

**Farm Life Offers Many Perspectives**

*By Vanessa Barr*

Recently, I've read comments about how agriculture refuses to change its production practices, but I disagree. Family-owned and operated farms have changed over the years, from diverse enterprises providing primarily for a single family to more specialized operations supplying food for people across the world and involving several units of the same family. Farms change with the times and consumer demand.

Organic dairy and vegetable products and cage-free eggs became widely available as farm families stepped up to provide more options to consumers. It's great to have these choices, but many times for consumers it's not only a "health" choice but also a financial choice, as most organic options are more expensive. Not everyone is able or willing to choose organic products, especially in today's economy.

While the relationship between farmer and consumer has proved to be market responsive, the animal rights movement continues to drive a wedge in that relationship. One wonders if those involved in the animal rights movement really know agriculture and farming. Speaking from personal experience, it takes a lot more than just visiting a farm (though I encourage talking with your area farmers), reading a book about farming or watching a movie with a farming theme.

I didn't grow up on a farm, but many of my relatives farm and I earned an agricultural journalism degree, so I thought I had a good grip on what farming was. Not until I married a farmer did I realize that I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did.

Now my husband and I discuss what crops to plant, what new ventures to take on, what pieces of equipment will last another year, which ones won't and, quite frankly, which ones have to.

I knew farmers stayed out in the fields late into the evening, but it took on a new meaning when I delivered supper for a week straight in the field and then returned home alone. That's not a complaint by any means, but it is one thing to know about it and another to experience it.

I had heard that everyone pitches in, but it meant more when I finished my "regular" job and then joined my husband in the field to get hay bales to the barn before it rained.

My family doesn't farm because it makes us rich or famous. We don't grandstand when we bring a sick animal back to health or when we help a neighbor in the hay fields. We farm because it gives us a sense of pride to work the land that's been in the family for many, many years. We produce hay for area livestock producers and for the dairy heifers we have grown on our farm in the past and hope to raise again in the future. We're a community of individuals who depend on one another.

I've lived in a suburb of Chicago. If you want to talk about cages and cramped spaces, check out some of the places people call apartments in big cities. There is traffic, sirens, people on top of people. I wouldn't trade my farm life for any of it.