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Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

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Fifty per cent and more: the changing life of farmers' wives over the last 60 years

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"A farmer's wife is half the farm. Do you think you're up to it? I know you're a good enough worker, but you're only a townee." So said my farmer boss when I told him I was going to marry a local young farmer. The year was 1945, the war nearly over and I had decided I was never going back to the town which I had left to join the Land Army.

I knew what he meant. Farming was a 'Way of Life' which hadn't changed much for hundreds of years. Farming families devoted their lives to the farm even if they didn't actually own it. It was the centre of their universe. It fed and clothed them even when times were so bad they couldn't make any money. They expected their children to marry into farming or remain single. To marry outside of farming was almost unforgivable.

There had been a period of prosperity during and after World War I. Many farmers had used their newly-gained wealth to buy their farms when landowners, forced by death duties and taxes, had begun to break up their country estates. Having spent all their money on buying the farm there was little left over to spend on the farmhouse. Most farmers' wives were grateful if they had water piped into their kitchens instead of having to pump it from the well outside. Septic-tank drainage instead of outdoor earth closets was another much appreciated improvement.

But work in the farmhouse remained heavy. Few farms had electricity. Paraffin lamps, candles and lanterns were the only means of lighting. Most farmhouses already had cooking ranges installed in part of the vast open chimneys, but as these burned coal, which had to be bought, they were used for part of the day only and 'cooking down

under' in the open chimney remained quite normal until the Second World War.

Before making a cup of tea in the morning the farmer's wife would have to get the fire going in the open chimney. Hopefully the backstick, a large log which had been placed on the fire last thing before going to bed, would still be smouldering - a few puffs from the bellows and it would glow red hot. Then sticks from a faggot would be placed on top and the big iron kettle on a ratchet swung over the flames. Ham and eggs were fried on a trivet which stood on legs over the fire. The ham, and the fat in which it was fried would have come from their own pig, fattened and killed on the farm and salted or smoked by the farmer's wife. The eggs would have been produced by her own poultry.

Farms were little islands of independence. The farm wife's shopping list for food was not very long. The main items were salt, pepper, sugar and flour, the last being bought by the sack as all bread and cakes were made at home.

A lot of hot water was required and every drop had to be boiled in big kettles on the range or in cauldrons hanging in the chimney. Sometimes the range would have a tank at the side which was filled with cold water at the top and the hot water drawn off by a tap in front. These were called fountains as were the big copper kettles which stood on top of the range.

If she was lucky the farmer's wife would have a 'boy' in the house to do the heavy work of chopping wood and carrying water. This 'boy' could be a male of any age from ten to sixty. Perhaps he was a boy from the village or orphanage just starting life in farming or perhaps he was a relative who needed looking after because he was a little bit simple.

The heart of the farmhouse was the kitchen and dairy. Here the farmer's wife reigned supreme. In the kitchen she made mountains of food to sustain a hungry husband and family and probably a workman who lived in. She restored sickly lambs to life in front of the fire and made jams and preserves with the fruits of the orchard. In the dairy she made clotted cream and butter to send to the pannier market each week. She took qreat pride in this part of her work as there was great rivalry between farms as to who kept the best dairy.

Traditionally she expected to clothe herself and her family and pay household bills from her dairy money while her husband paid the rent, tithe, wages for workmen and all other farming expenses from his farm work. But as farming slid inexorably into the great depression of the 1920s and 1930s, farmers saw their prime beef and lamb sold for less than the animals cost to rear and they relied more and more on their wives' work to save them from bankruptcy.

The formation of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933 was the best thing that ever happened for the small traditional farmer. For the first time he

had a guaranteed market and a milk cheque which arrived regularly each month. On the farms which now sent milk to the factory the farmer's wife lost her position as queen of the dairy. There was no butter nor cream to be made - no cream pans and separator to be washed and scalded. Of course there were still the milking pails, cooler and strainer to be washed, poultry to look after and pigs to be salted-in and hog's puddings to be made.

