

# Sandscrest: A Sense of Place, A Sense of Past

by Nora Edinger

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## First-Person Accounts of the Sandscrest Farm Era: AD 1920-1962

### Part 5 in a Series

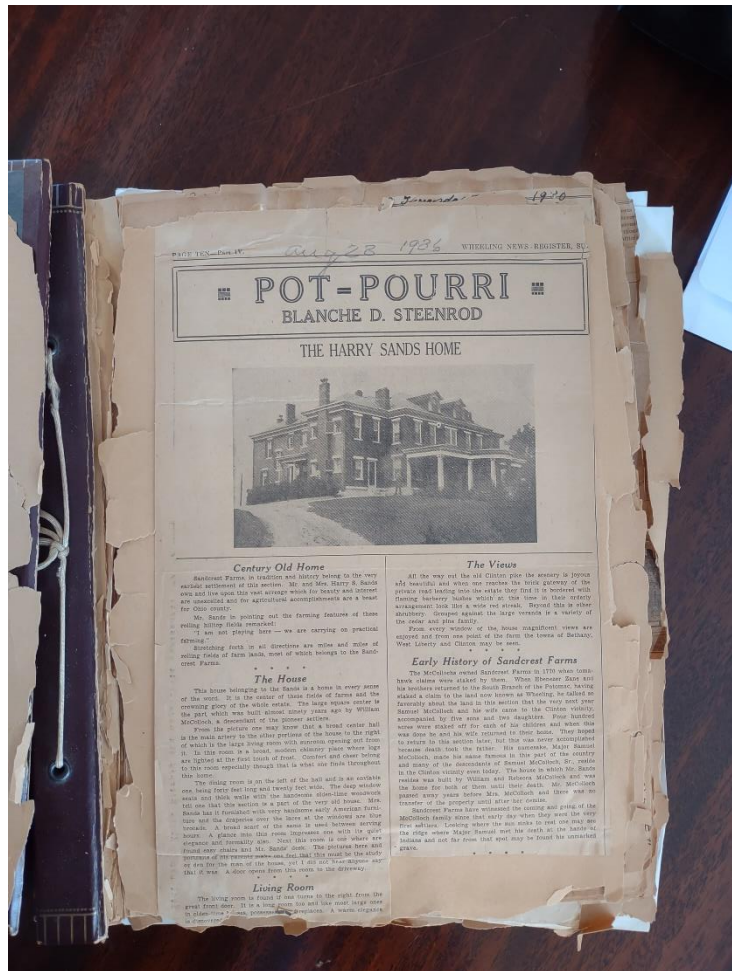
The Sandscrest Farm era is just recent enough to have a well-documented history. In addition to the previous section on this era – which covered Harry Sands and his view of farm life -- we also have two tantalizing first-person accounts from this same time period.

The first was written for the *Wheeling News-Register's* Aug. 28, 1936 edition by society columnist Blanche D. Steenrod. It was found pasted in Harry Sand's scrapbook, pictured at right.

The second is an account of farm life from the 1950s and early 1960s from Susan Griffith Sampson. Sampson is the eldest of three daughters of former farm worker Joseph Griffith, who lived on the property for nearly 40 years.

Both accounts are meticulous in detail, making them a feast for the serious lover of Sandscrest Conference & Retreat Center – or for any history buff who would enjoy learning more about farm life in the Ohio Valley in the early 1900s.

The two stories are presented as they were written except for minor editing. Contemporary editor's notes are displayed in italics and inside parentheses.





**Blanche D. Steenrod for the *Wheeling News-Register* Pot-Pourri column of Aug. 28, 1936**

*Century Old Home*

Sandscrest Farms, in tradition and history, belong to the very earliest settlement of this section. Mr. and Mrs. Harry S. Sands own and live upon this vast acreage, which for beauty and interest are unexcelled and for agricultural accomplishments are a boast for Ohio County.

Mr. Sands, in pointing out the farming features of these rolling hilltop fields, remarked: "I am not playing here – we are carrying on practical farming."

Stretching forth in all directions are miles and miles of rolling fields of farmlands, most of which belong to the Sandscrest Farms. *(In reality, the Sands owned about 600 acres, half of it wooded.)*

*The House*

The house belonging to the Sands is a home in every sense of the word. It is the center of these fields of farms and the crowning glory of the whole estate. The large square center is the part which was built almost 90 years ago by William McColloch, a descendant of the pioneer settlers.

From the picture, one may know that a broad center hall is the main artery to the other portions of the house, to the right of which is the large living room with sunroom opening out from it. In this sunroom *(pictured below)* is a broad, modern chimney place where logs are



lighted at the first touch of frost. Comfort and cheer belong to this room especially, though that is what one finds throughout the home.

