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Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

Sylvanus Farms--Farm Stays, Hunting Leases, Fishing, Conservation, Education

Interview with Becky Kelley, 1741 Creamery Road, Afton,
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What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

“Sylvanus” means woods, and it also refers to the Greek God of Woods and Trees. We manage Sylvanus Farms’ 600 acres on three farms in Union County, southern Iowa, which we purchased over the last 40 years. We raised the traditional cattle and hogs for 20 years and corn and soybeans for 30 years. The land was put into the Conservation Reserve Program in 1990. My husband Paul recently retired (1996) from the Burlington Northern Railroad, and I retired from being a former Certified Dental Assistant. We have planted native grasses, trees, and riparian buffers and instituted wildlife habitat management. The farms are in a state of use similar to what they were when they were first homesteaded in the mid-1800’s.

Describe the alternative enterprises in which you are presently engaged?

The conservation and habitat improvement on the farms are conducive to wildlife such as deer and turkeys. Neighbors and others were always asking permission to hunt, and of course some did not. We said yes to some and no to others, and it became controversial. In 1999, an out-of-state hunter leased the 600 acres and sold deer hunting packages. We reserved the right for turkey, pheasant, and quail hunting. The hunters asked if we could provide lodging, and we said yes. We had purchased a railroad crew car (sleeping and eating facilities for four railroad workers) in 1996

for relatives to sleep in during visits to the farm. We changed the crew car—what we now call our “Bunkhouse”—to include a kitchen, bath, television, and dining facilities for four. I provide the linens, towels, utensils, and basic household supplies.

What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprises? What were your goal and vision?

Our county rents cabins on Three-Mile Lake near us. These cabins are always full in both summer and winter. In January 2000, the county asked us if they could send the overflow to us since we had the Bunkhouse. We said yes and immediately found out that we also had an overflow lodging problem. We finished off the upper level of the building we had constructed over the crew car to increase the lodging space. We call this the “Loft.” It includes a sleeping area for six people, kitchen/dining area, bathroom, and living room. We also built a fish cleaning station and picnic areas, installed grills, and built a bonfire pit. We have several bird feeding stations for various species, including hummingbirds. We have constructed birdhouses for bluebirds, wrens, and wood ducks. We have cut walking trails to our ponds and through the woods. All of the trails are mowed and maintained for easy access and use. The woods and trails are very conducive to wildlife sightings and birdwatching. One pond is stocked with bass and bluegill, while the other

ponds contain a variety of fish, a number of which have been placed there by our friends and guests.

How did you make the transition?

We moved slowly as the business grew. We started with two to three hunters for three to four days or three to four fishermen for two or three days on two or three weekends a month. This has grown from one-night stays to two-week family vacations. In August 2001, our Loft and Bunkhouse were in use 28 out of 31 days, and only one weekend is left in June 2002. This growth rate over the past 20 months has allowed me to learn aspects of the lodging and hospitality business such as scheduling, bookkeeping, room cleanup and maintenance, personal time management, and catering to the customers to make sure their stay is as pleasant as it can be. Being able to find out how to meet every little need of our guests to make them feel welcome and have a very happy time is our major goal.

What is your decisionmaking process?

The lodging business has grown without any real planning other than providing our guests the best experience possible. The demand has been greater than our supply of space. Paul and I discuss the larger construction type projects that we need to accomplish. As far as day-to-day needs, I make the decisions, which are really in response to requests from our guests. I ask them what they need to make their visit more pleasant.

What is your business planning and goal setting process?

We don't have a formal business plan or process. I have a two-year degree in Business Administration. I use my training continually in running and growing our business. I do have a business plan outline, which I developed if our banker asks us for information.

How did you acquire your information on the alternative enterprises?

I developed and taught a seminar course at our local community college on non-traditional agricultural enterprises. I found local landowners were very skeptical of this type of income-

producing opportunity, so I decided to act upon the opportunity rather than let it slip away. Now that I have been successful, maybe others will be more inclined to try some new enterprise. This has given me a very solid base for organizing, operating, and managing our non-traditional enterprise.

How do you market your lodging business?

I have done very little marketing outside the farm. Our business started from referrals and continues to grow. I leave my business card with many people. I focus my efforts on relationship marketing, and my guests do the marketing by word of mouth. A satisfied customer is our best marketing tool. Paul and I take every opportunity to make our guests feel welcome and very special. We provide the best personal service we can to each individual.

How do you price your products?

I price my lodging so families can afford to come on the fishing trips rather than just the father taking a trip "with the boys." We are developing our business to meet the needs of a family. We could probably charge more, but we are very happy with the revenue we receive. We are part of the community and plan our business to support and grow the community.

What went wrong? And why? How did you correct the situation?

We underestimated the capability of our plumbing in the Bunkhouse, mostly due to the age of the faucets and water lines, since they were all original to the crew car. We had to make some fast repairs. One guest acted in a very indignant way and was asked to leave. As a result, we put up signage and guidelines about what is expected of our guests and there have been no further problems.

