THE FAMILY FARM

Behind a romanticized ideal, there is struggle—and love.

BY MARGARET ANN SNOW

The author with her children on the banks of the Black Warrior River

AWAKE SINCE BEFORE DAWN, WHEN the sky was still black and the birds had yet to consider their morning song, I had spent hours in this parking lot lined with white pop-up tents, transforming it into a farmers' market. Between describing the various heirloom tomatoes that lined my table and answering customers' questions with as much enthusiasm as I could, I didn't notice exhaustion creep in until the noon bell rang. Now the lot was emptying and as I folded our tent, a group of farmers began to gather around me.

One of the newest and youngest turned to me and said, "You and David are making it work. Balancing farm and family. It gives me hope."

I worked up half a smile while considering the best response.

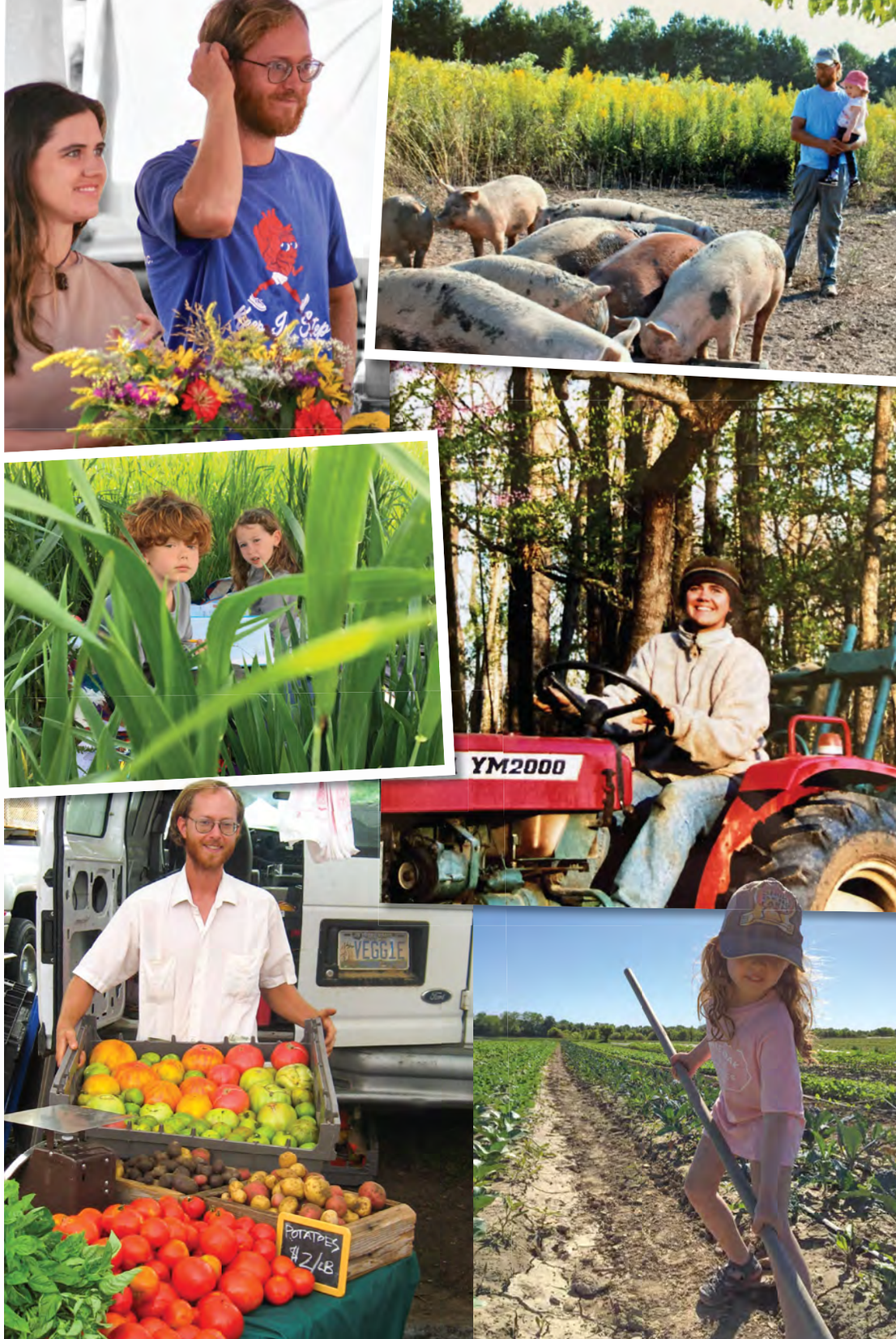
I could tell him that we began our farm as adventurous twenty-four-year-olds, when we had the freedom to fail. I could tell him how I never considered a life with children, not sure that we would even have them. Until we did.

