

# Self-Sufficiency on the farm: Gardening, picking, canning, cracklings, and sewing

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Interview with Louella Odessa Saunders Amar, May 31, 2007.

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## As you read...

By the early twentieth century, farmers were buying more and more goods off the farm. But during the Depression, they had little money for store-bought food, clothes, and household goods. Farmers returned to older ways of getting by. They grew food for their own tables instead of only for market, and new canning technology let them preserve that produce for winter. They sewed their own clothes and “made do” without a lot of things that urban families might have expected as normal. Still, living on a farm in North Carolina was better than being out of work in a city, because at least people on farms could feed themselves.

In this interview, Louella Odessa Saunders Amar recalls her life as a child during the Depression. From soon after her birth in 1930 until 1937, she lived on a sharecropping farm near Roanoke, Virginia. Her experience shows how farm families survived — by relying on themselves and their families and by helping one another. And it shows that even in the depths of the Depression, life wasn’t depressing for everyone all the time.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Describe the farm on which Ms. Amar lived. Who lived and worked there? What did they grow and raise?
2. What kinds of things did her grandmother and the other people on the farm do that you could describe as being “self-sufficient” — things they did or made for themselves instead of buying or paying for?
3. What did her grandmother buy from the store?
4. Mrs. Amar says that “you don’t get too little to work on the farm.” What work did she do as a child?
5. What were the consequences if a child didn’t do as she was told or did her work badly? (What does she actually mean by “they just kill you off on the spot”?)
6. Ms. Amar says that “We lived the life of a sharecropper. It wasn’t bad, I don’t think... I didn’t know any difference. Now, I would say it was horrible.” What does she mean? Why might her perception of her life in the 1930s be different now than it was when she was a child?



Figure 1. Louella Odessa Saunders Amar was born January 28, 1930, in Huntington, West Virginia, and she spent her first seven years living on a sharecropping farm near Roanoke, Virginia. This narrative is based on a word-for-word transcript recorded May 31, 2007, in Beckley, West Virginia.

I don't know when I first moved to the farm. I was very, very young. My mother was sick. So I went to live with my great grandmother. And her name was Lettie-Ann Leftwich.

It was a pretty good size farm. I don't know — by being, you know, small, and whatever, but, in my opinion, a pretty good size farm. Was no thousand acres or nothing like that. But, I guess that it was in keeping with the regular size of farms back in those days — country farms — not estates with farms connected to them, but just a farm.

We had a chicken house, spring house, and we had another house — in the winter time, they'd kill the hogs or whatever, they'd put them in this particular house — building, rather. (And in the summertime it was used as a kitchen. Cooking heated up the house too much to cook so they moved everything out in this little storage house.) They had sold all the meat that they had cured and put in this house — it was all gone. Very few was left and what was left was usually put in the spring house, which had a concrete — it was all concrete — and it had a swimming pool, or bathtub, or something in there, that they would put the milk and stuff in to keep it cold until you got ready to go into town to sell it, or you used it. The milk and the butter and the eggs and spoilable stuff that was easily spoiled was put in this spring house. Because we didn't have any refrigerator or anything like that.

Now Mrs. Nyningham, who the farm belonged to, she had all these luxuries. She had cars, and, you know, just everything that you would need, but we didn't, because we were sharecroppers and we lived the life of a sharecropper. It wasn't bad, I don't think, you know, I didn't know any difference. Now, I would say it was horrible, you know.

Beyond the gate they had the posts where they hang the hogs in the wintertime when they got ready to kill them. It had—one—two—three, I think, three poles down in the ground and one they run across. And they'd slaughter the hogs and hang them up and finish them off, while we would be in the house and the comfort of the warmth, —

cleaning chitlings, finish scraping the hair and stuff off of the hogs; it was a nasty job — it was horrible, yuck, but anyway that was part of our livelihood.

And there is a garden, a huge, humongous garden, and over here is part of a field, a plowing property, you know, that you raise stuff on to sell. And out there is the hog pen, and a mulberry tree. I've fallen out of that tree so many times — I was really the tomboy type.

We'd go to church on Sunday. We didn't have a car. I think we went every first and third Sunday, to Ironside, the Ironside Baptist church in Roanoke. It was on Peach Hill, if I'm not mistaken. We'd ride the wagon. Um hum. And on Sunday, some Sundays the preacher would come out for dinner, and he loved catfish. And his name was Reverend Fisher! So, you know, you wouldn't think of anybody sitting down to your table to eat dinner or breakfast or whatever the meal might be, without your children sitting down with them. Not back then. The guests ate, the guests and the mother and father whomever, they ate, and the children waited until they were finished — then they ate.

