



# “We are Right on the Cusp of Some Bad Stuff Happening”: Life and Death on a Missouri Farm

Colbey M. Stosberg

Marmee's house is damn near the oldest thing in all of Lafayette County. The place is an oddity. As you walk past the rusted-out playset on the lawn, ascend the stairs to the front porch, and pass through the screen door, Marmee is there. Beyond the mud room and laundry, a wire basket hangs filled to the rim with full-size Snickers bars. Marmee loves Snickers. The drink fridge is stocked with Pepsi, Sunkist, and water. "Grab a Snickers and a drink." Just like the animals, Marmee's company is always well-fed and watered. In the summer, the freezer above is always loaded with the delicious Wal-Mart brand ice pops that come in red mesh bags. Those things are cheap but damn good.

The soft, dark blue carpets and low ceilings make the living room feel smaller than it is. This, of course, is no problem for the short-statured Marmee. The distinct smell of Dial body wash fills the hallway, whose oddly sloped floor makes for optimal "scooter-riding," although Marmee does not enjoy scooter riding in the house. At the end of the corridor is the linoleum-floored kitchen. Marmee prepares hearty chicken fried steak and pork chops. The sides of the staircase just beyond Marmee's bedroom are lined with extra canned veggies, paper towels, and clothes. It is an extraordinary place to put lima beans, but considering it is impossible to open the pantry without everything falling out, it makes sense.

In 1821, no more than ten miles from Marmee's house, a man named Adam Lightner operated a ferry across Tabo Creek in present-day Lafayette County, Missouri. This ferry transported William Becknell's party across the creek on his inaugural trade expedition along the Santa Fe Trail. Nearby pioneers began homesteading, hoping to make a living despite scattered settlements and little infrastructure. More than two hundred years later, on the banks of Tabo Creek and a land littered with history, Marmee and her son Mike Williams operate a 773-acre farm on some of the finest land in all of Lafayette County—and even the state of Missouri itself.

Published in 1910, William Young's History of Lafayette County mentions the same attractive geographical features that my uncle Mike hypothesizes drew settlers to this area in the first place: quality streams, a healthy combination of timber and good open ground, wildlife, access to transportation, and more. The agreement between Young's and Mike's assessments is astounding, especially considering that my uncle hasn't read a lick of Young's work.



## About the Author



Colbey M. Stosberg

I am a fourth-semester Political Science major and Geography minor Mizzou student, with an anticipated graduation in the Fall of 2024. As a lifelong Missourian, whose family has ancestry in the state since the 1810s, I have an extreme passion for all things relating to this state. I am interested in Missouri Politics and am currently employed as a staffer on a major statewide campaign and was an intern in the office of Majority Floor Leader and Speaker-Elect Dr. Jonathan Patterson. Geography has always been an interest of mine, and I had a collection of maps as a kid. I enjoy learning, visiting, and writing about new places, so writing this paper was a real treat for me. I grew up on the western side of the state in the South KC suburbs as a huge Mizzou fan and was even Truman the Tiger for Halloween on several occasions.

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Despite over a century of separation, both men intuitively understand that the things that drew settlers to the farm were not gold or other far-fetched Western offerings. The landscape is a habitat for them, their families, livestock, and crops. Despite more than a century of drastic change, Mike's engrained respect for the land endures.

The antique family farmhouse, a Victorian-era gable-front-and-wing, is the centerpiece of the farm lifestyle. It was built by John P. and Mary Marshall Bear sometime in the 1860s, and in an odd twist, the property was owned in succession by families whose last names proceed like an animal menagerie: Bears, Foxes, and Lyons. In March of 1952, Earl "Tootie" and Pat Williams moved into the farmhouse and began renting the farm, about 200 acres, from Mr. Lewis Rechterman, eventually purchasing the farm ten years later in the final months of 1962. Working the land, Earl and Pat reared five children, Linda, Mike, Shelley, Susan, and Lori, on the farm. The siblings have their own children now, me among them, who, along with the grandchildren, call Earl "Pawpaw" and Pat "Marmee." After at least 150 years of ancestors in Lafayette County and seven decades on the farm outside of Higginville, the Williams family has developed an extremely tight bond with the land. There are indications that the exact land that my family currently owns was directly inhabited as early as 1836 by white settlers. Considering the population density of Lafayette County in 1830 was less than five people per square mile, the location says something special about the quality of the land: with a relative abundance of open ground available for settlers to choose from, the fact that a family chose to farm and build a home there indicates a prime location.

The farm primarily grows corn and beans. Although these crops are extremely important to the livelihood of the farm, the cardinal focus and area of expertise has been the Hampshire pig. The Williams family has bred and raised this specific breed of swine since 1947, when Earl was in high school. Hampshire hogs have shaped and dominated our family's identity.



