

Conversations

Local businesses are one of our largest sources of pride. These shops, companies, and organizations help make Monroe County unique.

[Benton's Country Ham](#)

An interview with Allan Benton,
June 11, 2024

Could you start by introducing yourself and your business?

I'm Allan Benton and I own Benton's Country Hams here in Madisonville. We produce dry cured hams and hickory smoked bacon and ship it all over the world, as well as having a retail store here. We've been in business since 1947 and I've run the business since 1973.

How did you become the owner?

The fellow who started our business was named Albert Hicks. He was a local dairy farmer here in this county, and he had a little country ham business that he got into, literally by accident, behind his house. It wasn't government inspected. He had built up a pretty good business over the years and he decided when he got older, he'd had enough, and he retired and quit. That was in the Spring of 1973, and in the Fall of 73, I heard that he had quit the business, and I had just resigned my job as a high school guidance counselor. I was thinking maybe about going to law school or doing something. I knew I couldn't make a living as a teacher, and I talked him into leasing me the little building behind his house. I was just planning on running it for a while and maybe going on to law school, but after about three or four months, I realized that I was enjoying what I was doing, and I figured it wasn't going to last long, but I planned on doing it just as long as I enjoyed and wanted to do it, and that's the way I got into it.

What is your daily work like?

I'll be 77 this month, and I still pretty much work six days a week. I'm always out here on Sundays, checking coolers and tidying up loose ends. Being in this business is a lot like running a dairy farm. You're married to it. You're there every day. Although I don't put in the 65-70 hour weeks that I once did. I'm still here, probably 45-50 hours a week at this point in my life. I still enjoy what I do. I like making ham and bacon. The best part of it is the incredible people I've been able to meet because of what I do.

What do you think of your business being a tourist attraction?

I know we get travelers from all over the United States here now and I like the eclectic slice of humanity that comes through that door. I get those local country folks like myself. I get the business folks. I get the yuppies, as I call them, from the cities across the country. I think I've outlived a lot of my competition. There used to be lots of producers of country hams in this country, but it's not an easy way to make a living. And most of the people that I've known in the business either retired or sold out or quit, they just didn't stick with it. And now there's not that many of us that do what I do, and we're grateful for the folks that walk through our door. We've gotten a lot of attention the last 25 years or so. The first 25 years I was in business, I barely kept the doors open, but I finally had a few lucky breaks, and now 80 plus percent of everything we make leaves on a UPS truck or a US mail truck

or a tractor trailer going somewhere, and we're very fortunate that we're able to sell it to these high end restaurants that we're dealing with.

Why do you think visitors should come to your business?

We've outlived the competition, and the business that I'm in, you don't see one on every street corner, almost a dinosaur. There's only a handful of producers that do what I do in this country. And we get a lot of media attention, and lots of folks are interested in seeing what we do now. And I know we get people who literally drive hundreds of miles out of their way to come by here. It's a dying art form.

How do you see this business within the culture of the county?

The business was started in this county by the late Albert Hicks, and at that time, he was mostly selling it to local folks. And the first five years that I ran it in his backyard, and it was mostly just the local folks from this area that found their way in here. And I don't think there's a better place in America to find good employees than right here in East Tennessee. You can't beat these local folks that live here. Most of my employees, virtually all of them are what I call local. Grew up here, got roots here. They have a good work ethic. They understand the mission for our business. Our goal is to make a world class product. And these are folks that take pride in what they do. And I feel blessed to be in business in Monroe County.

Where do you see your business in the next few years?

I have a son that I sent to medical school. He's a radiologist. Did his residency at UT, worked several years as a radiologist, but he gave up his practice, and came into my business last August. He's essentially calling the shots around here now, but I just hang around and try to stay in his way as much as I can. He is certainly in good hands. He's very passionate about what he does. I have a plant manager who's also about the business, and I suspect, if I have good health, I'll probably be here another 10 or 15 years. Don't have any desire to retire, but my son, Darryl, he will certainly, I'm sure, be in it for a long time. I see as far into the future as you can see in business. I think this one is on solid ground.

[Sequoyah Birthplace Museum](#)

An interview with Charlie Rhodarmer,
June 17, 2024

Could you start by introducing yourself?

