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Cream of the Crop

Troy's Sadie Allen
Artfully Separates
Farming from Fantasy

by Ruth Tonachel

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JUNE 2017

Cream of the Crop

Troy's Sadie Allen Artfully Separates Farming From Fantasy

By Ruth Tonachel



Farming is a more-than-full-time occupation and, despite her love of agriculture, Sadie Allen is an artist too.

Leaning over to pick up a cow tooth as she walks up the barn aisle, she says conspiratorially, "Dad says to let them compost. I use them to make stuff with. When I teach, kids are startled to find out what they are."

Born and raised near Granville Summit in western Bradford County, Pennsylvania, Sadie is a unique young woman who paints pictures and makes art that reflects her family farm, the cows, and the other animals that are a big part of her life. Her paintings express joy in rural life. They document the landscape she lives in and make the wild and domestic "critters" (as she fondly calls them) that

she encounters on a daily basis come alive. Her art is rich with color and the details of nature. It is playful and often humorous. Her elementary art teacher and good friend, Connie Sickler, describes Sadie's art as "a whimsical illustrated style in which pictures tell stories."

Joan Gustin, whose daughter Kally Canfield spent many childhood afternoons

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with Sadie on the farm, says that Sadie seemed to feel as comfortable with the farm animals as with people. "I've always been impressed by her ability to show emotions with the animals in her art," Kally remarks.

Sadie is a rarity—creative, intelligent, and born into a precious life and a world that that seems, in some ways, on the edge of vanishing. Much of the worldview she has grown up with on her family's farm is a throwback to earlier eras. The patchwork of houses scattered over approximately 1,000 acres that once comprised her grandparents' (Charles and Neva Allen) large farm is now two smaller farms: Allen Meadows, run by her parents, Paul and Arlene Allen, and Allenmeade, run by her uncle, Carl Allen. A brother, grandparents, aunts, and uncles all live in easy walking distance. In addition to her artistic work, Sadie is an integral part of her parents' farm and an advocate for sustainable agriculture and the farm community. She also helps care for grandparents, other relatives, and neighbors when needed. Looking out at woods and fields from the hillside barn where she works, Sadie says, "It is a pretty good playground."

At thirty, Sadie is still figuring out how to balance farming, art, an art business, home life, and family. She negotiates these conflicts with an uncanny grace and good nature that Connie Sickler describes as "always a ray of sunshine." She continues to grow as an artist, and is learning to market better.

"Most creatives are not wired to do both art work and marketing," admits Sadie, "but God's word says, 'where you are weak, I am strong.'" Sadie believes that her teachers and other adults have been placed nearby to help and direct her when she needs it.

Asked if she sees herself taking over her parents' farm in the future, she gives a resounding, "No! ... I'm just the minion. You can't be a manager and worker both." When pressed, she continues, "It's too big for one person. My uncle did a dairy business alone—but that's crazy hard. I'm not good with machinery—I break stuff. Farms are meant for big families. My parents

probably should have had ten kids..."

Sadie's parents built the dairy barn and silo that are in use today and are iconic in Sadie's paintings. There was some infrastructure on the property—a house ("they chased the raccoons out and moved in"), older barns, coops, and sheds—when they bought it from her grandparents. Although Sadie doesn't see herself taking over the farm, the future of the kind of agriculture she grew up with does concern her. She sees generational skills and infrastructure being lost and wonders how farms can survive in this region in the future. As we talk, water trucks pass frequently on the dirt road, heading for gas wells somewhere along the base of Barclay Mountain.

As for her own future, she says dryly, "I'm not sure yet what we are going to do with me." While it is probably impossible for her to stop making art, marketing has to increase in order for her to make enough money to pay bills. That requires time and energy. At present, she could not be doing what she does artistically without her family supporting her in many ways. She is grateful for the job she has working on the farm and believes that it "develops a person to be doing work. People are blessed for doing what they are supposed to do." She also adds cryptically, "Working on the farm keeps me out of trouble..."

Sadie lives with her uncle, Carl Allen, less than a mile from the home where she grew up. She and Carl—a conventional farmer who gave up his own dairy herd two years ago in favor of a less physically taxing beef operation—have a genial relationship and help each other out in various ways. The living room is decorated with her artwork—and over this past winter also housed a large portable mural she was painting for the Mt. Pisgah State Park Nature Center. She is very grateful for the upstairs space Carl's house allows her for a studio and a room of her own. She admits to being a bit messy and knows that, as much as she loves her parents, being this short distance away and having her own space is better for all of them. Her business is conducted