*Roughneck, the magnum opus of the Williams' hog tradition, sits in Mike's garage to greet visitors.*



*Mary Marshall Bear poses for a photo in front of the farmhouse. While abstracts for the farm trace back to the 1830s, the house was built in the 1860s. This photo was taken at an unknown date following the construction of the house.*

Working with Hampshires not only had a lasting financial impact on the development and improvement of the family farm, but also played a central role in the upbringing of each of Marmee and Pawpaw's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The Hampshires, like the record-holding "Roughneck" of the 1970s whose skeleton was on display at the American Royal in Kansas City and now resides in Mike's garage, are a source of pride. The Williams farm sign, planted firmly at the intersection of Highway FF and Brush Creek Road, features a Hampshire pig, and whether you're in the farmhouse or the home of any one of the five siblings, you will find an abundance of Hampshire photos, pictures, statues, and figurines.

Everyone in the Williams family understands the great historical, social, and economic value of the farm, but no one is more attached to the landscape than Mike. Mike has more than 50 years of experience as a farmer and his hard work and dedication to the farm are evident in every aspect of his life. This includes his body. In 1958, when Mike was



*Mike, like all farmers, checks on his crops regularly during the growing season, this time using his hand with all five fingers. High quantity and quality are essential features of a quality corn or bean crop.*

only six years old, the index finger on his right hand was amputated by a wheat drill. Hanging by a thread, doctors attempted to sew the finger back on, but to no avail. You only notice the effects of the injury when Mike grasps you in a handshake, which is so firm that you can feel the missing digit as a merciful absence in the compression.

For Mike, the uniqueness of the land lies not only in the quality of the soil but also in the geographic location. "Over the summer, moisture and precipitation tend to follow the river. My thoughts are, it's about ten miles either side of the river that tends to catch the most moisture when the rains blow down the river. We are about that distance. From year to year regarding moisture for making high-yield corn and beans, we are in a very good area for that." Although the farm lies firmly in the bounds of Mike's ten-mile theory, last year was tough on the south side of the river. "We need some substantial water. Our ponds are 3-4 feet down. Up to last week, you could walk across Tabo. In thirty years, I cannot hardly remember that happening. We are right on the cusp of some bad stuff happening."

The bad stuff doesn't end with the lack of rain. Raising livestock and farming has always attracted the ire of "so-called environmentalists". Accusations by environmentalists have led Mike to feel that outside parties are misinformed about the practices of his farm, not

to mention the ignorance over the hard work Mike has done as the caretaker and conservationist of the land. Mike has swift responses to each of the environmentalist's contentions. Regarding the concerns on erosion, he points to the practice of terracing. To the concerns regarding the destruction of habitat, he points to the extremely fertile soil or timber laden with foliage and wildlife. Mike retorts, "I think we are very humane. In fact, there's many days where we've been out trying to take care of the animals where it has been quite a detriment to our own health. It's real simple. If we don't take care of the land, then the land won't take care of us. And all of the people who consider themselves environmentalists or are people who have problems with agriculture and farming, they do not understand whatsoever how important the land is to our survival and their survival. Environmentalists are a threat, especially to smaller farms like ours, because a family farm doesn't have the financial power to fight some legal battle that they want to fight." Respect for the land, the flora, and the fauna are priorities for environmentalist groups, animal activists, and Mike. This is a vital common ground. Just recently, Mike himself was rammed by a tusk from an angry boar, barely missing his femoral artery and yet another potentially fatal experience. Yet, Mike continues caring for his animals.

The number of small farms in the United States has been declining steadily for decades. Mike believes that farms must operate a certain acreage to be profitable or self-sufficient. He explains that all farms must have a "baseline" amount of resources and equipment, so if farms do not have enough land to offset these baseline costs, then profitability is impossible.

Assuming Mike's theory is true, the relationship between expenses and output is not strictly linear, so margins can decrease rapidly for smaller farms. Mike believes the farm is dangerously close to that profitability threshold. For Mike, outside forces and foes are not the only thing threatening the small farm. Fighting and disagreements within and between families and partners--potential heirs--combined with hefty inheritance taxes cause family farms to slip below the land threshold and fall into sale and often, subdivision. Marmee and Pawpaw raised their five children with what



*While gilts are female pigs produced for consumption, sows, like the two pictured above, are females who have had at least one litter of pigs. The piglets in this litter are yet to be weaned off their mother and are still nursing in the farrowing house.*



they call a "mutual understanding." This mutual understanding involves each of the kids realizing that what is best for their personal interests may not align with what would be best for the family and, in turn, the farm, which is what Marmee and Pawpaw dedicated their entire lives to provide for and protect. Each of the four other children has no stake in the farm. Despite this, Mike has prioritized his siblings and involved them in the discussions on the home farm. The understanding between the siblings and their parents overcame personal desires, each knowing that it would be impossible to split the farm two, let alone five ways. Along with this, Mike has spent decades working on the farm just to ensure the farm's survival. Still, the question remains: who will take over after Mike? His daughter lives outside of St. Louis, nearly 200 miles away from Lafayette County, and while Mike's son currently resides on the farm, he has a family and business of his own. A few things are clear: Mike's children must keep the farm whole, and they must work together with their father to develop a plan. The Williams family farm will inevitably disappear if they cannot do this.