The dining room is on the left of the hall and is an enviable one, being 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. The deep window seats and thick walls with the handsome olden-time woodwork tell one that this section is a part of the very old house.

Mrs. Sands has it furnished with very handsome early American furniture and the draperies over the laces at the windows are blue brocade. A broad scarf of the same is used *(on the table)* between serving hours.

A glance into this room impresses one with its quiet elegance and formality also. Next to this room is one where are found easy chairs and Mr. Sand's desk. *(This room is now a secondary dining room called the farmers office.)* The pictures here and portraits of his parents make one feel that this must be the study or den for the man of the

house, yet I did not hear anyone say that it was. A door opens from this room to the driveway.

### *Living Room*

The living room is found if one turns to the right from the great front door. It is a long room, too, and like most large one in olden-time houses, possesses two fireplaces. A warm elegance is discovered... *(The remainder of this column of text has crumbled away.)*

### *The Views*

All the way out the old Clinton pike the scenery is joyous and beautiful and when one reaches the brick gateway of the private road leading into the estate they find it is bordered with flaming barberry bushes which, at this time and in their orderly arrangement, look like a wide, red streak. Beyond this is other shrubbery. Grouped against the large veranda is a variety of the cedar and pine family.

From every window in the house, magnificent views are enjoyed and, from one point of the farm, the towns of Bethany, West Liberty and Clinton may be seen.



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### **Susan Griffith Sampson for the Sands Reunion, September 2024**

*(In the fall of 2024, Susan Griffith Sampson and Betsy Griffith Taggart were invited to speak at a reunion of Sands family cousins – eight grand-nieces of Harry and Helen Sands. The Sands had no direct descents.)*

*Susan Griffith Sampson is the eldest of three daughters of Joseph and Myrtle Griffith. Joseph served as herdsman and all-around farm worker from 1948-1962. The first four of those years were during Harry Sands' lifetime. The remaining years of this period (and a second residency as groundskeeper from 1970 to 1992) were in the employ of the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia/Sandscrest Foundation – to whom the Sands left half of their property.*

*She prepared the following account for that reunion, whose attendees are pictured below. They are seated around the original Sands dining table in the main dining room.)*



When Mr. and Mrs. Sands died in 1952, I was four years old and my sister (Betsy Griffith Taggart) was a newborn. (A younger sister, Debbie Griffith, was born after the Sands' deaths. All three lived on the farm.) So, we don't have actual experience directly with Mr. or Mrs. Sands. What little we know about them comes from listening to the comments of others.

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#### *Residential areas*

In the 1950's, you turned into the driveway between two red pillars. The driveway was not paved at that time. It was spread with a by-product of coal mining. It was burnt coal waste called "red dog" for its burnt red color. This product was used on all of the farm's roads.

When you drove up the long, winding driveway, you saw on the right side lining the road fruit trees -- cherry and peach trees, with a large elm tree toward the middle of the bottom part of the lane. On the left, was a bank of grass with shrubbery like forsythia and mock orange to disguise a field of corn, alfalfa or wheat.

At the top of this drive, you would keep to the left to enter the main house's driveway. If you continued to drive straight, you went into the farm area. As you went left you would have passed a triangle of grass with a huge, old elm tree planted in the middle of it surrounded by mock orange bushes. On the other side of that triangle was another road leading from the Sands' home to the road into the main part of the farm. That road ran in front of the main house and its yard.



This front yard was very large, with only grass. The side yard next to the sun room was a flower garden with benches for seating. Across the backyard was a planted grotto with a statue fountain. The very large backyard was planted with fruit trees -- apple, pear, plum and peach trees mainly.

*(Pictured above are Joseph Griffith and daughters, left to right, Betsy, Debbie and Susan. This swing set was installed outside the Griffith tenant home in the transition time between farm and conference center. Susan suspects it was to keep the girls from playing on the porch.)*

Mr. Sands' home, the main house as it was called, looked different then than it does now. The house was painted red with white trim, as was the farm's barn. Mr. Sands added an elevator to the front of the house next to his office when he began having trouble using the stairs. The elevator later became inoperable because of some foundation shifting and could not be repaired. This happened after his death.

The front porch has always featured a beautiful view of the countryside. It provided rocking chairs and tables of wicker for comfort and entertaining. There were planters of flowers all along the edges and the signature boxwood hedges in front.

From the front door, you entered into the foyer with its grand staircase to the second floor and a hallway that led to the guest half bath and an exterior door to the patio.