See Allen on page 10



After a major fire in the on-farm restaurant at Milky Way Farms in March 2011, the Seeley family decided to rebuild and expand. In looking to bring their own unique perspective on farming in Bradford County into view for their customers, the Seeleys contracted Sadie Allen to paint the mural that now greets everyone who walks into the restaurant. Sadie worked on the cinderblock wall throughout the summer and also became familiar with the farm cows and dogs (even some no longer living). Parts of the mural were textured with a teasel and Kim Seeley can name all of the animals depicted—with the exception of one generic black dog that Sadie added for compositional reasons. Below the section of the mural celebrating the fields, woods, and livestock on the farm is the depiction of a picnic with foods that are regularly prepared and served in the Milky Way restaurant. Marie Seeley's luscious berry pie is being eyed by a bovine with a lurking tongue, thus tying the foods served by the restaurant and farm together—just as they are on a daily basis in real life. Connections between Milky Way Farms and Sadie's family go back years. When she was barely an adolescent, the Seeleys took Sadie to a Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) conference, an event which they think may have been the catalyst for the Allen family to start thinking about going organic. In any case, Sadie has been a strong PASA supporter ever since. In recent years she has created artwork annually for the invitations, T-shirts, and other promotional pieces for the Dairy Dash, a fundraiser for the Shon Seeley (Kim and Ann Seeley's son) Legacy Fund for Sustainable Farming Education—a PASA fund set up after Shon's tragic death in 2012.

~Ruth Tonachel

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Thrill of Spring: One of Sadie's most noted paintings clearly depicts the joys associated with springtime...at least for cows.

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from her parents' home, however, because they have Internet access and Carl does not.

A group of semi-feral cats gathers on the porch and around the house where she and her uncle live. They are treated like wildlife and observed with Sadie's eagle eyes and compassionate grins. Carl apparently coerced Sadie into adopting her short-haired border collie, Jaxon, of whom she has become fond—although she says she wouldn't call him talented.

"He's clumsy. But he's very smart so we can work with him."

Every morning, Sadie drives an ATV down the road to her parents' barn where her primary responsibilities include feeding and caring for calves and young livestock. To help prevent illnesses that could require medication, calves at Allen Meadow are not weaned until they are twelve to fifteen weeks old (conventional dairies wean at eight weeks). "Weaning is the hardest transition for the calves—on any farm," Sadie says. "I watch the health of each calf every day, I observe their temperament and thriftiness." She gets to know the quirks and habits of each individual—where they like to be scratched, how they interact with the others in their pen, and how well they grow.

Starting with bottle-feeding, the calves move quickly on to nipple buckets. "The buckets are communal, so they need to be strong to compete," she relates. They are fed baleage (hay fermented within plastic wrapping) and a grain mix that Rockwell Feed Mill in Canton prepares to meet organic standards. Supplements like kelp and vinegar are also used to keep animals healthy. Calves will move out to grass paddocks and then to the heifer herd to be bred so they can join the milking string. Sadie notes that sometimes the first year of milking is another rough transition for the cows.

Often Sadie returns for evening milking duty. The tie-stall barn with overhead milking lines can hold eighty mature cows, but Sadie's mom, Arlene, says they milk a maximum of sixty these days. The herd is mixed—Lineback, Shorthorn, Ayrshire, Dutch Belt, Holstein, and others, all of which give variation, color, and personality to Sadie's art. "The breeds need to be able to adapt to this specific type of farming," says Sadie. Speaking as if the cows

might go off to a birthday party, she continues, "If they go on to someone else's house, they have to adapt there, too."

Sadie's parents' farm became certified organic over ten years ago. They ship to Organic Valley Cooperative, which gives them a price set in advance, thus making budgeting possible. Most dairy farmers do not have that luxury. Becoming certified organic requires more paperwork but it wasn't a hard switch for the Allens because they had been grazing their cows for years and they have a closed herd (the only cows added to the milking string are those born and raised on the farm). Sadie's mom says their certifying agency—NOFA-NY—gives them lots of help and feedback so they meet standards when the USDA inspection takes place. "Organic is more about prevention of illness. However, it is in the rules that we can't withhold antibiotics if an animal is suffering. The animal is likely to be sold since it can't rejoin the herd, but it is a misconception that we let animals suffer and never use medicine," says Arlene. A wall of awards from the Co-op attests to the Allen's success as organic milk producers.

Growing up, with their parents nearby but busy running the farm rather than entertaining their kids, Sadie and her three brothers fended for themselves in the barn with the admonition to "stay out of the way" while their parents were working. Sadie started drawing on the barn walls at an early age for amusement. She invented hopscotch-type games by drawing a grid or other play space on the barn floor. Neighbors and relatives gave her chalk and other art supplies. "The rule was that I could draw on paper and the walls or floor in the barn, but not on the walls in the house!" says Sadie.