My name is Charlie Rhodarmer, I'm from Canton, North Carolina, and I'm the manager director here at the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum.

Can you tell me about the museum?

The museum opened in June 1986. It was a result of the fact that when it became public that [the TVA] were going to build the Tellico Dam and create the Tellico Lake, the Cherokee as well as local citizens were protesting, trying to stop the dam. At one point they thought they actually got it stopped but President Jimmy Carter signed a bill into law that said to ignore all federal laws, finish the dam, close the floodgates, be done with this project. And when that happened, the Cherokee went to the Tennessee Valley Authority and asked "how are you going to help us commemorate and remember

the Cherokee people that lived here?" They hired an outside company that came up with 38 different concepts. The very first two were to return the remains of the Cherokee that can be identified as 18th century Cherokee. That had never happened before. And that's the result of the memorial mound that's down in our field. And one of the other suggestions was to build a museum and tell Sequoyah's story who, in 5000 years of human civilization and all those records, no one person has ever created a writing system by himself, who was illiterate. He never went to school. Never learned Latin, German, Spanish, English, and by himself over a 12 year period, he developed the Sequoyah syllabary.

What is your daily work like?

It varies from time to time. I do administrative kind of things, paperwork, sometimes grants. Clean bathrooms. Sometimes I'm running chainsaws to clear the path. We got rid of our tractor but we would do stuff with the tractor to bush hog or mow. I guess that's one of the reasons I've been here for so long, is because each day is kind of a little different variety.

How did you get to where you are?

I've always loved history. My parents were not really big history people but when we went on vacation, we would go to battlefields and historic sites and, as I got older, an aunt gave me my uncle's WWI uniform. And so from there I started collecting military stuff. I got involved in living history, reenacting the Civil War, the American Revolution. I went to Western Carolina University and ended up meeting a blacksmith named David Brewin and I started apprenticing with him. He was the exhibit specialist at the Mountain Heritage Centre. I started helping him at the museum, doing contract work for the museum to earn extra money. And so, since 1989, I've been working in museums. I was working at the Boy Scouts National Scouting Museum in Murray, Kentucky. That was back when the Governor of Tennessee wanted to close a bunch of state parks that didn't really generate money and Fort Loudoun was one of them. And so they were going to shut it down so they held a Save The Fort weekend. I came down with another friend of mine, Jeff Wells, who became the park manager at Fort Loudoun and that's when I found out there was an opening here at Sequoyah Birthplace Museum. I contacted the chairman Max Ramsey and sent him my resume, and that was when I started here. July 10, 2000.

What do you think of your business being a tourist attraction?

When the museum opened in 1986, it was a state of the art museum for the time. They had actually bought the display from the McClung Museum which had been built in the 70s. When I got here, I looked at it as not just the museum but the grounds, the site itself. The board identified long before I ever got here that they needed to upgrade the exhibit. Seven years ago, we shut the museum down. We gutted it, redid the building. This was a bunch of offices and so we tore all that out to make a multipurpose room so organizations could come and have their meetings here. We started upgrading as best we could and doing what we could do in there and that's what my background is as exhibit building. Since we started the renovations and we made the new theatre, I've not heard a bad word from any visitor once they've gone through the exhibit. They're usually fascinated and it catches their attention.

Why do you think visitors should come to your business?

To learn about Sequoyah and his incredible story. In 5000 years of human civilization and all those records, no one person has ever created a writing system by himself. He was at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. He goes to Washington as part of a treaty group. There's so many fascinating things about him and the Cherokee during his lifetime. It isn't just the museum people come for, it is the grounds. Some people will say "I don't want to go learn about some guy that created a writing system. Oh, they have a hiking trail. Let's go hike." We get the people to come here because we have a mile and a half shoreline trail, people coming here to walk their dogs. And then one day they come into use bathrooms, they come in and then they go through the exhibit. Their family and friends from out of state come in, they bring them here.

How do you see this business within the culture of the county?

