

A New Chance At Life

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How One Woman Changed A
Town

a Stardew Valley fanfic

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WE ALL REMEMBER the days when we were younger, when folks flocked to Stardew Valley for festivals, vacations, or just a weekend away from the city. Every child here in Zuzu City still knows a grandparent or elderly great-aunt who wistfully remembers days at the beach, digging for fossils in the sweltering desert, or exploring the Stardew Valley Fair. Some parents still take their children on holidays to Pelican Town and the surrounding villages, but in the past few decades, the once popular vacation spot lost a lot of its luster.

It all started with the mines. For centuries, the population of the Valley – as the locals sometimes call it – supported itself with mining. Around this quintessential blue-collar industry sprang up vibrant communities of farmers and artisans to support the workers with food, shelter, and other necessities, as down-to-earth as the miners themselves. But after a series of devastating accidents and a decline in profitability as they began to run dry, the coal and iron mines in the Valley closed and the workers they once employed went elsewhere. Ever since, industry in the region has struggled.

The then-mayor of Pelican Town pursued plans to turn the town into a fishing port. But while the fishing grounds of the Gem Sea are rich in everything from tilapia to albacore, the sandy banks and narrow shipping channel proved too much of a hindrance for large scale fishing operations. An attempt at establishing a lumber industry failed because it couldn't compete with the one in Grampleton. The Stardew Valley agriculture, on the other hand, never had its equal in the entire Ferngill Republic. "No better quality of cheese and produce can be found anywhere in the world," famous food critic Augustus Temple once said. But the fields and meadows are scattered between mountains, lakes and rivers and nearly impossible to farm with modern industrial methods. In the end, the hardship and prohibitive cost proved too much for corporations and conglomerates.

And so the people left. Some moved to Zuzu City, some to Castle Village, others to Grampleton or even further north, while life got harder for those who stayed. The lack of industry brought with it neglect of the local infrastructure. Roads were no longer serviced, bridges crumbled dangerously and the railway station started to decay. Rock slides and a lack of public funding dealt the town the hardest blows yet. The last train stopped in Stardew Valley three years ago. Braving the lengthy bus ride to Pelican Town became an adventure nobody wanted to have. When Pelican Town's last farmer, Shepard Smith, died, everyone thought the end was only a matter of time. But nobody counted on Shepard's granddaughter.

"I'm always working and it's busy as hell three out of four seasons."

Sarah Smith is always busy. When I arrive at Honeyoak Farm no later than eight o'clock, she is already hard at work watering her crops. She's a short young woman, her long red hair in a sensible braid already fraying at the edges. She's wearing blue dungarees, rubber boots and a straw hat – a necessity for those working outdoors in summer. She looks every bit the farmer that was featured in "Up & Coming", a column in the *Stardew Valley Tribune*. You couldn't tell by looking at her, but until three years ago, she had been living the city life. When she's done watering, I introduce myself and ask my first question.

"Is it hard, working a farm in Stardew Valley?"

She nods and smiles. "I'm always working and it's busy as hell three out of four seasons. But it's good work, and there's always something else to do."

I ask her what she means by that.

"Oh, back in the city, I spent all my time in front of a screen, doing the same thing. It was exhausting. Now, I get to do a dozen different tasks in a day. It never gets boring, and when I go to sleep at night, I don't keep compiling tables in my dreams."

I think we all know that feeling, even if we don't work as a data analyst for Joja Corporation like Sarah did. To get a better idea of daily life on a farm, I ask her how a typical day goes. It starts something like this:

At six o'clock, the alarm rings and Sarah gets out of bed. The first order of the day is checking the weather forecast for rain, which is so integral to a farmer's life. Then she puts on the cooking channel while she eats – cooking is her hobby. After that, it's time for the livestock. Sarah keeps a host of different animals – cows, chickens, sheep, ducks, goats and rabbits – and they all need to be fed, watered, have their health monitored and let out onto their pastures. And the cows and goats need to get milked, otherwise they get grumpy.

“The animals always have the highest priority,” she tells me. “Even when I feel off, they get taken care of. And Miso, of course.” Miso is the farm cat and Sarah’s constant companion and closest friend. She’s an orange tabby that likes watching Sarah cook, playing with the chickens and lazing in the sun. She follows her around all day. Miso, it seems, is the only one who never had any doubts when it came to the success of the farm. Others did.

“[...] by the time old Shepard died, I was sure [the farm] couldn’t be saved.”

“I definitely had my doubts,” Demetrius – a scientist working to study and protect the local wildlife – said. “This place has a fragile ecosystem and there’s so much that people who tried to establish large farms here did wrong. You can’t use every fertilizer or the runoff will kill the fish and erosion is always a problem. But Sarah proved all of them wrong. This is how you do sustainable agriculture in Stardew Valley.”

“Oh dearie, the old farm was such a mess,” said Evelyn, a local grandmother and Pelican Town native. “It wasn’t always, but by the time old Shepard died, I was sure it couldn’t be saved.”

Only the mayor said he was sure Sarah wouldn’t quit. He’s an energetic man around sixty and full of optimism and pride in his town. “Sarah is like her grandfather. Shepard was a hard worker, and a natural-born farmer, if there ever was one. Hard work is what this town needs to get on its feet. We’ve got everything you can dream of, we just need someone to dream.”



After taking care of the animals, Sarah waters the crops – sprinklers are hard to install in some of the fields. The types of crop planted depend on the season, and often enough they grow interspersed with each other – no monoculture on Honeyoak Farm. A mix of plants helps prevent nutrient loss and the spread of diseases and pests. This kind of farming is called polyculture or intercropping, and it’s a technique that is currently being rediscovered in other areas of the country as well, although never by the type of farmer that supplies your local JojaMart. Mixing rows of legumes with rows of other crops helps add nitrogen to the soil – an important compound for plant growth.