Sadie attended East Troy Elementary School where Connie Sickler—now proprietor of Settlement House in Sylvania—taught art. Connie recalls that all the teachers liked Sadie.

"She would draw all over her papers but no one in the building had any issue with that. Sadie was a very good student academically. She had supportive parents who thoroughly encouraged her interest in art—despite her other academic capabilities."


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Steve Sliwinski was Sadie's art teacher at Troy High School. "I've known Sadie's family forever," says Steve. "I had her dad as a student back when he was wild. He's made a nice turn-around and done a wonderful job raising his kids."

Sadie graduated from Troy High School in 2004. As Connie was, Steve Sliwinski was impressed with her talents. "She was one of the top three students of about 12,000 kids that I had in my entire career. I knew that a girl as talented and motivated as she was would go far under the influence of college art professors. She has grown exponentially as an artist since then."

Sadie credits Connie and Steve with encouraging her decision to go to college. Because she wanted academics as well as art, she did not apply to institutes but rather to various regional colleges with strong art departments. She says Steve Sliwinski helped her negotiate the scholarships to make it possible for her to go. She ended up attending Keystone College in LaPlume, Pennsylvania, as a four-year visual arts major with an emphasis in painting. She graduated in 2008.

College was challenging psychologically, in that Sadie's background and worldview is so different from that of her peers. She had professors who "disrespected morals" and she was exposed to students whose art was designed to shock or that focused on their own internal battles and scars.

"My number one inspiration is creation itself," Sadie says. "Everything I make comes from something I've seen that's helped me form an idea. People enjoy my work because they find a sense of joy, of goodness and wholesomeness in it. My work takes too long to complete to spend it on painful or bad ideas. I try to celebrate the good things I have in my life to be grateful for. I hope I never focus on scars..."

By throwing herself into academics and limiting her social life, she made huge leaps in technique and skill at Keystone

and says she also had professors who "gave me the fundamental technical training I needed to make a lot of personal, artistic breakthroughs." Sadie's college work included creating some of the images she still markets today in the form of prints, cards, and puzzles. Many are pastel paintings of animals and wildlife that seem to be from the rather unique perspective of a rodent or insect. There is a carrot lying in the dirt with a large dark rabbit behind it. A broken raw egg with the tongue and whiskers of a cat looming. A pair of squirrels in a cave or tree root with two huge clawed paws facing them. Sadie describes this work as "technical explorations as part of learning. Some are color studies with pastel layers and ink. They do contain a dark quality."

Two paintings that have been shown and reproduced in various forms ever since she finished college were done during her senior year. Ironically, she painted the powerful bull standing in a field with dark clouds and lightning behind him (*Tip This*, pictured on page 3) while on Christmas break and did not take it back to school. It was shown locally and "that somehow got in the newspapers so my professors found out about it." They made her bring it in and while they critiqued technical aspects she also learned that the *Wow* factor can be equally important in art. Sadie describes the bull and the lightning as "both totally amazing things that are also totally terrifying." The painting manages to convey her awe and her fear.

What has become her most well known painting so far, *Thrill of Spring*, was also done during her senior year of college, and she hid it, too. "I had my easel set up in the studio at school and I would alternate working on it secretly and then work on a dummy piece. I just wanted to do something like the spring cows. It took time for me to mesh technical and playful. And I was very surprised at the response."

Met with enthusiasm from her professors, *Thrill of Spring*

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Hedgerow Hop Bunnies: Sadie's focus is not always about cows. This painting's attention is all about bunny bedlam.

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was hung for the first time in 2008 in Keystone College's graduation show. Sadie was very surprised that it sold immediately. However, she retained the copyright, so she has been able to market the image in a variety of forms ever since. She refers to it as "the famous one," and in this region, thanks to her generosity, it has been used repeatedly to promote local food, tourism, and agriculture. Eye-catching in so many ways, the painting conveys exuberance and the solidity and timelessness of a dairy

farm on the land—all important aspects of Sadie's world.

When *Thrill of Spring* was included in a 2012-14 regional exhibit focused on places with special meaning to local residents, Sadie wrote: "This painting is an attempt to capture one of those moments that keep farmers inspired to farm. At various times (mostly winter) it is mandatory to keep the cows inside the barn, for their own safety and to keep the water pipes from freezing. By the time the ice and mud have subsided, the cows are most anxious to go outside and

do cow things: kick up their heels, smell the spring smells, and eat all the tasty new greens."

Ultimately, the lesson Sadie learned in creating that painting and the subsequent response to it was "me just being me was all I needed to be."

Since then, "every year, things get a little bit bigger and better, income wise." She has been hired for commission jobs painting murals on walls and barn doors.

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