It is part of all the things that make up Monroe County. You wouldn't have the history of Monroe County if the Cherokee hadn't been here. You wouldn't have the history of the county because of the Cherokee, which led to Fort Loudoun, the siege of Fort Loudoun, which then led to Henry Timberlake coming here writing his memoirs. And then you have Sequoyah who is born near or in the village of Tuskegee, around 1776.

Where do you see your business in the next few years?

I see the museum growing by doing more events, having outside venues coming in to use our facilities which will in turn help us to raise revenue. Highway 411 used to be a two lane road from Maryville to Madisonville, and you had to want to come to Vonore. It was a nightmare getting here. Between the fort, the blockhouse, and the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, it was a destination, but there was very rundown hotel that was here in Vonore, which been torn down years ago. In all the years that the museum had been struggling to get to the next level, they were talking about shutting the building down, but the board continued to work to keep the doors open. Dr. Duane King said "Why don't we ask TVA to give us land like the museum, and then we find a developer that can build hotels, motels, campgrounds, cabins, retail, and then they would pay rent profit share to the museum to help run it?" And so that actually has developed with what now is the Cherokee Marina, used to be Sequoyah Landing. The only thing that shut our doors was the pandemic. We had to shut down like everybody else. And because of the rent profit share that we've been getting from the Marina, that's what kept our doors open. And we were actually able to continue to pay our part time staff during the shutdown, even though they couldn't work.

[Sweetwater Antiques](#)

An interview with Diana Osbrink,
June 12, 2024

Could you start by introducing yourself?

My name is Diana Osbrink, and I own Sweetwater Antiques. I bought this store in 2017. And it's been a great experience and we love it here.

Could you tell me about your business?

We are an antique mall. And that means that we have different dealers who rent space, and we sell their antiques for them. So we currently have 30 dealers, and we're over 8000 square feet. We pride

ourselves in having true antiques. We try not to get too much into the new stuff and I think we have a great variety. We were told that by customers and we really tried to keep the building up. We're currently remodeling, putting new windows in. Thanks to Sweetwater.

How did you become the owner?

I'm the third owner of an antique store in this building. It started out with Sweetwater Valley Antiques in the late 90s I believe and then it was Cooney's Corner and now it is Sweetwater Antiques since 2017 and hopefully will remain that for a long time. I bought it from Kevin Cooney who owned it as Cooney's Corner. I bought the building and the business and then we just changed the name to Sweetwater Antiques because I'm not a Cooney and I think it was more appropriate to the antique world and it identified us as Sweetwater, Monroe County. It was a way for people to find us and it's kept its name pretty good. People know us now.

What is your daily work like?

We open the store at 10am, usually getting here probably at 8:30 to go through and clean up and make sure we're ready to open. From 10 o'clock till five o'clock, we have constant people coming in, mostly tourists. We do keep a book where people sign in. They put where they're from so we do keep records of all that. So we kind of get an idea of how far people are coming and so on. But we basically help them find things they're collecting or maybe that they're buying for someone a gift or something to take back with them on their trip. And we close the store at five o'clock and straighten up again. And we're here seven days a week. We only close on Christmas.

What do you think of your business being a tourist attraction?

I think this is a huge tourist attraction. We do advertise in the tourist brochures for antique stores from the Busy Bee to antique guides. It is a tourist attraction and people love it. People often tell me we should charge admission to come in here because there are some really nice items in here that you don't see every day. We carry everything from war relics on to historical items from Sweetwater to old pottery and old glassware. And just everything we tried to keep it antique.

How do you see this business within the culture of the county?

That's an interesting question. Well, I think there's a lot of people here who appreciate antiques and appreciate the old style of living. And probably even want to keep it somewhat that way. Preference to the some of the growth and I think people appreciate seeing things of their past. It's definitely a way to go down through your memory bank and remember being a child or you bring your parents here and they remembering the way things were when they were children. So I think it's a good place for everyone, not just tourists. It's also a good place for people to bring their relatives or their visiting friends. And then also just enjoy the past.

Where do you see your business in the next few years?

Well, currently we are on a great growth spurt and we have been since we opened so I intend to keep it growing. Everyone's welcome and anything they're looking for, we'll try to find for them.

[The Bookshelf](#)

An interview with Ivy Schielke,

June 18, 2024

Could you start by introducing yourself?

