

Clover

Ideal Land for Farming:
A Note from the Author



Ideal Land for Farming

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Sometime around 1915 a young, unmarried black man, in the course of going to and from his job as principal of a small elementary school, daily slowed his horse and buggy to look covetously at the sandy soil in the small rural township of Filbert, South Carolina, just south of the North Carolina state line. Ideal land for farming, he thought, and eventually he decided he should use his savings to buy some of that land. Shortly thereafter he made his first acquisition of eighty-one acres of land with two houses. That man was my father.

He moved his parents and a widowed sister and child from nearby Sharon into the larger house, and took the smaller one for himself and his new bride. My nine brothers and sisters and I grew up hearing that the small house had been the slave quarters for what had once been a very large plantation.

The little town of Filbert consisted of a general store, a peach packing shed, a cotton gin, two churches, two schools, and a train depot. I can close my eyes and picture that store,

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with the well-worn wooden floorboards that creaked, particularly near the candy section where generations of children had shifted from one foot to the other while trying to decide between B-B Bats, Johnny cakes, and candy sticks of all colors. The smells of cinnamon buns, coffee, and onions mingled with those of cotton seed, Octagon Soap, and fertilizers. Wintertime was best of all, when the aroma of kerosene and burning oak from the big black stove made a pungent potpourri.

From the tiny depot my older siblings occasionally took the train that made two daily runs, north in the morning and back in late afternoon, to school in the next town. It was called the bobbed train, doubtless because of its size—two coaches, to be exact. Taking the train made them late for school, but the train trip cost only ten cents while the more timely interstate bus cost twenty.

Today a bypass pulls major traffic away from Filbert's decaying cluster of abandoned buildings—a fortunate turn of events for us, because Highway 321 runs right by our roadside peach shed. From the shed, nestled conveniently at the edge of our peach orchards, summer long I sing the praises of fine South Carolina peaches. South Carolina is, after all, second only to California in peach production. (Yes, it's California that's number one, not Georgia.)

I MUST ADMIT that my parents had a lot to handle. Aside from ten children and the peach orchards, there was the

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growing of sweet potatoes. Each crop brought its own set of problems. With the peaches there was the constant fear every spring of frost wiping out the crop for that season. When the temperature dropped, there were the long nights of burning old discarded auto tires, and waiting. Even if the peaches survived, peril still lay ahead. Too much rain and you end up with brown rot and frog-eyes, or hail could destroy a crop in a flash. One should never take for granted the perfect, blemish-free peaches we've grown to expect in our supermarkets.

Sweet potatoes may be a lot less trouble, but they have their own pitfalls. An early frost before harvest in the fall can ruin a crop, as can improper curing after harvesting. The growing of sweet potatoes was hard enough, but my progressive father also raised thousands of them as nursery plants, which we sold to almost every local farmer, black and white alike, in bundles of one hundred. If people thought our sweet potato plants were the finest, they had to know the potatoes they produced were also grade A. If I sound like a salesman, it's because I was raised to be one.

Anyway, my father devised an innovative plan for getting help to pick the potatoes. He talked high school principals throughout the county into letting those students willing to help harvest the crop work afternoons for two weeks in October. The working students would in turn earn school credits and be paid as well.

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DURING WORLD WAR II, with older sisters away at school and brothers in the service, the need for a tractor was magnified. New tractors were very scarce, and the demand was intense. It so happened that the Ford tractor dealer was one of my father's most faithful customers. With only one available tractor, and orders from many local white farmers, the white dealer made the unexpected decision to sell the tractor to my father. What happened in pulling that deal off is a story in itself.

In order to avoid having the neighboring farmers learn about it, the tractor would be delivered in the dead of night. When the brand new Ford tractor arrived, it was unloaded in a shed and covered over with large burlap sheets, the kind used to bundle up picked cotton. My brother loves to tell how we slipped out in the moonlight to touch the gleaming tractor again and again. It pained us to have to make it all dusty and muddy, in order to conceal its newness from the other farmers. We had no chance to show off our fine new tractor.

When my siblings and I reflect upon all of this now, we are quick to admire our parents' industrious creativity—especially Father's. As far as work went, he never missed an opportunity. Spring—planting, pruning, spraying, and selling. Summer—hoeing, harvesting, canning, and selling. Fall—harvesting, syrup-making, and selling. Winter—grading and packing potatoes, roasting peanuts, and always selling! Our father was a man for all seasons.

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When we were younger, we suspected that our parents might have decided to have ten children because it was cheaper than slaves for all the drudgery.

Other farmers benefitted as well from the Sanders chaps. If a farmer needed help, perhaps in the face of an impending storm, regardless of color he had my father's generous offering of his children to help out—and, of course, for free. Perhaps it was this that gave us a symbiotic relationship with our neighbors, who were equally quick to come to our aid in time of need.

Such things prepared us to face the realities of life, particularly the farming life. When, as in 1989, a late spring freeze wipes out all nine varieties of our peaches, we grin and bear it, and simply double our plantings of summer crops.

