

Life on a Farm in the 1940's

Farming methods in the '40s and '50s were very different than they are today. For example, "Tractors in the 1940s were not equipped with cabs to protect the farmers from the weather, so [they] had to tolerate Spring showers, Summer heat, and early Winter sleet and cold," Mrs. Birkby explains. "They had no radios on their tractors, but the meadowlarks sang to them. The family dogs ran alongside to keep them company. Most farmers developed a kinship with wild creatures on their land, with the wide blue skies, the brilliant sunshine, the refreshing breezes, and the sweeping view of far horizons. Their pride increased as they rode back and forth across their fields. Whether they owned the land or just tilled it as a renter...they felt as if it all belonged to them."

Imagine farm life in the 1940's in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. You would live in a house where the only running water is in the kitchen sink. You would talk on party-line telephones. Recalling the days of party-line telephones, Evelyn Birkby writes affectionately about a woman who was "the unofficial communications center of our neighborhood party line. No matter whom a call was intended for, when the phone rang everyone knew that Myrtle would be listening, She was an important source of information about local activities," Mrs. Birkby writes, and was "more up-to-date than the newspaper, more accurate than the radio newscasters, and more aware of the concerns and joys of the people on her telephone line than any other resident of the area." As we look back from the present, farm life in the 1940s and 1950s often appears perfect. However, the garden grown by a farm family was not a hobby in the 1940's like it often is today. "Rather, it was a vital part of farm production, saving the family money on their food budget and sustaining them through times when income from crops and livestock was low," Mrs. Birkby writes.

Farm life was hard work for everyone, where farmers and their families constantly were engaged in hard, physical labor. Farmers were isolated and lonely. There were always threats of storms, droughts, ruined crops, low prices, sickness, poor medical care and accidents. Many hardships were endured. In the words of Evelyn Birkby, "Ill-timed rains spoiled a hay crop. Drought robbed us of a corn harvest. High winds stripped the heads from the ripening grain." There were also the storms of life - the loss of friends and loved ones, including, tragically, the death of their precious five-year-old little girl, Dulcie Jean. She was abruptly stricken with a fatal heart infection. Farm women worked long hours at home. They did not have time to visit friends and neighbors for morning coffee, afternoon tea or casual fun. They worked in the fields, and assumed responsibility for the home. They made their own soap, and used a broomstick handle to fish laundry out of a scalding-hot tub of soapy water in a wringer washer.

They prepared recipes their mothers and grandmothers had taught them, for their families and for all the extra helpers they needed on the farm. All their foods were cooked on a wood stove. Jars of fruits and vegetables needed to be canned for the winter. Garden produce was stored in a dirt-floor cellar. If you lived on a farm in the 1940's, you may recognize foods such as liver and onions, gooseberry pie, applesauce doughnuts, country fried catfish, ham with cherries, fondant, crystallized popcorn, chili, stuffed zucchini, creamed cabbage, and watermelon pickles and carrots with apricots. All home made! All the time!

Farmers and their families would go to town on Saturday nights, and go to church on Sundays. They attended social clubs, rural churches, country schools and farm auctions, and celebrated holidays with fellow farmers and their families.

To learn more, visit the website of Evelyn Birkby and Honey Hill Books at www.evelynbirkby.com/about.php.



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