I think about an album of pictures sitting on a shelf at home. The first pages are of our early farming years, youthful faces full of pride at what we had accomplished. In one picture, David loads a crate into our van stacked almost to the ceiling with crates of perfect tomatoes. He pauses to hold one out for the camera, the proudest smile I have ever seen upon his face. In another, I stand behind a cart full of our first watermelon harvest. One hand perched on a melon at the top of the mountain, a look of delighted disbelief in my eyes. These pictures take me back to the time before our children were born, when David and I would ride out to the garden in our two-door pickup as the sun was rising and not return home until it set behind the trees on the opposite bank of the river. Home was for showering, eating, and sleeping. We lived among our rows of beets and arugula, in the newly turned soil, and inside our greenhouse.

When I was eight months pregnant with our first child, we realized there was nowhere to put a car seat in our pickup, so we bought a sedan. We would no longer be able to ride to the farm together since the nursery wouldn't open until 8 A.M. and one of us would need to be at the farm by six. The idea of our child being the first one dropped off and the last one picked up was also hard to accept. Our expenses began to grow: childcare, diapers, carriers, and clothes. In photos, we change from bright-eyed young entrepreneurs growing our business with each head of lettuce to bleary-eyed new parents. Our babies morph into toddlers and then into dirt-covered kids, proud smiles on their faces as they hold up freshly dug carrots for the camera.

Would it help if I told this optimistic young farmer standing next to me at the close of a long market morning how, when our children were born, we began to weigh the time it took to raise them well alongside the time it took to run a farm and business? Only able to work a fraction of the hours we had previously put in, we compensated with inexperienced staff. High payroll followed, and the farm began to lose money. We hadn't realized how our unpaid hours subsidized the farm.

Should I tell him about the dinner-table discussions David and I have after our children have eaten their few bites and wandered off to play? He and I sit,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Margaret Ann and David Snow at one of their first farmers' markets; David and their daughter checking on the pigs; The author on the couple's first tractor; The Snows' daughter helps to cultivate; David with tomatoes in the farm's early days; The Snows' children hide in a cover crop.

PREVIOUS: Andrea K. Mabry; THIS PAGE: courtesy of Margaret Ann Snow

The author's daughter holds a snail shell she found.

Andrea K. Mabry

surrounded by half-eaten plates of homemade pizza, cups of milk, and balled-up napkins. The weight of our worry is heavy. We try to unload it by talking about staffing, expenses, our income, our to-do lists. We talk about whether we can afford a new delivery truck, or if we should keep sinking money into the old one. About how the deer are still getting through the electric fence to eat the strawberries. We wonder how we can create time to think through necessary, large-scale changes when each day poses multiple small hurdles such as these. Do I tell this farmer how these conversations end, not with closure, but when we are too tired to talk about it any longer and need to put our children to bed? Would it help to be truthful about the annual financial reckoning we face? The rewards of our job never show up on the profit and loss report.

I recently read an article about farmers making the life- and identity-altering decision to shut down their operations because, once they had children, their situations were no longer financially sustainable. The piece followed two couples trying to keep their businesses afloat, juggling the needs of their children with the needs of their farms. It sounded familiar. I felt their pain, and also their relief at finally moving on and letting go of a dream they realized was already gone. I don't want to be a statistic, yet another family farm that failed. I want to be a good mother and also a good farmer. I don't want to believe that it is impossible to do both well. I want to ensure the existence of local food, raised by people who care for their community and for their land. I don't want this food to only be available to those with the income and resources to access it.

Maybe I should tell my young colleague about the successful farmers I know who chose not to have children, suffering over the decision. I want to say to him, "Don't let the farm make the decision." But is that good advice?

