

Mary Margaret Freeman
Professor Chavigny
History 105.01 - Doing Sweet Briar History
Fall 2015

Sweet Briar College Dairy Operations: How it Came to a Halt

In the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains lies Sweet Briar College, an all-women's school of over 3000 acres. It has been recognized in many college reviews, such as the notable *Princeton Review*, as one of the most beautiful college campuses in the United States. It is known for its beautiful, native environment, and all of the natural beauty it possesses. In the beginning, Sweet Briar was named 'Sweetbrier' because of its wide abundance of wild roses that are spread throughout its land. The Fletchers and their four children- Indiana, Lucian, Elizabeth, and Sidney- made it their permanent residence in 1841. When Elijah Fletcher died in 1858, Indiana, Elijah's daughter, inherited Sweetbrier. She renamed it 'Sweet Briar.' She and her husband, James Henry Williams, raised Daisy (Maria Georgiana) at Sweet Briar. Daisy and her father enjoyed roaming the spacious farmland at Sweet Briar, her father did as well.

Elijah discovered a passion for farming and managing some of Sweet Briar's agricultural property. In addition to publishing articles in *The Virginian* newspaper (1825-1841), he was well-known for his studies and practice in agriculture, which began at Sweet Briar. In addition to working for the newspaper and practicing his agricultural studies, Elijah studied acres of land near Amherst County, some including that of Sweet Briar College.

He introduced deep plowing, drained the wet land, leveled the gullies and ravines which the washing rains had been so long forming and deepening in a soil which was destitute of sod or vegetable matter to keep it together, and to sow clover and plaster. This process acted like a charm upon these lands, and they immediately began to repay the labor and outlay by giving bountiful and remunerating crops. Mr. F. did not stop at this, but as soon as he got his farm in a situation to support stock, he began to import the best improved breeds of cattle, sheep and hogs, paying no attention to the fine blooded race-horse, which had been the only animal of cost and care in the country. His early efforts in agricultural pursuits were looked upon by many as the

visionary theory of a book farmer, but the practical results were so striking that all who saw were convinced, and one after another of his neighbors began to follow his example, and a general spirit of improvement was infused which has produced favorable changes in this part of the country. ¹

John Livingston, *Portraits of Eminent Americans Now Living: With Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Their Lives and Actions*, vol. 3 (New York and London, 1853-1854), p. 17.

Elijah Fletcher's farming and agricultural experience at Sweet Briar set the foundation for the beginning of Sweet Briar College's future student body. At the time of its opening (1901-1903), the College's first Board of Directors emphasized on the its abundance of land and natural resources, as well as highlighting its beautiful Georgian- style inspired buildings and architecture.

In 1908, Ross Martindale became the College's farm manager. He was succeeded by W. C. Blackwell and J.E. Dinwiddie, the managers who managed the land before the school's opening. He supervised the farm, dairy, orchards, timber and crop lands, and livestock, and even oversaw the equestrian program.

Jan Ype Osinga, a Dutch native, emigrated by ship with his wife Douwina Anna Bouma to Hoboken, New Jersey in 1952. He was a graduate of Rykslandbouw Agricultural College, and attended the agricultural exchange program at Purdue University. He also served three years in the Dutch Army in Indonesia. After living in New Jersey, Osinga and his wife moved to Amherst County where he was accepted for the herdsman job at the Sweet Briar Dairy. Upon his arrival, Osinga took one look at the cows and it instantly reminded him of home. He was welcomed by black and white cows, a friendly, welcoming community, and scenic mountains and farmland. Osinga did not waste any time when he arrived. Within just one year of working the dairy, he fully updated the processing plant that supplied the fresh milk to the dining hall by adding newer,

¹ John Livingston, *Portraits of Eminent Americans Now Living: With Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Their Lives and Actions*, vol. 3 (New York and London, 1853- 1854).

²more modernized equipment to it. He also replaced the cream lined milk served in pitchers with homogenized milk that was served in milk dispensers, and added new products such as cream.

During the 1950s, Sweet Briar was one of the only liberal arts, private college in the country operating a fresh dairy on its campus. Peter V. Daniel, the vice president and treasurer of the College during the time, stated, ‘the dairy made great use of the land and was quite profitable for the college (Vol. 102. No. 58).’ He also stated that Sweet Briar’s dairy would not be successful if it were not for Jan Osinga operating it:

The whole secret to doing anything is getting a qualified person to do the operation. In my book, Jan Osinga is the best dairy manager east of the Mississippi, and he has got a reputation that way. Since Jan has operated it, the dairy has never lost any money.³

From the internet newspaper article, “Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy.” Writer of Article Unknown. Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star, Fredericksburg, VA. March 1986.