And my great granny she could cook — especially cakes and pies. And I just couldn't help it, like Flip Wilson<sup>1</sup> said, "The devil made me do it." I would pinch off of the cakes or the pies or whatever — but more so with the cakes — and I would turn them around so they wouldn't see, but, not realizing that when they took the cake out they was going to see where I had pinched. Couldn't put it on nobody else, because there wasn't anybody there that stupid but me. And you ever heard of dogwood switches? Yeah, well the little branches on them are called switches. They hurt, when you get a whipping with them. I mean they will eat you up. And I shall never — I shall know a dogwood tree if I's in a death slumber — I'd wake up, "Oh, that's a dogwood tree." Those switches are something — they don't break, I've tried it. They just don't break.

On Saturdays, Saturday morning, early, Mr. John Ed would get up and he would pack the wagon to take it to town to sell his share of the produce: butter, eggs, chicken, bacon, country ham, and stuff like that. Occasionally, on rare occasion, he would take a couple of Granny's cakes or pies into town to sell them. He would go through the community, you know, hollering "Eggs for sale such and such, thirty-five cents a dozen" or whatever the case might be. Sometimes I was allowed to go with him. But I never rode the wagon through the community selling anything. I always stayed with my aunt until he was finished. And he, when he got ready to go into town, he would ask my Granny, "What you want me to bring you back, old woman?" and she said "Oh Johnny, just bring me some cheese back." She loved cheese, this old cheese that just bites your tongue off almost.

In the wintertime the women usually made quilts and things. Weren't doing a lot of crocheting then — that type of stuff — that came later, but they did everything by hand. And I had an aunt who lived in Roanoke. No sewing machine — when I would go to visit her sometimes, we would go downtown, to the better stores, like Porch and Childress, somewhere or other, and... "Well, baby, do you like this? Oh, isn't this pretty." And if I liked it, then we would go back to Kresge's which is a Five and Ten Cent store, like G. C. Murphey's or something. And she would find some material. And she would — no pattern, no sewing machine, no nothing — but her needle and thread, and scissors. She didn't even cut a pattern out of paper. And she'd sit down and make that, whatever she had seen that she had thought would look pretty on me. (And I'm not spoiled either. (laughing).)

Oh, but let me tell you about the milk. You ever heard of anybody churning? OK, you had to churn your milk and whatever, and you churn and you churn and you churn. And it

looked like the butter wasn't going to come. Because when you churn the butter comes, you get that off of the top, and you put it in a mold — that's how you get your pretty figures on top of your butter cakes. But if the butter is slow coming, you'd wash off a quarter, and drop it in the churn, and that will supposed to have made the butter come quicker. And when they'd got through churning they'd separate the butter and the milk and put it in the spring house, and it would stay there until Saturday when they got ready to go to town.

And I never got strong enough to milk the cows. I'd have been out there milking cows, and the cows teats you know how they are, well I never could do them like this and get the milk (demonstrates milking) — I had to put my thumb in there, like that, and get enough milk to come out of there to fill up a rat. So, they left me alone, I didn't have to... "She's too doggone little."

OK, my next venture was, on the farm back then, you didn't have any rest day. Every day there was something to do. In the fall you'd shell corn, to put up for the livestock, and... I got prints of corn that I'll have when I die. You take the ear of corn — you had to — do that (demonstrating shelling corn) — so after I had my breakfast with my granddaddy — black coffee, that's the way we drank our coffee — black coffee. I can't stand coffee. Would you like a cup of coffee or something? You're sure? Just because I said I didn't like it, doesn't mean I don't have any! (laughing). And I would have my molasses, bacon, and biscuits, or whatever Granny had cooked for breakfast, and, then you'd go out to — 'cause in the winter the only place we had heat was in the house, in the kitchen, and that's where we'd shell the corn. And I would be shelling that corn. Poor little hands would all, would be bleeding. But it had to be done, and you weren't too little to work on the farm. There was something for everyone to do, and you did it, or you got killed, alive.

And let me see what else went on that was exciting out there. We had chickens. Oh those chickens, pardon my French, but they caught hell, OK? They would whip me — wasn't anybody else out there for them to whip and if something went wrong I got the blame for it. OK. I'd go out there, and the chickens were free to walk—they didn't get off of the property. They knew their boundaries. And I'd go out there, and I'd get me a rock or a piece of coal... and I could throw then.... pow!... Chicken... (illustrates dead chicken). That's me and the hen.

