

The Sunday Star

and

The WASHINGTON DAILY NEWS

CLEAR SKIES — Sunny today with high in middle 80s; clear tonight, with low in 60s. Partly cloudy tomorrow with high in 80s. Yesterday's high, 86 at 2:30 p.m. Yesterday's low, 73 at 4:15 a.m. Details: Pg. C-18.

INSIDE METRO — In the peaceful countryside of Virginia's Surry County, a gentle old man singlehandedly tackled a tangle of woods and has transformed it into a magnificent public park. Details: Page D-1.

120th Year No. 233.

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WASHINGTON, D. C., AUGUST 20, 1972

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CIRCULATION 484-3000

40 CENTS



—Star-News Photographer Pete Schmick

Montgomery County farmer Benoni Allnutt could be a vanishing breed, even in Sugarland Valley.

The Simple Life

By JOHN SHERWOOD
Star-News Staff Writer

Sugarland was heavy in dew and darkness. A dawn rustling of wind swept the corn in the field, stirred the thin tops of trees and gently nudged a swinging porch bench.

It was 6 a.m., and Benoni Allnutt was beginning the motions that would bring his "Homestead" farm in Montgomery County back to life for another day. Bumping around in the dim light in the house in which he was born 55 years ago, he entered the large kitchen.

He looked into the refrigerator for the Allnutt bacon from the Allnutt hogs, the Allnutt eggs from the Allnutt

hens, and the Allnutt milk and butter from the Allnutt cow, Rosie.

Farmer Allnutt placed an electric frying pan on the electric range and began cooking breakfast. As a pot of coffee murmured in a corner, he skimmed the cream from the top of a small milk pail.

"Noni" Allnutt speaks in a soft, patient tone colored with country. He knows his profession so well that it is difficult for him to explain its unending duties to a layman. It is a full life that is fully lived, from morning to dusk, and at every turn there is a chore. He is a man constantly at battle against the waste of time and what it may do to him.

"My father and his father farmed

this area," he says, "and that's all I have ever known. All the land around here has been in the same families for generations — Byrds, Darbys, Allnutt."

It is still "Sugarland," out the old Sugarland Road about eight miles south of Poolesville. In a county where change often comes with startling suddenness, Sugarland is on the far side of the valley, where things are rarely disturbed.

Even the concrete road out of the near-ghost town of Dawsonville is a thing of the past. Barely two lanes at the start, it suddenly squeezes into one narrow lane.

At the end of a lane of trees off the

See FARMER, Page A-6



—Star-News Photographer Pete Schmick

His father and grandfather farmed "Homestead," too.

Farmer: The Simple Life

Continued From Page A-1

road sits the white Allnutt place, a light from the kitchen breaking the pattern of semi-darkness that is lifting from the surrounding fields as the mist settles.

The aroma of frying bacon finds its way to the upstairs bedrooms, creating a stir from the ceiling above. It brings downstairs Tom Allnutt, 18, who goes off to college next month. Next is Lee Zulanch, 18, followed by Jim Hill, 18, both friends of Tom who are working on the farm.

Noni piles on more bacon as the stragglers arrive at quiet intervals, saying little, trying to wake up. The last to come to breakfast is Ben, at 20 the oldest. A student of landscape architecture at the University of Kentucky, Ben suffers from hay fever on a farm where hay is the principal crop.

Noni's wife, Sarah, is at the seashore with her daughters Anne, 16, and Caroline, 5, and the youngest son, Bob, 14, who may or may not be the successor to the family farming business.

The youngest in a family of twelve and the last of the farmers Allnutt, Noni is skeptical about the future of the farm as he has known it. "Ben and Tom just aren't sure about farming," he says, "and all Bob can think about now is baseball. I'll run it until I can't do it any longer, and that's about all I can do."

Allnutt is still a traditional farmer with his general family farming operation. There aren't many left in Montgomery. Most farmers there are specialized, working with dairy or beef cattle.

