

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

PROFILES OF BUCKS COUNTY FARMERS: FEATURE STORIES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Bucks County, Pennsylvania, despite being decidedly suburban and contributing minimally to the nation's overall agricultural production and income, has maintained a community-wide interest in agriculture. This thesis seeks to explore the unique connection between Bucks County and agriculture by profiling three different Bucks County Farmers. In these profiles, I consider many different values, among them family, education, and ethics, to which citizens of Bucks County attach agriculture. I in turn bring to light national concerns involving American industry and food safety.

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## Chapter 1

### Keeping Farming in the Family: Bucks County Police Sergeant Represents the Foundation of American Agriculture

Once Green Lane Farm harbored a half-standing house that was well-trafficked by squatters and fostered myths of hidden treasure and secret graveyards. But today, nearly six decades after his parents purchased the thirty-six acre parcel in Penns Park, Pennsylvania, John Bailey has restored both its look and its reputation. In the process, he has become an accidental emblem of the enigma of agriculture in America. Although the majority of American farmland is being tended to by multiple-generation operators, these farmers see no economic return on their labor.

Bailey isn't in it for the money, he tells me. Outfitted in a button-down shirt and a pair of slacks that look out of place tucked into a pair of unlaced work boots, he crunches his way across the dirt during his lunch break. Like many American family farmers, 42% of whom work primarily of the farm and 99% of which operate a family farm according to a recent study done by the USDA, Bailey maintains an interest in selling his locally grown beef and pork products to the Wrightstown community. The weekly farmer's market in Wrightstown is proof of a growing market there—but it's not growing enough.

To complement his labor of love, Bailey works in a neighboring town as a police sergeant, a career he decided to pursue as an extension of his volunteer work with the nearby Lingohocken Fire Company. Tapping the pager on his belt, he recounts some of the more memorable calls he's answered



and descends the small set of concrete stairs that lead to the first floor of the barn. “It’d be like a death in the family,” he explains, “if this barn burned.”



Bailey describes the barn and its two-hundred year history in striking detail, taking care to point out each wooden peg that, at every corner, hold the building together. On the second floor, Bailey squeezes between hulking pieces of machinery and presents what he considers to be the “crown jewel” of the barn. A massive room with high ceilings and a set of French windows that are swung open to overlook a small paddock, Bailey’s hay mow is packed, almost floor to ceiling, with square bales of timothy hay. “This will, ideally, last us until next August,” Bailey explains, pulling a few grassy stalks from a bale that’s level with his ear. “It’s good

stuff,” he promises. Bailey shares that his hay was once in high-demand amongst the most discerning horse farmers in the area. “I could name my price, really,” he says, “if I could grow enough of it.”

Like a majority of small-scale farmers, specifically those who are either retired or employed off of the farm, Bailey loses money annually. From the hay mow, he points down to a herd of cattle who are clustered around a mound of loose hay. He yells to them, and when they bellow in reply, he laughs.

“Worthless,” he jests. Each of the cows, he explains, are female. “By my luck,” he says sarcastically, “we’ve had a run on female calves.” Not well-suited for eating, the female cows are useful only in terms of breeding and, without the time to carefully plan for the births of several calves, Bailey faces the challenge of feeding the cows with no monetary return. “I’d like



to expand the herd,” Bailey says. “But it’d take some organization.” His biggest problem is that many of his herd are past their maternal prime. And, he says, on a commercial farm, they would be culled—or butchered. “That feels a little unfair,” he says on the topic of trimming the fat. “I’m no vegan or whatever,” he clarifies. “Cows are food. I get that. But we spend so much of our time gaining their trust.”

He calls to the cattle again, and again, they offer a chorus in reply. So Bailey’s herd remains, for now, a group of “pasture ornaments.”

Bailey admits his disappointment at the dissolution of the family business. “My dad was home every day when I was a kid,” he reminisces.

“This was his 9 to 5. He just tended the farm like

everyone else around here. And that was enough.” Bailey admits that his law enforcement career was his “plan B” and that farming remains his passion. “I’m generally proud of what I do with the police department,” he says. “But do I love it? Do I like it? Not really.”

Bailey describes his motivation the farm as a simple one: “This farm is my childhood,” he says. “And I had a great one. I learned so much.” And he has hope that his farm and farms like it can teach the next generation something, too. He continues, “I want my kids to learn a lot.” He swings the French doors closed and blows an insect off of his index finger. “Someday, they may be the only person in the room that knows how to ride a horse, or lead a cow, or grow their own food. And that’s something to be proud of.”