But on the farm we had a bunch of fruit trees, black cherry — Oh, I've fallen out of that black cherry tree — it was at the end of the yard. It's a wonder I didn't break every bone in my body. I loved to climb that tree and pick cherries, and every time I'd climb, nine out of ten times, I'd fall. Then we had a mulberry tree on the way to the hog pen, and we had couple of peach trees and down where the edge of the farm went down to where you catch the bus, there was all kinds of blackberries. And what's these red berries you get? Anyway it was just oodles and oodles of berries. And I'd go down there and pick them. And Granny would can. All summer long. And the storage place for the canned goods, — I told you the house was two stories, well under the steps was where she kept the storage. Now when they would take the corn and stuff to the mill,... that was under there. We had a big barrel with flour in it, and another one with the meal, and that would last us until next harvest time. Bought very little stuff. Like, we bought the cheese that Granny loved and that's about all. She sent Mr. John Ed's grandson to town — he was going to town with his granddaddy and she sent him, gave him money to get me a pair of socks to wear to church Sunday. He paid a quarter for 'em, and she liked to died. "You went there and threw away my money, 'cause it wasn't yourn! You know better'n than to pay this much for a pair of

socks!” I don’t know. I don’t have any idea what the socks would have cost normally, but twenty-five cents seemed to have been a whole heck of a lot for a pair of socks.

In our garden, we grew potatoes, onions, cabbage, green beans, and, what else?... cucumbers, tomatoes..., we just had a garden, we didn’t grow carrots — none of the sophisticated stuff, you know. We just grew, oh, corn, and what else? Right now that’s all I can think of. To prepare the soil, some, most of the time for the garden he used a plow, horse and plow. But for the field, he had a tractor, and strangely enough, he could not drive a car but he could drive that tractor. Um Hum.

And it was like I said, I picked berries and fruits — you know — from the trees. And, as far as I can remember I believe that’s about all. We didn’t grow watermelons or anything like that, because they didn’t grow in this soil there, they didn’t grow too well. I believe the soil was brown. Um Hum, I think; I’m not sure. ‘Cause my aunt used to eat dirt. Honestly, people have gone as far as North Carolina and brought her back dirt to eat. Then she went from that to starch, Argo starch. Um hum! — crazy.

My granny canned, otherwise we wouldn’t have had anything to eat. She could can chicken, sausage, all of that stuff and put it under those steps. Hundreds of cans, and she knew exactly where everything was. She’d get the lantern, and she’d take that and go in that closet and get whatever she wanted. Had big old barrels, wooden barrels, full of flour, corn meal, sugar, and all that stuff and you got that when you went to the mill. They would divide up between the lady who owned the farm, Mrs. Nyningham, and Grand-daddy. They’d divide whatever percentage it was supposed to get and everybody was happy. Me, I was too tired to be happy.

I told you—you don’t get too little to work on the farm. Yes indeed, I could hoe them potatoes, beans and things, and not chop ‘em down, cause if you did, that was a automatic killing. No mercy, didn’t ask you why you did it, or “what, didn’t you know better?” No, they don’t ask you that question, cause they know that you know better, whether you do or not. You’re supposed to know better. So they just kill you off on the spot. Um hum.

To control worms and insects they had... what did they have that they used to sprinkle on, on the garden? — wasn’t fertilizer — I remember it was white, a white powder like, and Mr. John Ed would put it in a little bag and put it on his shoulder, and go out and sprinkle the garden and that’d kill the bugs and things. Un huh. And I guess maybe he did it once a week, I’m not sure, but I do know that they had something to control the insects. Beetles was the worst thing that they had to control I believe. Those beetles were terrible, especially on the beans.

Some of the canning, if it wasn’t a lot of canning to be done, she did it in the house on the stove. But if she was going to do a lot of canning, the cans went in this big black iron pot. — it had legs about that high, I suppose, and Granny put it out there and build a fire under it. Right outdoors. And sometimes she would can for two or three days, in this big pot. Well, we’d be set for the winter — as the food came in — as it got ripe — pick it — Granny would can it, and put it under the steps in the house.

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## Listen to an excerpt

Mrs. Amar talks about sewing and self-sufficiency in the 1930s. (1:12)

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## On the web

### Canning for country and community

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/1656>

In this lesson plan, students will use primary source documents to evaluate the technological challenges of food preservation in the 30s and 40s, compare food preservation in the first half of the twentieth century with today, and consider the political role of food in the community.

### During Tough Times, Canning Makes A Comeback

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105527038>

National Public Radio looks at the revival of interest in home canning during the recession of 2008–09.

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## Notes

1. African American comedian (1933–1998). His most popular character, “Geraldine,” was known for saying “The devil made me do it”

## About the author

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### Figure 1 (page 2)

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