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Understanding the region's rural past

Preserving the memories of vanishing farmlands Radford University students record oral histories of New River Valley farmers from the 1930s to the present.

By [Paul Dellinger](#)

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paul.dellinger@roanoke.com

(276) 228-4752

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RADFORD - Agriculture may have never gotten the proper credit for the role it has played in the development of the New River Valley.

In the mid-1930s, nearly 7,500 farms covered more than 690,000 acres of Floyd, Montgomery, Giles and Pulaski counties. By the late 1990s, the numbers had dropped to 1,959 farms covering a little more than 363,000 acres.

Most of the missing acreage has gone into housing, roads and, perhaps most significantly, commercial development like that along U.S. 460 between Christiansburg and Blacksburg. It is no accident that the newest mall along that stretch is called the Spradlin Farm Shopping Center.

But the role of agriculture may now be getting its due, if Mary LaLone, an anthropology professor at [Radford University](#), has anything to do with it.

Weather

Thanks to her and students in two of her economic anthropology classes, the history is now preserved through some 30 interviews with New River Valley farmers from the 1930s to the present, in a book titled "Appalachian Farming Life: Memories and Perspectives on Farm Families in Virginia's New River Valley," published by Brightside Press in Fairlawn. Funds for the project came from a [Radford University](#) Foundation grant.

Rather than teaching the history of agriculture from a book, LaLone sent her students to record oral histories in cooperation with the Montgomery County Farm Bureau.

"This is the perfect university-community partnership," LaLone said. "We tried to get people who remembered the past, and people who are doing it today."

"We worked real hard on that," said Charlotte Holland, office manager for the Farm Bureau. "The Farm Bureau board of directors took this on as their project. ... Since it was a New River Valley thing, we worked with the different counties and contacted the different Farm Bureau offices."

What the Farm Bureau folks liked about the project, she said, was how it would let the children and grandchildren of farmers learn what farming was like decades ago and how it has changed.

The project took a year and a half. Two of LaLone's students - Kay Spence, now a teacher assistant at Floyd County Elementary School, and Peg Wimmer, now pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Kentucky - helped edit the final work.

Both had grown up on Floyd County farms. "We could identify," Spence said. "Of course, we learned a lot, too. We were educated on some of the early hardships."

The students who recorded the interviews were a mix of those from farms and from urban areas. "Some of the students hadn't ever seen a cow

before," LaLone said.

A 2002 report from the American Farmland Trust said the nation loses 2 acres of farmland every minute of every day. From 1992 to 1997, more than 6 million acres of farmland - the size of Maryland - was converted to development.

The study showed Virginia losing 21,000 acres per year from 1992 to 1997, up from 11,960 acres per year from 1987 to 1992, making it

the 11th-highest among states in agriculture land loss. Most of the losses came in the northern and coastal parts of Virginia, while most of the western part of Virginia remained relatively stable, with one exception: the New River Valley counties, particularly Montgomery and Floyd.

"It's a big issue here. We've got a great agricultural base, but we also have a lot of economic development, especially in Montgomery County," LaLone said. "I can't think of a better time for this to come out, with Montgomery County doing a comprehensive plan and all the development that's going on."

The commercial stretch along U.S. 460 used to be a big orchard area. "People don't remember some of that," she said.

Younger people also do not remember when feed sacks would be bought with identical patterns because it took two of them to make a dress, LaLone said. They have no idea how independent farm families were, not only raising their own food but making their own soap and other basics.

Nor do they realize how long some of the farms now being broken up had been around.

"Everyone calls them bicentennial farms, because they go back 200 years," she said.

"They weren't just in their own little world. They were aware of global concerns," Spence said of the farmers interviewed. "They knew very well what the markets were, what the concerns for the future were."

The Farm Bureau board and Women's Committee took copies of the finished book to all the middle and high schools in the four counties and to Virginia Tech and several libraries.

They presented a copy to state Farm Bureau President Bruce Hiatt at a statewide gathering, prompting bureau representatives from other counties to consider similar oral history projects.

LaLone hopes the book will be put to use by regional planners.

"The challenge for the future is really to balance the agriculture with the development that's coming up," she said. "And that's what all of the New River Valley has to face now."

"Appalachian Farming Life" is available from Brightside Press and other outlets in the New River Valley. The 432-page soft-cover sells for \$20.

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