Like this young man, some farmers are able to live on the land that they farm. For various reasons, mainly that we do not own the land we farm, we are not. In some ways, living on the farm would be simpler. No more thirty-minute commutes one way, sometimes just to open or close a greenhouse. In other ways, such as our children's education, it would be more difficult. If we home-schooled our children, one of us would be their caregiver and teacher, not a full-time farmer. The other parent's workload

I want to be a good mother and also a good farmer. I don't want to believe that it is impossible to do both well.

would double, or we would have to hire to make up the difference. One parent in the field, one in the home—this seems to have been the model of the past. Was it a successful one? The fact that most of those children grew up to leave the farm far behind signals it might not have been.

Should I turn to the young farmer's wife and partner and mention how the schooling and household chores historically have fallen to women? If our children's education were left in my calloused hands, reading and math would be replaced with entomology and plant pathology in the field.

Yet I want farming to be a choice for them. A farmer must be compelled to farm. There is no other way for it to work.

Farming is a multigenerational endeavor,

one that cannot be fulfilled in a single lifetime—though it can be lost in one. Do I tell him that many family farms only become profitable in the second, or even third, generation? Like us, he is a first-generation farmer, setting the foundation for the future.

I'd rather tell him how seeing the farm through our children's eyes has renewed our own excitement in it, as well as in the natural world. Our son and daughter play in the soil while I weed, sometimes coming over to help. They'll show me a snail shell they have found or a sculpture they have created from mud, sticks, and grass. If I've kept my head to the ground for too long and lose sight of them, I'll call out and they will pop up like prairie dogs in different sections of the garden. It would bring me more happiness to talk about how familiar they are with the land, how they always know exactly where they are and cannot get lost. Watching us do the physical work of farming creates a familiarity with it that can only be had in this way. They are learning about cover crops, beneficial versus harmful insects, weeds, and plant families. If they get hungry, they pluck a leaf of kale, a sun-warmed strawberry, a handful of pea tendrils, or a cherry tomato. They are familiar with which native plants are edible and which are not, sharing that information with their friends, who then teach their parents. This is the story of their childhood.

If the children get hungry in the garden, they pluck a sun-warmed strawberry, a handful of pea tendrils, or a cherry tomato.

My own youthful experience with farming is much different. David and I worked for six short months on an organic farm in Washington state on a post-college whim before deciding we were ready to start our own farm. We learned the hard way, our education ongoing. Our children have been learning to farm through osmosis since the day they were born. They tell people it is okay that they are covered in dirt because they are farmers.

What if I only give my farmer friend this view, where a mere glance at our son or daughter makes my heart swell with so much love that it begins to ache? That wouldn't be the whole story, but it is what I want to say. If I were to be honest, to detail the difficulties, would it influence his decision one way or the other? Would he feel, like others, that he must choose: family or farm?

IT HAS BEEN a long day, and I begin to think about the drive back to the farm, dropping off the employee who has helped me all morning, unloading the unsold produce, cleaning coolers, putting all the wooden display boxes and scales back

LEFT AND RIGHT: Andrea K. Mabry

The Snow family checks on their lettuces, October 2020.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The author's daughter enjoys a fennel frond.

into their designated places. I won't return home until after 3 P.M., almost eleven hours after I pulled out of our driveway this morning. David will be exhausted from parenting alone all day, but our children will still be full of energy and need dinner and baths and books read to them.

"I don't know that we are making it all work, necessarily." It is the only response I can give him in this moment.

"Sure, you are!" he responds enthusiastically.

That is all he wants: to believe that it is possible.

All I have to offer him is a genuine smile and a willingness to keep trying.

I'll keep for myself the memory from a couple of nights ago, when my daughter woke me, calling "Mommy!" I snuggled in bed beside her, small and sweet and warm under her blankets.

"Can I tell you about my dream?" she asked.

"Sure, but then we need to go back to sleep."

"You and I were working on the farm and then we kissed."

I pulled her in to me as close as possible, took in a deep breath of her, and whispered, "That's a good dream."

Margaret Ann Snow is the owner, along with her husband David, of Snow's Bend Farm, just outside her hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She has been farming organically for over eighteen years.