What went right? And why? How did you build on your success?

Paul and I are very interested in people. What do they think? What do they do? As a result, our guests feel very welcome and receive the best service we can provide. This is measured by our repeat business; one fisherman returned five times

with his family in 2000. With all the seasonal activities of fishing (water and ice), hunting, camping, and fall foliage, we are busy every month except March when the ice is going out on the lake and there is no hunting season open. We enjoy making our guests feel extra special.

What would you have done differently?

We receive numerous inquiries about cabin lodging. However, people don't turn us down when they find out we have a Loft and a Bunkhouse. I would have considered building a few cabins if I had realized the need for lodging in this area was so great.

Where do you plan to go from here?

The demand is very high in our area for lodging, and there is no competition. We are now building a lodge with four bedrooms, four baths, a fireplace, a kitchen, a television, lounge and dining areas. The lodge is located on a ridge overlooking a small rural town in the distance, beautiful oak timber, hills, and a pond. The lodge will be completed at the end of 2001, and it is already rented for December (Five months before it is completed.). We have a laundry facility in each location; although this facility is primarily for laundering the bedding and linens, our guests may use it, but only with special permission and for special reasons, such as the children fell into the lake or pond and soiled all their clothes.

Where did you get your information on how to build your lodges?

Paul lays out the dimension of the building, and I began designing the inside. I draw out the room sizes, storage, kitchen, bath, and lounging areas. We have not hired consultants on layout and design.

How do you obtain your financing?

We have been using our own capital except for the large projects such as finishing off the Loft and constructing the Lodge. We tried to obtain funding from Federal and State grants or loans. We found no grants available, and government agencies absolutely were not interested in funding our

enterprise. So we went to our local banker who supported us.

What do you consider the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?

1. All family members need to be included in the decision and must be in favor of the enterprise.
2. Some family members must love to work with the public, as you are in constant contact with people.
3. Be realistic about the cost of getting started on a new project; it's easy to underestimate the cost.
4. Keep good records and document events
5. Enjoy what you are doing, or get out of the business.

How did you handle the liability concern?

We carry a \$1 million umbrella policy. This was obtained from the same insurance agent and company that insures our farm.

Do you mind sharing your promotional material?

I want to prepare a brochure for our guests to take back with them to share with their friends. We plan to do this after the new lodge is completed. Now, I just hand them my business cards. Again, our biggest promotion effort is to make our guests feel special.

What do you dislike the most and like the most?

I dislike cleaning the facilities, but this is the most important job. I am known for very clean lodging and for the special personal touches I give the place. I like meeting all the different people no matter how young. For example, one guest is a professional turtle trapper. It was such an educational experience for us to see how he traps turtles and how he can tell the ecology of a pond or lake by what kind of turtles turn up in the traps. He sells the turtles mostly in the Far East and Australia, usually live, where they are considered delicacies.

Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?

Yes.

What groups/organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of the alternative enterprises?

We have been very active in our community and serving on national boards. We have not joined any additional groups or organizations pertaining to our business.

What conservation and education activities do you have?

I have displayed state publications on wildlife in rural Iowa that the guests can use as they walk the trails, fish in the ponds, and look for birds, flowers, and trees. I have a state plant identification handbook that can be used to identify the plants. The children are very interested in doing that activity. The state has a poster showing all the plants and animals in Iowa by different areas such as dry prairies, wetlands, mesic prairies, and oak savannahs. I make sure every child receives one of these.

Paul has been involved in conservation his entire life. He has been planting trees on all the farms from the day he purchased the land. Since the 1980's, the farm bills have had several new conservation programs to help farmers improve their soil, water, plants, animals and air. Paul has been very involved not only on our farm, but as a member of our local RC&D (Southern Iowa Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.). He is also President of the North Central Region of RC&Ds and a member of the National Board of RC&Ds in Washington D.C. These

programs were used to transition the farm from traditional agriculture into non-traditional uses. We are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program to retire cropland and return it grasses, which encourage wildlife. The Wetland Reserve Program helped us restore 20 previously drained acres; this land now attracts waterfowl and wildlife, as do the six ponds that we have on the three farms. We used the upland and stream buffer program to enhance water quality and wildlife habitat, and the agroforestry program to increase forestry on the farms. Our long-range plan is to have sufficient wildlife on the farm to provide the needed income through hunting and lodging so we do not need to use our land for crop and livestock production.

What do your customers like the most about your place?

This is best shown by the comments in our guest book:

- "Awesome."
- "Best place I have ever stayed and will ever stay."
- "You're the best ambassadors for Afton, Iowa."
- "My 3-year old daughter is still talking about the bonfires and the deer a month later."
- "You have a wonderful place."
- "We are going to bring Mom down."
- "Thanks!!!"

Would it be ok for people to contact you? Yes

Do you want additional information? For more success stories and other information, go to <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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