

Down on the Farm

I got to be a farmer for three years. My dad owned 102-acre farm thirty miles south of St. Louis on the bluff above the Mississippi River between Columbia and Waterloo, Illinois. He worked full-time for the Ralston Purina Company in St. Louis, so I did most of the work on the farm. It was a great learning experience because I learned how to repair equipment and solve problems, such as pulling fence posts, building a septic tank, cleaning cisterns, etc. On the farm you need to use a lot of baling wire and chewing gum to fix things. I've been handy all my life because of three years on the farm.

My dad's farm was in a German community where we were surrounded with neighbors whose names could have come from the farmland of Germany, like Stumpf, Gummersheimer, Schneider, Rodemacher, or Schmidt. In fact, the generation of farmers about my parents age spoke English with a German accent. Their parents who immigrated from Germany in the thirties and forties, spoke mostly German and their grandchildren, my age, had no trace of German at all, and only knew a few jokes and swear words in German.

But, many German cultural distinctives were still common in our community. For example, a small village three miles from my dad's farm was called New Hanover, named after the original city of Hanover, in northern Germany. It exhibited a unique style of housing common in Germany, but unusual in the US. Many of the farmers lived together in town and drove their farm equipment out to the fields to work during the day. Their houses were typically two-stories tall and the families lived on the upper floor. In the lower level the farmer housed his equipment and many of the farm animals. I suppose this helped keep the home warmer in the winter, but also added a bit of farm fragrance as well. In the US, farmers generally live on the land and don't congregate in towns or cities.

I didn't realize the uniqueness of this cultural heritage I observed in New Hanover until some ten years later when I visited Germany while in the Air Force and found it was rare for farmers to live on their land. While flying in a helicopter over the hill country north of Frankfort I found there were few houses in the countryside.

I attended eighth grade and the first two years of high school in Columbia, Illinois, and most of my classmates were of German ancestry. Many of the school's social events centered around German and agricultural activities. For example, in the Fall, Columbia celebrated Oktoberfest with a carnival, German food, lots of beer, and band music. I was in the school band and got to play lots of polka music in a round, beautiful, white bandstand in the city park.

Later in the Fall, closer to Thanksgiving, when it began to get cold in the evening, the school sponsored hayrides and watermelon eating parties. These weren't just a bunch of people piled in a truck with a few hay bales driving down the highway, but low, open farm wagons full of straw, pulled slowly by horses or small tractors, down country roads. These hayrides were great for bringing a date or just mingling with the girls. Then around Christmas, when it got cold and the farm ponds froze over, we had ice skating parties, with wiener roasts.

In summer when school was out, the country church we attended, just up the road from our house, had a sit-down potluck on the lawn. German farm wives know how to throw a potluck. The tables were weighed down with fried chicken, German potato salad, three-bean salad, jello salad, cakes, pies, and homemade ice cream. And, these women were competitive! They tried to outdo one another in building the tallest, most colorful, and nut or cheese-filled jello salad possible.

Meanwhile, the men were busy playing horseshoes on about a half dozen horseshoe pits and drinking beer. My family didn't partake in alcoholic drinks, but German farmers thrive on beer. The United Brethren Evangelical Free Church of New Hanover, Illinois where we attended, only frowned on drunkenness. They had cattle troughs filled with beer and ice for the adults and soda for the kids.

When I attend most church potlucks today, where people contribute Kentucky Fried Chicken, Domino's Pizza, and Marie Cullender Pies, I can't help but think back to the good old days of my childhood when a potluck was a potluck!

After a couple of years working on my dad's farm I thought I wanted to become a farmer. It seemed like a great life. But, my high school teacher in the agriculture class I took for two years, convinced me it would never work for me. He said I didn't have the requisite resources to become a farmer. My dad had

bought the 102-acre farm and was making monthly payments and struggled to do that. It only had 50 tillable acres and we had very limited equipment to farm with.

My ag instructor convinced me that I needed a minimum of 400 acres and much more equipment to make a farm profitable. The problem was that if you didn't inherit a farm and a lot of equipment, you would have to borrow lots of money to buy it, and the interest would eat up all the profit. He told me that, "If I had enough money to become a farmer, I didn't need to go into farming."

But, farmers don't go into farming just to make money -- It's a way of life. If you can't make a go of it, it's only temporary. I once heard a story that illustrates this truth. A farmer won the jackpot of ten million dollars on a gameshow and was heard to say, "This is wonderful! Now I can continue farming another ten years, until I run out of money again!"

So, even with all the wonderful memories living among my German neighbors and experiencing life down on the farm, I reluctantly decided to forego becoming a farmer and, instead, became a scientist.