn't have felt no different toward him if he'd kept a



Andy's nephew, Mason George, watches cattle in the farmyard at his grandfather's house, lower left. Starting with a herd of 20 in 2006, the Sumners raise South Poll beef cattle, a cross between four breeds developed by Teddy Gentry, a Fort Payne farmer best known as a member of the band Alabama. The Sumners raise their South Polls from birth to 600-800 pounds, at which point they're sold to producers who finish growing them out. The Sumners believe in the benefits of grass-raised beef, which is rising in popularity partly because it has less fat and higher omega-3 levels than grain-fed cattle. Sugar content is important to cows is higher in new growth grass. Rather than simply turning cattle out to pasture, the Sumners utilize strip grazing, confining cattle with moveable fencing to broad strips of pasture. "If you graze grass down to a certain height, then get the cows onto a new strip, the grass grows back faster and is less affected by dry weather," Andy says.





Since 1979 Stanley has raised breeder hens, whose fertilized eggs are hatched and grown into chicks that are raised in broiler houses for consumption. The Summers have 14,000-15,000 breeder hens and 700-800 roosters in each of two houses. The 7-8-pound hens are coming into production when he gets them at 21-22 weeks old. At peak they lay 12,000-13,000 eggs per day. The birds are 60-65 weeks old when the flock finishes out, at which point they are processed for soups and such.

public job. He had a good work ethic. He learned it on the farm. So whatever he did, he was going to be successful at it.

“He’ll do better on the farm than his daddy.”

Cows meander to the pond as the Kawasaki sits parked in the pasture. It’s as fine a spot as any on Sand Mountain for farm talk.

Technology and new methods – such as strip grazing – have improved farming. Stanley says Andy uses these changes to their benefit. Also, at least some changes in government policy have been helping farming he says, such as doing away with so many subsidies.

“Now it’s more competitive,” Stanley says. “If a farmer doesn’t do a good job and make a profit, he’s out of business.”

Solomon, the Summers’ only employee on the farm, examines and stacks the large breeder hen eggs that produce big-breasted broiler chickens for grocery stores and restaurants. Stanley says questions about steroid and hormone use are blown out of proportion.

“It’s not artificial growth,” he says. “It’s as wholesome a product as you can grow in your backyard. We know where it’s going – on somebody’s table. I wouldn’t eat it if there was anything in it that shouldn’t be.”



Under contract with Koch Foods in Gadsden, Andy expected to get his first birds or his two new broiler houses in early August. “Good mommas and daddies make a chick that will grow into a four-pound bird in about 35 days,” he says. “The genetics are what it’s all about. No steroids. No hormones. They get corn and soybean and all that good stuff.” He’ll grow out about seven bunches of chickens per year.

After church one Sunday this summer, the Summers gathered on Andy and Misty's large, covered back porch for a family portrait. Family members are, from left front, Helen, Brynlee and Mason George, Noah and Maggie Summers and Stanley; Matt and T'isha Summers George are on the back with Misty and Andy.



Farm product prices have not kept up with inflation, he says, but those prices still come closer to their products' worth than they once did, and that helps. Stanley knows what they get for their products, and he knows what they cost in the store, but the disparity doesn't bother him.

"I've seen what it takes to take one of these beef calves to the feed lot, to feed it out, process that beef, truck it to market, get it on the grocery store shelf ... There are a lot of steps involved," Stanley acknowledges, "and everybody has got to make a little money. So it doesn't bother me."

He's just glad to get his share.

Farming is hardly a get-rich-quick scheme.

Both sweat equity and financial investments are steep, margins slim, risks as iffy as the weather.

A two-house broiler farm these days exceeds a \$1 million investment.

Plus, in the Summers' case, they have several John Deere tractors, Kawasaki Mules, pickup trucks, the goose-neck trailer and assorted equipment.

"You've got to have stuff," Andy says. "There are all kinds of cost."

The successful farmer is a successful businessman.

"You better know how to count your eggs, so to speak, or your chickens," Andy laughs. "Whatever you want to call it, you'd better know what you are doing financially, or you can get in a bind in a hurry."

Cold winters drive up gas heating bills for poultry houses. Saving hay for winter feeding? Dry summers can mean breaking into those supplies as early as September. Be prepared, Andy says.

The mention that rain has been decent this summer brings a quick answer from father and son in unison: "So far."

So why do it? Why farm?

Andy gets satisfaction from completing a job, from seeing a cow born to shipping it off. In cases of cows they've kept for years, he's enjoyed seeing them have calves then seeing their calves have calves.

He says he looks forward to growing chickens – starting in early August – and knowing he's raising quality poultry for tables in homes and restaurants.

"I'll know I'll have done the best I can do," he says.

If push comes to shove, Andy can get another job, but the bottom line is that farming makes him happy.

"Working and sweating don't bother me," he says, "as long as I enjoy what I'm doing."

And another thing ... after farming all day, Andy sure sleeps well.

"I haven't had a problem," he says, laughing and adding, "Yet. But that could change when I get my birds."

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