I SUPPOSE IT was my reflections upon that childhood that inspired me to write *Clover*, my first published work. Although my book is not autobiographical, there are many things in *Clover* that touch upon my own experience.

As I've said, my father was an elementary school principal, and so is the fictional father in *Clover*. Unlike that character, however, my father was the principal of a segregated school, and did not have an interracial marriage.

As a schoolteacher and landowner, who very early on purchased additional land for his sons, my father enjoyed a certain status in both the black and the white farm communities.

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For one, he didn't have the sharecropper-type relationship that some blacks, of course, had with white landowners. There was no one to say, "Boy, plow the cotton today. Y'hear?"

I don't mean to imply, however, that racial problems and tensions did not exist for us. Indeed, they were everywhere. The segregated schools, buses, trains, and movie houses didn't admit blacks at all. Drinking fountains were marked "For Colored Only," even in courthouses with their mounted scales of Justice. Perhaps that's why they say Justice is blind.

There were occasions, of course, when those racial barriers were defied. In my work of fiction, the narrator, Clover, has to visit a doctor because of an eye problem. In real life, I jabbed a pair of scissors into my left eye. Well, my father rushed me down to Rock Hill (the largest town in the county) in his old pickup truck. He marched right into the ophthalmologist's waiting room, even though a sign clearly read "Whites Only." My father held my right hand. My left hand held the clean white cotton bandage my mother had concocted for my eye. "This is an emergency," he announced to a startled nurse, rendered speechless by our very presence. "My daughter has a serious eye injury," he continued. "We must see the doctor *now!*" Well, we saw the doctor then, and on several follow-up visits.

We even returned a year later when my eyes turned scarlet red from eating snow. I guess that was my first encounter with the possible effects of chemicals on our environment. The doctor said that the snow had doubtless been contaminated by

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something in the atmosphere. I was forever after forbidden to eat the delicious snow ice cream my mother had always made.

AGAIN, NOT UNLIKE my fiction, I grew up under a strong male presence, an achiever. In the not too distant past, portions of my father's autobiography were salvaged when our house burned. What remained totaled less than a dozen pages, yet from them I learned things I had either forgotten or never fully knew. For one, my father had taken leave from his teaching post and reentered college to study algebra and Latin. And he wrote a history of several organizations in the county, a thousand copies of which were published in 1924.

I realize now that, for a hard-working farm family, we had quite a sophisticated lifestyle. My father played the piano and several other instruments. I still have his trumpet with mother of pearl keys. My mother played also, although by ear. She had a lovely voice as well, and coached us in a cappella singing. Even now, unless I'm writing at the peach shed on paper bags and the backs of out-of-date banquet menus from the Maryland hotel where I help plan banquets in the winter months, I write to the background music of my favorite symphonies and concertos. It is the music of my childhood.

Books were also a necessity of life for us. I grew up with Homer, Hawthorne, and other classics. Early in our teens we tired of reading only the *Grit* newspaper and farming magazines, and my sister took her personal earnings and joined the

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Garden City Book Club. One of my brothers subscribed to the *Charlotte Observer*. Today my library cards fill the wallet slots that others use for credit cards. (Credit cards? Not for me! Debt was a four-letter word in my family.)

As one can imagine, in a family as large as ours, squabbles were a daily if not hourly occurrence. In order to spare my mother and himself from constantly having to mediate arguments, my father held family court each Wednesday evening. As intended, by the time the week was up, most of our trivial disputes had been forgotten. Court was a serious affair, with my father playing all the parts, with appropriate gestures, demeanor, and tone of voice for the bailiff, judge, and both the prosecuting and defense attorneys. When needed, my mother served as witness, juror, and/or audience.

In one particular case, I was the plaintiff, accusing my brother of having thrown a large rock at me, dramatically gesturing to demonstrate my walking-along-minding-my-own-business innocence before the attack. In order to improve the case, I decided to bring in an impressively large rock as evidence. Upon hearing my description of the crime, my father suggested that we adjourn the court to the yard for a proper reenactment of the alleged offense. I readily agreed. Unfortunately, the rock I had chosen was so huge that, try as I might, I could not heave it more than two feet, after which it dropped to the dirt with a thud.

Raising his eyebrows with a Solomonic stare, my father

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pointed out that it was hard to believe that my brother, several years my junior, could have managed even to lift, much less throw, the rock the distance I claimed. While I lost that case and plenty of others, we learned many lessons from those trials. It seemed that my father viewed life through a wide-angle lens.

AS A CHILD I had no idea how very progressive and yet conservative my parents were. I confess I was often somewhat envious of some of my playmates. Where we had a tablecloth and matching plates on our dinner table, and even had to ask for and be granted permission to leave when we'd finished eating, my playmates used a variety of tin pie-pan plates, and ate their meals under shade trees, up in trees, anywhere they chose. What fun for them!