In addition to operating the dairy, and keeping up with over 160 cows within the herd, Osinga supervised five full- time employees. Each year, the dairy produced over 2.5 million gallons of milk, most of which was distributed by the Maryland- Virginia Milk Producers Association. Only ten percent of the milk produced was consumed at Sweet Briar.

The farm, on about 700 acres of the College’s land, is considered by the College as an unrelated business enterprise, which means it is subject to all income, personal property and real estate taxes. It has an operating budget of about \$350,000 per year.

From the internet newspaper article, “Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy.” Writer of Article Unknown. Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredicksburg, VA. March 1986.⁴

Osinga and his wife, inspired by their trip to Holland, began investigating establishment of a yogurt operation at Sweet Briar in 1960. The area they used to begin this operation was

³ “Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy.” Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredericksburg, VA. 10 Mar. 1986.

³ “Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy.” Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredericksburg, VA. 10 Mar. 1986.

⁴ “Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy.” Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredericksburg, VA. 10 Mar. 1986.

leased to Osinga's son, John. It was located near the dairy operation so that it was less difficult to maintain. Virginia, at the time, did not produce yogurt. He thought that this would become popular at Sweet Briar, and implemented this idea on campus. Indeed, the yogurt operation was more than just successful. It supplied yogurt to over 35 area stores, including Amherst County, Lynchburg, and Albemarle County.

The operation, which in 1965 was supplying yogurt to 35 area stores, was scaled down when Osinga was named farm manager that year to just supplying Sweet Briar and a few area health- food stores.⁵

From the internet newspaper article, "Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy." Writer of Article Unknown. Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredicksburg, VA. March 1986.

Additionally, Osinga decided to extend the farm operations by doubling the number of cows and improving the dairy facilities. As he explained,

The animals (cows) were important to the revenue for the farm at the beginning, but the more students that attended the college, the animals not only provided for the college but also provided for the students. Not only did they provide food, like dairy products, for the students, they also provided the image and the environment of quintessential Sweet Briar. The students had a connection with the animals. They posed for pictures with cows, included them in their yearbook, 'The Briar Patch,' and of course the riding program has continued to be one of the main aspects of the college and one of the main pulls for students that attend Sweet Briar College.

Hill, Barbara A. Letter to Sweet Briar Community. 26 Apr. 1994. MS. The Sweet Briar Archives (Box 14, Folder 3). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, VA. ⁶

In 1990, the Land Use Committee of Sweet Briar College was contacted by the staff of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concerning dairy operations. EPA staff examined the streams close to the dairy operation. This lab testing would reveal the potential for urine, fecal, and other contamination. After an examination of test results, the staff concluded that there was sufficient evidence of animal contamination in the streams. The Land Use

⁵ "Sweet Briar Still has a Dairy." Vol. 102. No. 58. The Free- Lance Star Newspaper, Fredericksburg, VA. 10 Mar. 1986.

⁶ A Letter to Sweet Briar Community. Hill, Barbara A. 26 Apr. 1994. MS. The Sweet Briar Archives (Box 14, Folder 3). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, VA.

Committee members at Sweet Briar was shocked by this information. The EPA advised the committee members that they must act quickly and decide upon a solution before the situation become worse.

Among the Committee was Dr. Linda Fink, a noteworthy biology, ecology, and natural history professor who has taught at Sweet Briar for many years. When she was asked about her main concern regarding the dairy operation, she stated that it was the ‘continuing threat that the location of the dairy farm imposed on the stream,’ and added, ‘the water pollution that had occurred previously due to irresponsible manure maintenance practices (Letter to Hill, B. Box 3, Folder 7).’ She also stated that she was worried about the research of each option that was put forth. She did not believe that there was enough substantial research to prove any sustainable solution. She stated, “the requirements for a new location would be large pastures close enough to the milking barn in order for cows to be milked more than once a day, truck access to collect milk, close enough to a stream to cool milk, cleaning the milk parlor and water for cows.”