Honeyoak Farm also differs from what we usually imagine a farm to look like in another way: the plots of crops and meadows are small, and in between them are rows of trees. Most of them are fruit trees, but there is also the occasional oak, maple or pine tree. In an area like Stardew Valley, which is surrounded by mountains, trees prevent erosion, aid in water retention and provide wind cover. And of course they can be useful in other ways as well. There may be an artisanal specialty shop near you that sells oak resin, pine tar or maple syrup with the Honeydew logo on it.

“The Pelican Town JojaMart is one of the few in the country that failed”

“The resin and tar are wonderful,” the local carpenter, a woman named Robin, told me. “Always high quality, and I don’t have to worry about additions or changes in processing. Plus, Sarah gives me a discount in return for getting one from me – my chairs and tables have been selling much better ever since I started using them. Higher quality at a lower price!” When she showed me her work, I could see that her furniture really is something to behold.

It took the people in Stardew Valley some time to remember the value of supporting one another as a way to improve their community on the whole. It is a miracle the local general store survived what the owner terms “the Joja years”. He shudders when he says it. JojaMart converted an abandoned cinema five years ago, and like many of us, the citizens of Pelican Town quickly came to love the low prices and large selection of branded goods. Some of the townsfolk even found employment where there had been none. But the drawbacks quickly became apparent as well: the jobs offered little opportunity for advancement, and where the general store always had a section reserved for local produce and specialties, Joja Corporation shipped its wares from the other end of the country and didn’t buy any of the local crabs or dairy products.

“Honestly, I’m much happier now,” one of the former workers told me. “I was in a really bad place back when I worked for JojaMart, and the work didn’t help. Now I’m breeding chickens with my aunt, and I’ve had some success at poultry shows.”

“I was only sweeping floors anyway,” another said. “Didn’t want to do that for, like, the rest of my life.”

The Pelican Town JojaMart is one of the few in the country that failed and they’re still scrambling to provide an explanation – Joja Corporation declined to comment on this article. Their business isn’t missed. Prices at the general store might be a bit higher, but not too much higher – buying products directly from the source cuts out the cost of middlemen and logistics that large supermarkets have to deal with.

“People want to eat healthy and live sustainably, and they’re willing to pay more for it.”

Around midday, Sarah makes some time for herself. Just enough to eat something, then it’s back to work. With all the most important tasks already done, Sarah focuses on the lesser ones. Some days, she harvests crops, then packages them so that they can get shipped to their destinations – local markets and restaurants, mostly. Sometimes they are even shipped as far as Zuzu City. Sarah’s farm is organic, and the rising market for organic food has been a boon for her. People want to eat healthy and live sustainably, and they’re willing to pay more for it.

“I also make cheese and jams and sell eggs, of course. And I’m currently working on expanding into some other fields. The sheep are about ready for shearing now, and Emily has promised to help me with spinning the wool into yarn. My first batches of wine are going to be ready to try soon, and I’m thinking of getting pigs.”

There really isn’t anything Sarah can’t do. When I say so, she looks bemused.

“You learn on the job, you know? And I’ve got people helping me out all the time – Demetrius knows a lot about the nature in the Valley, Willy knows everything there is to know about fish, Marnie is always ready with advice when it comes to animals. It’s not like I’m doing everything on my own. That’s the beauty of Stardew Valley.”

I hear that a lot here – everyone pitches in in Stardew Valley. An unfamiliar thing for someone who has lived in big cities all her life.

“I would be nothing without her and Willy”

Of course, Sarah Smith wasn't the only one who helped put Stardew Valley back on the map. In recent months, it has also made the news as a new home for aspiring artists. The recently released surprise hit romance novel *Camellia Station* was written by Elliot, a resident of Stardew Valley. And artist and sculptor Leah has been selling her work online with some success. Finally, of course, there's the Stardrop Saloon, which received a raving review in the *Ferngill Culinarian* just this month. But even so, Sarah Smith had an influence on all of them.

“I didn't know what to write,” Elliot confessed. “It gave me a terrible writer's block. I had three ideas, and just couldn't choose. I asked Sarah, and it helped immensely.”

His friend Leah had a similar experience, and she also told me that Sarah gives her any piece of intriguingly shaped wood she finds on her farm, to turn into art.

“I would be nothing without her and Willy,” Gus, the owner of the Stardrop Saloon, admitted. “A cook is only as good as his ingredients. Before, I had to order so much from out of town, and especially with fish, fruits and vegetables, that extra time makes a difference. Now, I use local vegetables and fruits in season. This orange came straight from the tree this morning.”

“Sometimes, a spark is all it takes”

Sarah remains humble when confronted with all this. I say goodbye to her in the evening, after watching her clear another patch of abandoned farmland. As a parting gift, I get a tour of her famous grove of oaks that shelter the beehives that give the farm its name. Then she hands me a glass of Honeyoak honey as a souvenir.

“Sometimes, a spark is all it takes,” she says. “Stardew Valley had everything it needed. It just needed someone to take a chance.”

And maybe that's the truth. Sometimes, a small, languishing community just needs the right person to believe in it. The way Sarah believes in her grandfather's farm and the way the people of Stardew Valley believe in her. It needs someone who is willing to take a risk on a dream of a better life instead of settling for something safe that's merely good enough. This world could use more folks like Sarah, so maybe we should all aspire to be a Sarah for our communities.