To the right of the foyer was the living room and, through it, the sun room with all its windows for light and air plus a fireplace for cooler evenings.

To the left of the foyer was a large dining room. To the left of the dining room was Mr. Sands' office, which had two exterior exit doors -- one from the front of the house, the other to the back porch. The entrance to the elevator was in this room.

At the interior end of the dining room was the butler's pantry, then into the large kitchen with its walk-in pantry.

Through the kitchen, you entered the back hallway, with an access to the back patio on one side and staircases on the other side, both to the basement and to the second floor. There was another room off this hallway to house the cook or perhaps Mrs. Sands' office.

Down the steps, there was a landing with an exterior door. From the landing, there was another staircase of three steps up into another room which housed the butler. This room also had an exterior door and steps down to the back sidewalk.

*(The two back rooms of the first floor are currently part of an enlarged kitchen and a small office area for the director.)*

The rest of the staircase led to the basement, which consisted of a laundry room, a three-quarter bathroom, a storage room, a fruit cellar and the coal storage room since the house was then heated by coal. A smaller room facing the parking lot was the gardener's work room.

The second floor consisted of three suites at the top of the main stairs. The two on the left were guest suites with a bedroom, full bath and a smaller dressing room.



On the right was the third suite. Mr. and Mrs. Sands occupied these rooms. This suite included a large bedroom with a large lengthwise walk-through closet, a large sitting room with a fireplace and the elevator exit. The ensuite bathroom had an exit door into the side hall.

*(The bedroom of the Sands' suite, now called the Bishop's suite, is pictured at left. The elevator shaft is tucked behind the bookcase. The side hallway and one back-hall bathroom now make a fourth suite.)*

Down the back hall were two full, side-by-side bathrooms; a large linen storage area; and two bedrooms at the top of the back staircase. It is unclear if these rooms were guest rooms or staff bedrooms.

From the front, second-floor hallway was a staircase to the fully accessible attic. The attic was used for storage.

What is now the conference center's guest house *(with nine guest rooms and both shared and private bathrooms)* was entirely different then. *(Interestingly, when the Sands had this building constructed in the 1920s, it was a high-tech chicken house.)*

The top floor off the parking area was a four-car garage with an apartment for the chauffeur along the right side of the garage.

Behind the garage were two bedrooms, a sitting room and a full bathroom. There were stairs to the lower level, where there was a large party/ballroom, a kitchen with a pass-through into the party room and a storage pantry with an exit door. *(This area is now a chapel and bathrooms.)*

The party room was surrounded on two sides with a concrete porch. There were steps from the main house parking lot down to the lower level of the guest house and a stone sidewalk from a parking area at the bottom of the house's driveway.



Accessible from the party room and an outside entrance was the basement area that was used for food storage and had a walk-in freezer.

The side yard from the garage to the main road was planted with trees -- elm, maple and ash. The area between the building and the steps was planted with peonies and ivy.

There was no building below the ballroom, just more yard with trees. (*Campbell Hall, a two-story meeting space, was added just downslope from the guest house in 1975.*)

### *Farming areas*

The main farm where almost all the farming was done equaled 300 acres. The other half of it was very wooded. (*The Sands gave the wooded half of Sandscrest Farm to the Boy Scouts of America upon their death. It still operates as a scouting camp.*)

It was a dairy farm that bred and milked Holstein cattle. Those are the beautiful black and white



ones. They produce the largest amount of milk compared to other breeds but their milk does not have the best butter-fat content.

The barn was just past the main house, hidden from view by a copse of trees. (*Susan believes this is because Mr. Sands didn't like to be reminded of work when relaxing.*)

This barn had four levels to it. The top most level was a large hay mow with a drive-up ramp so wagons could be backed in to unload the hay bales, which were stacked almost to the rafters. There was a trap door in the center aisle so hay could be thrown down into the main barn without carrying it outside.

The next level was a large milking parlor with stanchions lining down the area in two rows, with an aisle in the middle for the feed wagon to roll through and shovel grain or hay into the feeding troughs. There was another

depression or gutter in the floor at the end of the stall for manure that had to be cleaned out often.

Off the side of this level was the room at the bottom of the silos. Green organic material was blown into the silos to ferment into silage. This was fed, during the winter, along with hay and grain since access to the pasture was not possible during the snowy winters. There were two sliding doors on each side of this level to accommodate farm machinery to haul away the manure.

From this second level, there was a ramp down to the third level, where there was another six or eight stanchions for more milk cows. It had just one entrance door. To the right, was a workroom and storage for medical and health aids for cleaning and medicating the animals.

