

He's FFA, She's 4-H, It's All In A Day's Work

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SOMERSET (Somerset Co.)—When Andy and Melissa Hipple moved here from Frederick County, Virginia, so Andy could teach ag mechanics at the Somerset Area High School, they had good reason to rejoice. For one thing, the Pennsylvania natives would be closer to both their families, and second, they expected an economic benefit from the relocation.

"If it tells you anything," Andy says with a reminiscent chuckle, "in the 10 months we lived in Virginia, I put 36,000 miles on my car."

His family home is 20 miles north of Williamsport in Lycoming County and hers, much further west in Armstrong County. Visiting home often was a must.

As one of five ag teachers in a big county-wide system, the Virginia job was Andy's first official teaching position. Earlier, his stint of student teaching was at Clearfield High School, Clearfield County. Working as a long-term substitute, Melissa was also employed, when the Somerset opportunity unexpectedly arose.

"There are only about 148 ag teacher positions in the state and they don't open very often," Andy said. But knowing his preference was Pennsylvania, Andy's friends and contacts were tracking all the possibilities.

In March 1993, news spread that Ed Shoemaker, Somerset's ag teacher, had died.

Andy took over the empty position that June. Summer recess was ideal for him as orientation time. He prepared for the task ahead, got acquainted with the area, and touched base with his record book students.

"It's difficult when you are stepping into a situation of a very well-liked person," he said. "I know what it's like to be a beginning ag teacher. My teacher in ninth grade was a beginner."

Persevering with confidence, Andy soon had friendships developing with students and FFA members.

"There are a lot of days (now) when kids talk to me about things not connected to ag—they just need someone to talk to. You become a friend," he said.

Meanwhile, his spouse like Andy, had earned her degree from Penn State, having majored in ag-science as opposed to his, ag-education. By studying tenaciously, she managed to complete college in three years instead of four. She and Andy graduated together.

"I wouldn't recommend it to anybody," she advises those considering demanding so much of themselves, but adds rosily, "I guess I did it for love."

Fortunately, student teaching took Andy out of sight for a few months during the last semester. Minus that distraction education got Melissa's full attention.

Their college romance spawned when he was a sophomore and she, a freshman. Having both attended (a year apart), the Governor's School of Agriculture, they discovered that between them was a lot of common ground.

Ag was his career choice. He liked what he learned in Montoursville High School, was very involved in vo-ag and FFA; with leadership, public speaking, parliamentary procedure and ag-salesmanship. Kids who struggle found that Andy's knack for remembering information and his

willingness to help them, was very beneficial.

Too, the 200-acre Trout Run, Hipple dairy farm, among the county's biggest, and home to Jack and Patricia Hipple and their four offshoots, laid the interests of agriculture in Andy's early life.

Not so, Melissa. Her rural, non-farm background saw her dad—Gerald F. Crawford, Moreno, Calif., as a funeral director, her mother—Betsy Crawford, Freeport, working in a steel mill, and a grandfather who was a chemist, which hardly brought the Freeport Area High School honor student into close contact with agriculture. It did, however acquaint her with environmental issues that impact not only society in general, but also the farmer, literally, on every side.

Attending the Governor's School of Agriculture rather than of Science, was a lucky coincidence for Melissa, caused by a glitch with her application. The "very intensive" five-week school courses were animal science, plant science soils, leadership and an independent study project. She fell in love with agriculture.

Andy says, "The benefit is that you work with one professor the whole five weeks."

February 21, 1991, probably is the most notable date in the lives of the Hipples.

Where to go on spring break was the problem. Andy and Melissa argued whether to go to his home or hers.

"It was the biggest fight we ever had," admits Melissa.

Finally, Andy handed her a cute new teddy bear, which effectively infuriated the young woman further, as would a scarlet cape being waved before the eyes of an angry bull.

It wasn't just any stuffed bear, though, as Andy calmly pointed out by calling her attention to the baby bruin's neck ribbon and the diamond engagement ring attached there.

Of course, he was proposing marriage and she couldn't stay angry in those circumstances. So his folks got a telephone call while hers got the spring break visitors. In May 1992, both graduated from Penn State and married the following October.

Last June, Melissa, after being a caseworker for Somerset County Children and Youth Services, became the first female ag agent in the Somerset County office of the Penn State Cooperative Extension Service where a very active and very traditional 4-H program is thriving.

"We have a very high retention of leaders," said the new agent, "unlike some counties who have very high leader turnover. There is lots of parental involvement in



Andy and Melissa Hipple and son, Britton.

Somerset County 4-H.

"A lot of hard work has gone into the 4-H program. If you look at the length of time the kids stay in 4-H, it's double the state average," Melissa reported, noting how many of the county's teens stick with the program.

"We have more teens in the program. I think it's more important to make an impact on a teenager than on an eight-year-old," she observed.

"I think any experience a child has with any organization is beneficial to a child. With so many broken homes and both parents working, kids need it. They need positive role models."

Melissa believes that her responsibilities—the 4-H interstate exchange program, county fashion revue, foods revue, demonstration contests, public speaking and square dancing, will go smoothly because a strong foundation was laid over the years by the now retired Bob Antram, a former interim director at Somerset.

As they chat, the Hipple's are kept busy monitoring the movements of their active little son, born Dec. 15, 1994, who seems

determined to inflict his unwelcome attention upon the cats—Taylor and Sparky. When that fails, Britton remembers the glasses of iced tea and soda placed on the end table.

Advancing their education was always an accepted fact for the currently expectant, Melissa and her two teenaged sisters.

"I like being a mother," she says, "but I like to do things other than being a mother because I think it makes me a well-rounded person."

Kept busy by their jobs and attending various evening FFA and 4-H affairs, the spouses happily report that their workplaces are but five minutes from home and the babysitter located along Andy's route to school.

Family time is important which means they all go to work-related, evening engagements whenever possible.

"In Somerset County," said Andy, "there's a distinct difference between FFA and 4-H. FFA

is co-curricular, part of the school curriculum. If you are in ag, you should belong to the FFA."

Making good grades in high school was never a problem for either of them. Both had 3.9 grade point averages and stood amongst the top ten percent. His class had 180 students and hers, 169.

Traveling to his home, where his dad's parents also occupy the farm and his mother is disaster coordinator for the Lycoming County Chapter of the American Red Cross, is a four-hour jaunt from Somerset.

So by the time they arrive, if after work on Friday, everybody is ready for bed. And waiting to go until Saturday—well, that's too short of a weekend when you gotta' turn around and come back on Sunday.

But still, the Hipple's aren't complaining. They try to adapt themselves to the circumstances and know they have much to be thankful for.



SOMERSET NOTES