My name is Ivy Schielke and I've been at The Bookshelf since we've been open. I started in 2005 and I enjoy working here.

Can you tell me about your business?

We are in downtown Tellico Plains on Scott Street. We have, give or take, 20,000 books at one time. We have a lot of local history books that people come in for. We have some classics, a lot of fiction and many nonfiction genres including children's books, cookbooks, wellness books, a lot of religion books, business books, medical books, you name it, we probably have a few.

What is your daily work like?

Depending on the day, well of course I wait on customers and help them find a book they already enjoy. I also pick out the books that we buy from customers. So I guess I'm the book buyer. I clean them and prepare them to put on the shelves. That's pretty much it. I wait on customers and pick out what to sell.

What do you think of your business being a tourist attraction and why should visitors come here? Bookstores are so rare these days that we're more like an antique shop. We have books that people didn't think they were gonna find. And I can make somebody's day by finding a book in under five minutes. We welcome people, we help them find locations in and around Tellico Plains. So I feel like I'm kind of a tourist center in some way. There's no Wi Fi service up in the mountains as far as I know. So a good old book is what you need in order to enjoy your time here. It's a great way to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

How do you see this business within the culture of the county?

We're the only bookstore in the county. People are surprised to see an independent bookstore. But many of them are located in tourist areas in big cities. We're a little town and we have a bookstore for people to enjoy. You can come in sit in our chairs and review books if that's your thing before you buy them.

Where do you see your business in the next few years?

I think The Bookshelf will be here for another few years. People still read books, luckily for us. And as long as there's no Internet in the mountains, they'll need books to read. So I think we'll be here and be part of the culture here for a few more years.

[Tsali Notch Vineyard](#)

An interview with JD Dalton,
June 25, 2024

Could you start by introducing yourself?

My name is JD Dalton. I'm with Tsali Notch Vineyard. I'm the general manager here, and been here since May of 2009.

Can you tell me about your business?

We're all about muscadines. Muscadine crazy here. We're the largest commercial muscadine vineyard in the state of Tennessee. We are a 208 acre farm and we have 35 varieties of muscadines.

What is your daily work like?

It's a full range. I guess the best way to describe it is basically nurturing vines. Got about one month out of year that we harvest them and everything before and after that is getting to that point. So I tell a lot of people, it's eight days a week and 13 months out of the year.

How did you get to where you are?

I was in the right place at the wrong time, or the wrong place at the right time. No, I was very fortunate. I worked when we first bought the vineyard back in May 2009. When the owners bought it, I'd happened to be working for one of the brothers, and I've been here working for him for about 16 years. He said, "JD, if I buy a muscadine vineyard, would you run it?" And I said "if that's where we're going, let's try it out." And so that was back in 09. Thank goodness I'm still here. I love it. I enjoy it. It is something that I never thought I would be able to do and thankful for the owner to allow me to continue doing this.

What do you think of your business being a tourist attraction?

One of the things about being a tourist attraction for us is we just want people to be able to enjoy what we get to see on a day to day basis. Obviously, it's a lot of hard work, sweat equity, so to speak, blood, tears, all those kinds of things, but we want to share that with folks and so they can come out and get a little piece of what we get to see on a day to day basis.

Why should visitors come here?

There's a great gazillion places in Monroe County to visit, for sure, we're very thankful if they want to stop by, it's just something you're not going to see every day. With the way times are now, farms and vineyards we're coming less and less. It is an opportunity that I don't think you can pass up. Customers come in and do the you pick, taste the wine, juices, and jellies. When muscadines are ripe and ready, when you get that smell in your nose, people always say "Hey, that's like going to grandma's house!" That brings back great memories for folks.

How do you see this business within the culture of the county?

It goes back to agriculture. It's one of the founding things in our state, it's right there on the seal. And Monroe County is a huge agricultural place. We've got some great leaders help us kind of set the precedent. We just want to kind of take it, keep running with that and let the snowball roll.

Where do you see your business in the next few years?

Hopefully continue to have the best quality muscadines available. Continue to partner with a lot of great wineries, breweries, distilleries. Keep making great relationships, making great memories with the folks that we've met across the years. That's what we're hoping to do.