Now that there was a quaranteed market for milk, herds gradually increased in size and milking machines, powered by generators, began to appear. Some farmers joined the tuberculin testing scheme. This meant shifting milk handling from the farmhouse dairy to milk-houses outside. Deprived of the income from butter and cream sales, the farmer's wife looked for other means to help the farm economy and in many cases turned to paying guests.

The Second World War brought prosperity back to the farm. Once again the farmers' efforts to feed the country were appreciated. Government money was poured into farm improvements. Young men disappeared into the Services and were replaced by landgirls many of whom stayed on to become farmers' wives. They were not always welcomed by the older generation who were afraid that they would become disillusioned with farm life and hanker after the towns they had left behind. Actually these girls put more than their fifty per cent into the farm, although in a different way. They had been trained for outdoor work, so much of their efforts went into helping their husbands outdoors. They could milk cows, drive tractors, tend sheep and cattle and shift electric fences as easily as their husbands. Many of them had worked in offices before joining the land army and their skills were put to good use in organising a farm office. They could deal with the mountains of paper work much more easily than the older generation and soon most farms had a well-run office.

Vowing never to put the country at risk of starvation again the government continued to pour money into the countryside. Electricity was brought to all but the remotest parts of the country and soon farmers' wives had all the labour-saving equipment enjoyed by their town sisters.

Outside the farmhouse Mechanisation, Specialisation, Accumulation were the buzz words. Young farmers forgot the words of their grandfathers "Never be owned by the banks" and "Never trust the government". Utopia seemed to have arrived. You name it and there was sure to be a grant for it. Herds expanded to over a hundred cows. Tractors became enormous monsters. Farms had to grow bigger to support the cows. Hedges had to come down to give the tractors room to work. One man and his machine could do the work of six men. Farming was no longer a social job. Farms were agribusinesses with the wife as secretary and probably full business partner.

It couldn't last! Britain joined the EEC. Food subsidies which had kept

down prices to the public were stopped and the money went to pay for intervention storage. Milk quotas were imposed. Food prices soared and the public blamed the farmer. No longer was he regarded as the saviour of the nation. He had become a despoiler of land and polluter of water, a poisoner of food, a factory farmer. Food faddists led new cults and farm incomes plummetted. Farm wives looked for new ways to put their fifty per cent into the farm. Diversification into tourism was the favourite suggestion from the government. Talk about teaching your granny to suck eggs!

Milk churn collection had stopped in 1979 and small farmers who didn't produce enough milk to warrant buying a milk tank no longer had their milk collected. What could the farmer's wife do with all the unsaleable milk? Some farmers turned to calf rearing but others turned the clock back. Out came granny's old milk pans; the separator was over-hauled and the farm returned to making butter and cream. They soon found that selling clotted cream was a very seasonal occupation and making butter fit for sale required a lot of skill and practice. A few farmers with the necessary retailing skills are making reasonable profits from making fancy cheeses and yoghurt but it is not an opening available to everyone, so what of the future?

Many experts say that there is no future in farming. Even though half the world is starving the government is hell-bent on reducing food production in the EEC with quotas, Set aside, restrictions on research, etc. Agricultural colleges are finding that the number of students taking a full-time agricultural course has dropped dramatically. They are all concentrating on new courses such as equestrian, veterinary nursing and environmental studies. Engineering courses have had to expand from agricultural engineering to include other types of engineering - such as marine. Many of these new courses have more to do with leisure in the countryside than farming.

The landgirl farmers' wives of 1945 have lived to see their husbands prosper, the farm expand and sons and daughters proud to take over, but their hearts bleed for their grandchildren.

Many of the big institutions that bought into farming as an investment are selling up and getting out while they can, but on family farms the farmer and his wife will pull together and look for ways to survive. They have always had an unique partnership with the wife taking her full fifty per cent of the work and worry. The one big difference since 1945 is that girls with no farming skills are readily welcomed into the family because it is realised that a wife with her own career can bring money onto the farm and many prefer to do this rather than turn their homes into hotels.

In these days of equality sometimes it is the farmer who seeks extra work off the farm while his wife sees to the work on the family farm. Whichever way it is managed the farm will remain in the family and the wife will put in her fifty per cent and more.