I thought our food was boring—whole-grain breads, mostly unrefined sugar, syrup made from sugar cane right on our farm. Summer long, a huge mounted iron dinner bell rang daily at 11:45 A.M. to summon us to a steady diet of vegetables, fruits, and meats, usually boiled or baked, rarely fried. It was a diet that would please any contemporary cardiologist.

If I seem to overemphasize my father's influence, it is surely not because my mother's influence was less positive. My father held in high esteem the lovely former student of his that he later fell in love with and married. His pet name for her was "Sugar," while *she* called *him* "Mr. Sanders." And my mother's collection of fresh wildflowers and dried weeds were proudly

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displayed in crocks throughout the house, long before “country” was in vogue.

I am certainly not trying to say my father’s influence was totally unique. I’m sure there were many other black fathers who were influential in their children’s lives. Rather, because a positive black maternal image has been well explored time and time again, I feel that the positive black male has too often been given short shrift. Surely there are more who deserve equal time. When I’ve shown admiration, even in fiction, for a strong black father figure, it is because I’m drawing on the familial background of my youth. So the only pen portrait I’m capable of sketching is a positive one.

I guess my writing and my strong characters all come from having been allowed my own experience. It’s only natural for me to draw upon it. My experience may be different from that of others, but there should never be a need to offer apologies for that. So often we turn out like our parents before us—traced images, not too unlike paper tracings.

WRITING ALLOWS ME the freedom to reflect on the things of my youth—my roles in school plays written and produced by my father, being first-prize winner time and again in county-wide oratorical contests and spelling bees, and so on. Those glimpses into the past, along with the insignificant—the wonderment of tufts of moss clinging precariously in mid-air to tiny branches of dead trees, yet thriving, the mournful

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cooing of doves by day, the haunting cries of hoot-owls by night—evoke memories that tear pleasantly at my emotions.

But all has not been pleasant. Down through the years, death has played its somber hand. While we mourn the deaths of our parents, we are conditioned to expect them to leave first. It's quite different, however, when it comes to a sibling, especially when it's a younger one. Mourning begins a long journey, an ever-present sadness that cannot be ignored. So even in my writing it finds a place.

In small ways, in company with those in my family who continue to hold on to the land and the farming life, I find some measure of happiness and satisfaction. Some of my brothers and sisters left the farm to pursue careers in cities. They did take with them, however, a love of land and the freedom it confers. Regardless of the amount of land they own, be it great or small, when spring comes not one fails to respond to the call of the seed catalogs.

Childhood can only be interpreted when seen from the distance of years, and usually by that time few tangible reminders are left. A rusting water tank atop a decaying tower is all that remains of the sophisticated irrigation system that my father designed and built for watering the beds of sweet potatoes before we had electricity. So many other things, like our old family home, remain intact in memory, yet lie in ruins in reality. Old, silent foundation stones are the only landmarks remaining of a house that no longer stands, but that looms far nobler in

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its decay than when it was new. An unattainable piece of the past becomes even more desirable because of its unattainability.

MY FARMING EXPERIENCE has served me well. It's an occupation that is at once challenging and humbling. Actually, it was our roadside peach shed, with its steady flow of customers and visiting farmers, that set the stage for my novel.

A farmer's very approach to life is so appealingly mundane. Rural life, unhampered by the frenetic pace of city living. Hard work, but plenty of relaxation. Meaningful lives played out without affectation by ordinary people, on their own ordinary stage. A fertile environment for the imagination and for storytelling. Tales of the old cotton-picking, watermelon-patch days—of opossum and 'coon hunts with hound dogs or beagle hounds, told over and over. With such richness, it's no small wonder that so many of the Southerners who moved north earlier are now returning home in droves.

Farming has its own unyielding deadlines. Timing and discipline cannot be ignored at any stage, or an entire crop can be lost. My early exposure to these habits served to implant in me the sustained discipline so necessary for writing.

It is this experience and background that is the wellspring and the strength of my writing. It is also what doubtless enabled me to muster up enough courage to submit my first manuscript to a publishing house.

While farming prepares one for rejection and fuels the faith

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to try again, I must admit that the blow of the rejection of my first manuscript was softened by a caring editor, who, instead of sending the usual rejection slip, wrote a letter. He encouraged me to write about what I knew, rather than think of some contrived melodramatic plot. I shall be ever grateful for that.

I remember reading in Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, "Don't let's forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and that we obey them without knowing it." So, lest the very last vestige of it all be washed away like the erosion of fine soil, I write to establish, if only in fiction, some permanence to it all.

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Dori Sanders was raised on one of the oldest African American–owned farms in South Carolina. She does most of her writing in the winter and reserves her time during the peach-growing season for work on the family farm and at Sanders Farm Stand on Highway 321 in Filbert, South Carolina. She is also the author of the bestselling novel *Her Own Place* and a cookbook, *Dori Sanders’ Country Cooking: Recipes and Stories from the Family Farm Stand*.