## Chapter 2

### **In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Youth Involvement in Agriculture is Defying a National Trend**

Having grown up just outside Doylestown borough, in the heart of suburban Bucks County, Aaron Stepnoski recalls having little interest in agriculture initially. Previously a left guard for the Central Bucks High School East football team, Stepnoski admits to thinking his sisters' involvement in the local 4-H chapter was "stupid." It wasn't until Stepnoski failed to "have [his] growth spurt," that he decided to take a job milking cows in nearby Buckingham. Encouraged by the dairy farming community, Stepnoski joined the Bucks County 4-H Dairy Club and, despite the fact that involvement in agricultural education is falling annually state-wide according to the 2018 Agriculture Education Report by the PA Department of Agriculture, Stepnoski graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in dairy science in 2011. Today, Stepnoski boasts an impressive agricultural resume, and he rents around 150 acres of farmland across Bucks County for his row crop operation. His early involvement in agriculture is representative of a unique trend. While the interest in agricultural is waning on the state-level, in Bucks County—an exclusive, largely developed suburb of Philadelphia—youth involvement in agriculture is booming.



According to a 2018 interview with Penn State Cooperative Extension educator Sarah Gregory, 9,000 youth participate in Bucks County 4-H—a youth program that promotes “learning by doing” and facilitates education in subjects as varying as robotics and poultry judging. When considered with U.S.

census data for 2018, Gregory's figure suggests that 1 in 10 children are Bucks County 4-H'ers, despite the fact that Bucks County's contribution to Pennsylvania agriculture is relatively inconsequential, with Bucks County making up roughly 1% of PA farmland and almost 3% of the state's agricultural income. And though 4-H places a huge emphasis on animal husbandry, a majority of participants—like Stepnoski—live in suburbs and towns, while just 9% live on farms.



Stepnoski's involvement in 4-H, he says, solidified his interest in a career in agriculture. He shares that, in addition to farming across Bucks County, he works as a nutritional consultant for Perdue and offers his services to the largest organic dairy farm in the country. According to Stepnoski, his job at Perdue "runs parallel" to his grain operation and, while he has developed what he calls "an intense appreciation for the land and animals" in general, his desire to problem solve and work autonomously has solidified his interest in farming his own crops. "I don't think I'd do anything else," Stepnoski admits. "Until I die, really."

Regarding the future of agriculture, Stepnoski hesitates to make a prediction. "That's a question for some agricultural think tank," Stepnoski quips. "I'm just some lowly, little Bucks County farmer," he qualifies with a laugh. But if he can predict anything, Stepnoski predicts that farmers will continue to make food safer and more efficient. Furthermore, Stepnoski imagines a "convergence" of all of the ongoing conversations about food safety. He clarifies that, as evidenced by the rapidly decreasing public interest in agricultural education, "the one thing the agricultural industry has done a poor job of is maintaining that communication path between the person in the grocery store and the farm." Stepnoski asks if he's been clear in his response before elaborating: "Things are going to come to a head...If we're



not proactive as an entire industry in teaching America how we grow its food—” Stepnoski is silent on the line. “Things are going to get interesting.”

The scenery that distinguishes Township Line Road, the definitive divider of neighboring Wrightstown and Buckingham Townships is gold and idyllic owing, in part, to the meticulous rows of soybeans, pale, dry and almost prime for harvest, that Stepnoski has planted there. Just a small demonstration of the work he’s done in Bucks County, Stepnoski’s field on Township Line is representative of nine years of steadfastness and entrepreneurship. Before Stepnoski heads to a late-night business meeting, he states, “If I’m going to be in agriculture, [Bucks County] is one of the best places to be. And that’s after traveling to a lot of states and seeing a lot of places.” Steponoski says. “But I don’t know if 50 years from now I’m going to have a farm market, or if 50 years from now I’m going to have a commercial-size grain operation, or if 50 years from now I’m going to be bankrupt.” He laughs. “ I don’t know. But I think this is the place I’d want to be.”



## Chapter 3

### **“A Premium Price [For A] Premium Product:” How a Bucks County Farm Stays on the Cutting Edge of American Agriculture**

Down a long, steep driveway lined with straw bales and slouching, pumpkin-headed scarecrows sits None Such Farm in Buckingham, Bucks County. Purchased in 1932 by the grandparents of brothers Scott and John Yerkes, its current owners, the expansive property has been farmed continuously by the Yerkes family for generations in the face of a dramatically changing agricultural industry. Historically, the farm drew attention because of its unique wholesale products like cantaloupes and Canadian hemlock trees. Today, however, it is known for its locally grown beef products and its direct-to-consumer marketing, which has attracted both locals and customers from as far away as New York who want high-quality groceries at a fairer price.



Although the USDA reports that Pennsylvania ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 50 states in terms of agricultural production in 2018 and Bucks County contributes to less than 3% of figure, Bucks County farms like None Such are successfully capitalizing on the farm-to-table trend in agriculture. The farm is a big part of the reason why Pennsylvania is that state with the largest number of direct-to-consumer farms and, as stated by Montgomery County’s 2018 Local Food Promotion Strategy, Bucks County boasts the highest percentage of direct-to-consumer sales in the state.