The options disclosed during the Land Use Committee meeting were limited. They were either forced to move the dairy operation, or to close the dairy operation. By moving the dairy operation to a new location would have the potential of continuing the water pollution as stated by Dr. Fink. She also recommended to the Committee that the possibility of transitioning from dairy to breeding beef cattle could be a better option than moving a dairy operation without sufficient research. Dr. Fink stated, ‘a new dairy should not be approved until a structurally sound location has been established (Letter to Hill, B. Box 3, Folder 10).’

In 1993, a biology student tested the stream of Williams Creek, the creek located directly near the dairy operation. She found that there was pollution within the water and the water levels

were unsatisfactory to the Virginia State Water Quality (VSWQ) regulations. The levels surpassed the standard water quality levels:

The acceptable limits of the geometric mean should not exceed 200 bacteria per 100ml water and a single sample should not exceed 1000 bacteria per 100 ml, yet in fact geometric mean levels were measured above 200 and there were levels of single sample bacteria that exceeded 1000.⁷

Letter to Barbara A. Hill. Fink, Linda. "Sweet Briar Streams are Affected by the Dairy." 2 Apr. 1994. MS. Sweet Briar Archives (Box 3, Folder 7). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, VA.

During the early months of 1994, after extended deliberation and disputes about the options, the dairy and yogurt operations at Sweet Briar College were closed. The herd of over 450 cows maintained by Jan Osinga were auctioned off for approximately \$300,000. The school officials stated that auctioning the cows resulted from new environmental requirements presented by the Environmental Protection Agency. It made the cost of maintaining, improving, and operating the Sweet Briar dairy operations difficult.

In 1994, the College auctioned off 450 Holstein cows and the machinery that was used to produce the beloved milk, cream, and yogurt. The decision to close the dairy was based on new EPA regulations that required significant changes to the operation in order to prevent runoff from reaching nearby streams.⁸

Letter to Tom Connors. Fink, Linda. "URGENT: Re Board Discussion of Sweet Briar Dairy." 18 Apr. 1994. MS. Sweet Briar Archives (Box 3, Folder 8). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, VA.

Among the numerous members of the Sweet Briar family affected by this decision, the most affected was the devoted farm manager who had managed it for nearly 40 years (1953-1994), Jan Osinga. He said in his autobiography, 'My Story,' that the closure of the Sweet Briar dairy and yogurt operation was one of the 'saddest days in his life.' He continued stating:

That almost killed me. It really did. That night of the auction. That night, I cried. I always thought it a missed opportunity that the academic part of Sweet Briar never took great advantage of incorporating the

⁷ Letter to Barbara A. Hill. Fink, Linda. "Sweet Briar Streams are Affected by the Dairy." 2 Apr. 1994. Sweet Briar Archives (Box 3, Folder 7). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, Va.

⁸ Letter to Tom Connors. Fink, Linda. "URGENT: Re Board Discussion of Sweet Briar Dairy." 18 Apr. 1994. Sweet Briar Archives (Box 3, Folder 8). Sweet Briar College Cochran Library. Sweet Briar, VA.

farm and dairy in some way into their academic curriculum. If they had, perhaps the farm and dairy would still be operating, perhaps in a more reduced capacity.⁹

From an article written in The News & Advance Newspaper, "For All It is Worth." Hodges, Kristin. Oct 21, 2008. Lynchburg, VA.

Although Sweet Briar College did not particularly use the dairy and land for study purposes, it did have a working farm from its inception, and hiring Osinga in the 1950s was a wise decision: he was an excellent manager who modernized, streamlined, and updated operations to make them more efficient and profitable.

If the Sweet Briar administration had continued the dairy operations, it would have provided an additional academic department, potential majors, and individual experience. Students would have had the opportunity to explore and advance agricultural interests by working on the farm or feeding the herds of cows that were owned by the college. Students in the biology and environmental fields would have had a chance to further scientific research with the presence of an operating farm.

In summary, Sweet Briar would have been able to advertise a unique asset: a farm with over 450 cows that provides milk, yogurt, and cream to students. By removing the dairy operation from the College, a shift in the development of its values, customs, and core principles was caused. Thus, college officials and students questioned the basis of the college, and examine what must be done in order for the college to continue its prominence and distinction throughout the nation. The farm and operation of the dairy contributed greatly to the culture and values of Sweet Briar College.

⁹ Hodges, Kristin. Article in the News & Advance Newspaper, "For All it Is Worth." Oct 21. 2008. Lynchburg, VA.

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