*Brand new combines and tractors often cost more than a house. Smaller farms like Mike's are forced to lease or buy older equipment. As agriculture technology rapidly advances, this could put some farms at a disadvantage.*

On New Year's Eve 2022, Marmee passed away at her home in town. I was concerned with Marmee's passing, considering this was the first loss in the family since I have been alive. The Higginsville Methodist church pews were packed, with story after story being shared by friends and family. My mother and maternal grandmother (unrelated to Marmee) made the two-hour round-trip journey from home to come, even though my parents divorced over 10 years ago. If that is not indicative of the character that Marmee displayed, then I don't know what is. Heck, my stepfather came, and he never even knew Marmee.

I was granted the chance to speak in front of several hundred folks at the funeral. In my speech, I decided it would be appropriate to talk about the countless stories we had about Marmee. I had pre-written the address but knew my delivery and tone would have to be based on the emotions in the room on the funeral day. I gauged the room, a small-town church that was cozy, yet dramatic, with impressive stained glass windows. I expected to see the usual somber vibe surrounding a funeral, but I observed something different. The room was filled with awkward happiness. Everyone missed Marmee, yes, but everyone also knew her life was spectacular, filled with dedication to her earthly family and farm, living with a deep conviction and commitment to her faith.

I briefly considered sharing the hilarious story of 90-year-old Marmee sipping a Busch Light through a fluorescent orange straw on Thanksgiving Day. However, I soon determined that the story would be inappropriate in a place of worship. I instead saved that hilarious story for later. On that Thanksgiving Day, Marmee spotted one of the men watching the football game and drinking a beer. She promptly said, "Get me one of them." So, we did just that. She sipped on it for a while, and when Susan tried to take it away, she got upset and said, "I'm not done." Her voice was weak, but you knew damn well not to take Marmee's Busch Light away. It is the beer of the farmers, after all.

Instead, I opted to share something different. In the fall of 1977, Marmee was headed home in the very early hours of the morning from southern Missouri in a severe rainstorm. As she was crossing the bridge on Brush Creek Rd. just north of the confluence of Brush and Tabo Creeks, she believed the rising water on the bridge was no more than a few inches deep. In a near-new 1977 Chevrolet Caprice, Marmee figured she would have no problem crossing the bridge everyone in the family traveled daily. She was wrong. The floodwaters swept her off the bridge and into the creek. Marmee miraculously managed to climb out of the car and the gulch and made the two-mile trek in the dark downpour all the way back to the farmhouse, arriving soaked just before dawn. Marm's car was recovered, but totally laden with silt, sand, mud, plant debris, and just about anything nasty you could find in a rural creek. Among other near disasters were the



time Marmee was nearly suffocated by snow when she was putting snow chains on her vehicle in a blizzard, just as a snowplow drove by and buried her underneath her vehicle. This was no match for Marmee, as she dug herself out with her hands and continued on her way. When she was 89 years old, Marmee tried to take out the trash on the coldest day of the entire winter while wearing just a light coat. She slipped, fell, and was stranded for hours in the snow before she was found. Her skin was frozen to the snow as the EMTs attempted to rescue her. Her body temperature fell to below 80 degrees, and we were sure she would not make it through the night. Despite losing several digits to severe frostbite, Marmee fought on, as she always had, and lived another two years.

Marmee was weak and frail for several years before her death. To be honest, several of us were wondering why she had not gone to be with Pawpaw earlier, considering her condition. My aunt often spoke with Marmee, and Marmee told her that she was worried Pawpaw was not there waiting for her in heaven. I was heartbroken to hear this and still get choked up thinking about this. This was not like Marmee, who was so steadfast in her faith. I found Marmee's concerns on the afterlife especially alarming considering the numerous near-death experiences she has had. Eventually, my grandmother decided to visit the psychic. The psychic even confirmed and assured Marmee that Pawpaw was waiting right there for her on the other side. Even the strongest Christians like Marmee doubt their faith. In times of doubt, I truly believe faith becomes more fortified. After Christmas, I think Marmee was able to let go and go be with her husband, whom she so dearly missed as a widow of nearly three decades. She never remarried. Marmee passed away just hours before midnight on New Year's Eve. It was a peaceful passing for the most deserving woman. There is no doubt in my mind that Marmee is reunited with Pawpaw. In the words of my cousin, "Marmee got the New Year's kiss she had been waiting on all those years." We can only pray, now with Marmee gone, that the legacy of the farm and ancient house will survive. The rows of corn and beans, the terraces, the hogs and cattle, and the age-old farmhouse all are examples and proof that the land is truly connected with the family. The connection to their land and each other is ultimately what will have the potential to immortalize the farm and the house against threats of all shapes and sizes. For now, the farmhouse, the oldest thing in Lafayette County, will lie empty, waiting to be bulldozed, Marmee is no longer there to greet its visitors.



*Marmee (center), my twin sister, Kayden (right), and my cousin Clayton (back), and myself (left) in March 2017*