John considers the farm’s customers to be “foodies,” or, as he clarifies, “people who appreciate good food. In order to achieve the quality that None Such’s customers are used to, the farm is meticulous

about the way it grows and prepares products. While None Such farm is a conventional or non-organic operation, John stresses that any chemicals used on their crops feature a low re-entry interval and, as soon as 12 hours after application, John feels comfortable eating his produce straight out of the field. In addition to using the safest modern technology, None Such has remained committed to selling non-GMO products and, to supplement their own produce, they buy and sell organic products from outside the farm to meet demands for organic produce

In the beef barn, Scott proudly showcases his top-of-the-line cattle handling system which, with its many chutes and levers, offers None Such the safest, most efficient means of sorting and moving cattle on the farm. “It’s dangerous, what we’re doing,” Scott confesses as he gestures to the herd of beef cattle behind him. His set-up “cuts the time [spent dealing with cattle] in half,” he says and greatly reduces the chances of human and animal injuries. “When we built this, we built it heavy-duty,” Scott says and slaps the enormous, metal chute system on which None Such spared no expense.

On the topic of animal health, Scott describes his herd health regimen in detail. While his use of antibiotics disqualifies his herd from any claims of being all-natural, Scott shares that veterinarians strongly suggest practicing preventative medicine and using modern veterinary technology to eliminate threats to herd health. Scott admits to trying to eliminate None Such’s use of antibiotics altogether, but he cites an uptick in mortality as the reason he’s decided to integrate antibiotics into his herd management. Scott clarifies, however, that None Such’s use of antibiotics is strictly limited to animal health purposes. “We don’t use daily antibiotics in feed or anything,” he explains. To illustrate his point, Scott ducks into his feed room which, renovated two years ago, is outfitted with the newest technology. Above his head, a glass-cased white board displays orderly rows of measurements and rationing



information. Scott reaches into a five-gallon bucket and cups a mound of probiotic meal in his hands. The feed additive, he says, promotes coat and skin health and good digestion which, Scott says with a laugh, is working to combat the surplus of methane in the environment by making herds less flatulent.

Although None Such enjoys local fame for their deli sandwiches that are legendary across Bucks County, Scott and John agree that farming anywhere is difficult. “Do you want to know three ways to get

into farming?” John

a farmer”—either

care to mention—“or

echoes his brother’s

come from [a farming

says. “You have to do

elaborates, using None

agritourism efforts—as

festival and petting

discloses that he’s

operation in recent

and making sure “every



asks. “Inherit a farm, marry

female or male, he takes

win the lottery.” Scott

sentiment. “Unless you

background,] it’s hard,” he

something else,” he

Such’s retail market and

per their annual pumpkin

zoo—as an example. Scott

honed his beef cattle

years. He’s “slowing down”

steer that goes out looks

like prime beef.” Before taking off on a golf cart that is just one fragment of the massive fleet of

immaculate machinery that None Such tends to its land with, Scott shares the following concerning the

direct-to-consumer market in Bucks County: “[The consumer] isn’t dumb.” People are paying “a

premium price,” he explains, but only for a “premium product.”

## ACADEMIC VITA

### **EDUCATION**

#### **Bachelor of Arts in English**

**2019**

Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University, Abington, PA

### **PRESENTATIONS**

“Make America (Immi)Great Again: A Public Deliberation.” Community forum led at Council Chambers, State College, PA. February 28, 2017.

### **PROFESSIONAL AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

#### **Intern**

**September 2019 – December 2019**

Inkpot, LLC, Newtown, PA

- Provided SEO services for Inkpot’s blog
- Completed research for Inkpot’s writing projects
- Gained experience in maintaining and acquiring clients

#### **Volunteer**

**September 2017 – January 2018**

Pennsylvania State University Literacy Corps, Central Intermediate Unit #10,

State College, PA

- Trained in the pedagogy of reading and writing with a specific focus on adult learners
- Created engaging, multimedia weekly lessons to support an adult ESL learner in expanding her written and oral English skills over the course of a semester
- Participated in the organization of several educational projects at Skills of Central PA, a human services organization dedicated to creating opportunities and caring for adults with special needs

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Phi Eta Sigma National Honor Society

**January 2017 – Present****FELLOWSHIPS**

Paterno Fellows Program

**August 2016 – January 2018**

- Enrolled in at least four honors courses during my freshman year and at least two honors courses during the first semester of my sophomore year

Penn State Abington Writing Fellows Program

**August 2018 – May 2019**

- Collaborated with a small group of faculty-selected writing fellows to study the pedagogy of writing
- Provided comprehensive writing assistance to a first-year composition class of fifteen students

**AWARDS AND HONORS**

Dean's List

**August 2016 – December 2019**

Pennsylvania State University State Paterno Fellows Scholarship

**August 2016 – January 2018**

Pennsylvania State University Ogontz General Scholarship

**August 2018 – December 2019**

Evan Pugh Scholar Award

**May 2019**

2019-2020 English Faculty Scholarship Award

**August 2019 – December 2019**

Student Marshal

**December 2019**