



Love Story on the Middle River

BY ROBERT WHITESCARVER

Jeanne Trimble Hoffman is a beef cattle farmer. I am a soil and water conservationist. Many years ago, we fell in love, and in 2004 we married.

We were complete opposites in some respects. Her cows had access to the streams on her farm. I spent a lifetime fencing cows out of streams. Can you imagine the dance, with our differing values and objectives during our courtship years? What resulted is amazing. And now fourteen years after we tied the knot, we not only love each other even more, one can actually see the blending of our values in the way we farm.

Jeanne is a very hard-working, fast-paced, work-til-you-drop farmer. She can ride any horse and rope a calf from a horse or from the back of a pickup truck. She can drive a tractor, a hydra-bed, and a bull. Jeanne's family has been farming this same land since 1746 when

her ancestor John Trimble purchased the land from the Beverley Manor Land Grant. Jeanne is a ninth-generation farmer.

Me, on the other hand, well, I'm a soil nerd, birder and a naturalist. When we met, I was the district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Even to this day, when we ride through the pastures checking cattle it's like a comedy—Jeanne making endless lists of tasks that need to be done. “We need to re-hang that gate,” or “We need to fill that groundhog hole,” she'll say.

Meanwhile, I'm looking out for birds and foxes and blooms. “Look! Horned larks!” or “Orchardgrass is heading out!” I'll say.

Our differences are real, but we have a great deal of respect for each other. Our marriage and our farm are successful because of that respect and we both realize we must work together.

Jeanne's farm is located amid the rolling hills of Augusta County in a small, rural community called Swoope (rhymes with hope). Most of the soils here are deep and well drained. We receive enough rain to grow our crops without irrigation. That's why this

Valley was a sacred hunting ground for Native Americans and was considered the Breadbasket of the Confederacy—it can grow a lot of food. It remains the most productive farmland in Virginia.

The Middle River, a tributary of the South Fork of the Shenandoah, flows through our farm for a half a mile.

What's crazy about the Middle River is that it is perhaps the most polluted river in Augusta County. The river begins just six miles upstream, yet it is on Virginia's Impaired Waters List because it violates two of the state's standards for water quality: E. coli and sediment. It's polluted because of all the cattle that are allowed to freely roam in the river and its tributaries.

(Look around as you drive up and down Interstate 81—you'll see plenty of cows taking languid ankle baths in area streams and rivers.)

How do I know the Middle River is chock full of E. coli? Because I regularly test the water for it. The state standard for E. coli in freshwater streams is 235 colony-forming units (cfu) per 100 milliliters of water. When the river enters the farm, the E. coli counts are consistently over 1,000 cfu/100ml. That's a lot

of E. coli! Repeat: You do not want cattle wading through streams.

But when the river leaves our farm after it travels only a half a mile, the E. coli counts are reduced on average by 55 percent. Why? There are two main reasons. First, cows no longer make direct discharges of manure and urine into the waterways on this farm. Jeanne and I accomplished this by agreeing fourteen years ago—that's how long we've been married—it was best to fence out her beautiful cattle from the streams. The second is the riparian forest buffer we agreed to plant along the stream. Trees supply the leaves and foliage that regularly drop into the river. That organic matter feeds an aquatic ecosystem that helps process in-stream pollution.

This farm is an example of how agriculture and conservation—which sometimes can appear to be at odds with each other—can work together as one. Our land produces good food and clean water. We cannot have clean water without healthy farmland and healthy farmland is achieved by installing best management practices to the land: fencing and riparian buffers, but also rotational grazing, nutrient management, and not over-grazing.

It's just like a good marriage. You might not always see eye to eye with your partner at first but the energy you create between you can be fruitful and beautiful.

Jeanne believes in protecting her farm. She placed a conservation easement on the property in 2005 that extinguished any right to subdivide the property. Hoffman Farm will be a farm forever. It is here where we continue our dance of combined values and respect for the land and water. And it is here where we continue our respect and love for each other.

Find more at www.SwoopeAlmanac.org and www.gettingmoreontheground.com



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