The fourth and lowest levels had a longer row of stanchions for dry cows or ones needing medicated. Usually, these were only full in the winter. On the other side of this level were four large, square pens for newborn and young calves -- usually up to four per pen. These babies were bucket fed a replacement formula and the mother cow was milked by machine for shipment to the dairy.

The last two pens on this side were big enough to hold a large bull, with the floor recessed three feet below the main floor to prevent the bull from jumping out of his cage and getting away or rowdy. Each of these pens had its own outdoor space for them to get exercise and fresh air. The two bulls were never allowed together as they would fight.

Off the second level and storage room, through a short, covered breezeway, was the milk house, where the milk received its first processing.

Each cow was milked with a vacuum-run milker; they were milked twice a day. The milk was transferred from the stainless steel milker container into a 10 gallon milk can. When this can was filled, it was carried to the milk house, where the warm milk was poured over a cooling coil into another clean 10 gallon can. It was stored in the walk-in cooler until it was loaded onto the bed of the farm truck and taken to Ohio Valley Dairy to be processed. This room was thoroughly washed and disinfected every night after the last milking.

There were other buildings clustered around the barn. Across the barnyard, where the cows were herded in and out of the barn, was a large L-shaped building that was called the sheep barn. The top level had a large hot house where seed was planted to start the gardens. It held potting soil, elevated tables for clay starting pots, fertilizer and hoses for water. Across from the hot house was a large storage area for feed grain. The lower level was a big open area for the sheep's protection from the weather and it was open to a pasture area just for the sheep.



To the right of this building -- on the same level as the fourth cow barn level -- was a barn we called the horse barn. The top of it held another hay mow. The bottom was an open pen area for horses. But, by the 1950s, horses were no longer used for farm work and this area held young heifers until they were old enough to breed or be sold.

On the far end of this barn was a special pen for pigs. They had a small, fenced outdoor pen, too.

Across the area from the pig pen was the corn crib, where ears of corn were stored to be ground into feed. There was a grinder on the top level and burlap bags to put the ground corn into storage.

To the left of the sheep barn, there was a small pasture that had the chicken coop and brooder house in it. Chickens were placed into the coop every night to roost and keep them safe from predators. Some eggs were placed into the brooder under heat lamps to be hatched. They were kept in the brood house until they were old enough to fend for themselves in the pasture.

That's a lot of buildings, but by no means all of them.

Along the driveway, past the barn and two of the tenant houses, was a large building for machinery maintenance. You could put two tractors at a time in there to be repaired. There were work benches for tools and a caged area that could be locked to hold parts and expensive tools. The building was heated by a pot-belly stove so the workers could repair the equipment year around.

Beyond the shop was an open parking area which had a gas pump to keep the tractors running. You never wanted to run out of gas while working. Enclosing that area was an L-shaped machine shed where the tractors and important machines were parked. The equipment was never left out in the weather. Another smaller shed was across from the gas pump area for smaller equipment like the farm's pickup truck and the flat-bed stake truck to haul the milk into town.

Over the hill, at the back of the farm, was the last farm building, the lime shed. It had another hay mow and was used to store lime and fertilizer for the fields.

Finally, that is all the buildings for farming. All those buildings took a lot of maintenance. They kept all the hands busy when not doing farming chores.

In addition to the farm buildings, there were five tenant houses. One at the end of the driveway as a gate house. One below the main pasture field below the barn and by the lake. It did not have a road to it from the farm but by another public road off GC&P to several other private properties.

Two tenant houses were between the barn and the machine shop. With the last house on the back of the property away from all the others but at the top of a seldom-used back entrance that led to Short Creek Road and served as another gatehouse to protect the property from trespassers.

*(Only two of these houses survive. The one closest to the main house is where the Griffiths lived.)*

There were four pasture fields for the animals and five crop fields. Crops were rotated between corn, alfalfa, wheat or left fallow until the next year.

#### *Mr. Sands and Farm Workers*

Mr. Sands built a "fire proof" tenant house for his farm manager. It was made out of poured concrete and stucco. It had an eat-in kitchen with a gas stove and a refrigerator. It had a door to the outside from the kitchen, with a small porch and steps to the parking area outside the integral garage. There was storage under the porch.

In addition to the kitchen, there was a dining room, a living room, four bedrooms and a full bathroom. The basement had a pantry, storage room and laundry room with a double concrete laundry tub. There was also a shower and a toilet so the main house wasn't contaminated by the dirt and dust of a working farm.

It had a one-car integral garage with two other rooms. One was used as an office for the farm manager. His office had an exterior door.

The farm manager who lived in that house was Mr. Clarence Currence. He was the only manager we ever knew that lived there.