And, of course, farms themselves are vanishing in the county as land values increase and communities creep farther and farther into the countryside.

In 1960 there were 935 farms in the county, taking up some 54 percent of the 318,000 total land acres. In the 1969 census this was down to 654 farms taking up 36 percent of the land area.

Farmer Allnutt, a patient man who needs his sons more than most fathers, prepares breakfast for the entire gang. The plates are so cleaned by the boys that there is hardly reason to wash them.

Piling into a pick-up truck, they head to the corn field, all but Ben. "It's best to pick corn early in the morning," says Noni. "It's cooler then, and the corn snaps off the stalk better and stays fresher longer."

Dressed in soiled khakis and a white T-shirt, he pulls on a pair of floppy rubber boots and places a white pith sun helmet on his fast-balding head. A stainless steel pail in one hand and a cardboard box of corn shocks under an arm, he walks down a red clay road to Rosie and her calf.

"The young'un gets most of the milk now," he says smiling. "But we manage to get about a gallon a day, and that's enough for our needs."

Walking to a side house, Noni strains the milk into a pail and then refrigerates it. On the way out he stops to pick up a bucket of broken tomatoes and vegetable ends



"Noni" Allnutt fixes his own breakfast: Allnutt bacon, Allnutt eggs and Allnutt milk.

for the walk to the hog pens. The tomatoes dumped in a feast of garbage, Noni then fills two large containers with wheat and dumps them into feeding troughs. The hogs are on top of it before the can is emptied — squealing, squeezing, grunting, biting, shoving.

Everywhere you look there is a shed for a certain use. Machines and equipment are scattered about. Some of the sheds and implements are dead, but nothing is discarded. A farm is a place where things are by necessity accumulated and retained.

The work seems endless. A fence needs mending. The chickens and horses and heifers need feeding. The cow must be milked. The corn

must be picked. The hay must be cut and baled; the tomatoes picked and trucked to market with the corn. . . .

"You get used to it," says Noni. "You get so used to it that you don't even think about doing it half the time."

By mid-morning he has joined the others in the sweet corn field, picking the corn, stuffing it in gunny sacks and then dumping it in the back of the pick-up.

After a break for lunch, the hay baled must be cut and the hay fields. Most of Allnutt's 250 acres are in hay now. All his land is tilled, and he even leases 250 adjoining acres. The "Homestead" is no tax real estate write-off. It is a working farm.

"Of course, when I was a boy on this farm we did not have machinery to cut the hay," he says. "That is what has really changed the farm — the machinery. And best it came, because if we didn't have machinery it wouldn't get done. Not now. Not today it wouldn't."

After the hay is cut, the sun must dry and cure it. And when it is baled it is carted to the hay barn for storage and shipment. The busy hay season was in June, but tropical storm Agnes slowed things down.

The Allnutts are cutting the second crop now and will finish around Labor Day, just in time for the alfalfa crop. After that will come the cutting of the feed corn, and after that the sowing of wheat and barley. And then, by the coming of winter, the two oldest boys off to school, Noni selects his animals for butchering and catches up with his maintenance work.

During the winter he sells choice meats and country sausage, and hams that hang by the dozens in small curing sheds. Looking at the hams covered with a green mould, he says, "funny how something can look so bad yet taste so good."

In the evening, after a sound and satisfying meal, Noni may watch television, often joining his son to watch a baseball game. "But television just puts me to sleep," he says, "even baseball games."

Farmer Allnutt is in bed by 9:30. He can stop, but the work doesn't. There are too many living things dependent upon him — the crops, the livestock, the customers.

Maybe it is all coming to an end — the sweet, simple way of life in Sugarland. But as long as Benoni Allnutt can milk a cow, he'll have a cow. As long as he can sow a field, he'll have a crop. As long as he can slop the hogs, he'll have bacon and hams.

And as long as he can be a farmer, he'll be one.