Mrs. Flossie Currence, the farm manager's wife, had to keep an immaculate house because Mr. Sands was prone to conduct tours of his pride-and-joy, fire-proof house at any time of the day.

*(This house was demolished in the early 2000s.)*

Our father, Joseph Griffith, quit school in the ninth grade to work the family farm to support his family. That's where he learned farming. He worked on a dairy farm after his family moved from their farm. He learned about being a good herdsman.

After marrying our mother, Myrtle, he worked at Washington Farms just down the road from Sandscrest. When he learned Mr. Sands needed a herdsman he applied and got the job as head herdsman. The only herdsman.

He and my mother moved to Sandscrest when I was just nine months old – in 1948.

My dad's salary at Sandscrest at that time was \$90 a month, a gallon of milk a day and a tenant house. But the utilities were not included.

Our house (*which is still standing near to the main barn*) was next to the manager's house and close to the barn for convenience. Both of the houses were just across the backyard from the main house. They were convenient to Mr. Sands and the rest of the farm buildings but separated from the main house by a screen of trees and shrubs.

My father worked seven days a week. He got one day a month off. Mr. Crupe, a farm hand, milked that day, supervised by Mr. Currence. Dad didn't own a car back then, so he was allowed to use the pickup truck to get groceries and visit his family.

Although dad's title was herdsman, he did any farm work necessary. He plowed, planted, baled hay or drove the milk to the dairy. He did whatever was needed.

When mom and dad moved into our house, it was five rooms -- a living room, dining room, kitchen and two small bedrooms. It had a full basement with an integral garage.

The bathroom was downstairs in the basement under the back porch and stairs. It didn't have a bathtub, just a shower. It was heated by a little unvented gas stove. This was replaced when I was in grade school with a forced-air furnace which heated the house much better.

A large bedroom wing was added sometime before my memory. It had a bigger bedroom, a large coat/storage closet and a full bathroom with a bathtub but no shower.

My parents couldn't afford a refrigerator when they first moved in. They did have a stove. It took them two years to save enough money to get a refrigerator. In the meantime, they were allowed to keep a few things cold in the milk house cooler.

Dad worked for Mr. Sands until Mr. Sands died in 1952 and left the property to the Episcopal church and Sandscrest Foundation. He continued to work there until 1962, when the church discontinued full-scale farming. The church, at that time, sold off all the livestock, including my dad's and sister's favorite cow, Jessie. She was very tame and a good producer.

I remember walking the pasture fields with my father to herd the cows into the barn for a milking. It was not an easy task. There were always a few reluctant strays. We had a dog to help herd them. The first one I remember was Poncho, a black cocker spaniel. The second one was Red, he was a water spaniel.

*(In addition to working farm animals and larger-scale crops on the farm, staff who lived on site also gardened for the Sands and themselves on the small scale.)*

The backyard of the Sands' house was planted from the patio to the cornfield with fruit trees. There were a couple of varieties of apple trees, two types of plums, pear trees and peach trees. Part of this planting included a double grape arbor planted with Concord grapes. Mom made great grape jelly with these. Beside the grape arbor was a patch of ground that was planted in asparagus. This whole area provided much of the food for the Sands' table.

The Currences and dad were also given spots behind the green machine shed to plant a garden for their own use. We planted green peas, lima beans, green beans, tomatoes and corn. Mom canned and froze whatever she could.

After the Sandses died, the Currences moved into the main house and lived there until the estate was settled and the church took over. The house was full of antiques and valuables. It was decided that no one should know it was unoccupied.

In those days, no one locked their doors. No one ever bothered your house. Even the mansion doors were left unlocked since there was someone always around.



During this time, I pretty much had free rein in the house. The Currences were like grandparents to me.

My favorite room was what used to be the butler's room in the back staircase. It was set up as a play room for the Currences' granddaughter Judy, who was one year older than me. I was welcome to play there, too. There was a great doll house there that I loved. I would often go there to play with it.

Before the church took over, my mother was allowed to go through the attic and claim a few items that she liked. A framed picture and a vanity tray are all I remember her taking. The furnishings of the house were sold at auction. Mom bought a large dresser, which we still have.

*(Joseph and Myrtle Griffith are pictured at left celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.)*

Dad was the last living person with knowledge of Sandscrest Farm and its infrastructure. He was asked to return several times to show where the wells and septic lines were located.

He never lost his love of Sandscrest and, until he was unable to drive, he would drive over just to visit and get his Sandscrest experience. He worked hard on that farm in many capacities and I think it got in his blood. He loved the place and remembered it right up until his death.

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