



Our Times

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THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Summer 1997

Farm Life in Logan County

By the early 1900's, Logan county was criss-crossed with hedgerows of Osage orange, planted as a firm reminder of whose land was whose. The hedges were a haven for blackbirds and groundhogs, but a curse to the hired men whose job it was to trim them and whose arms bore the scars from their thorns. Cattle were fenced in with sturdy posts cut from those Osage orange trees; some of those fenceposts would still be standing many years later.

The fields between the hedgerows were farmed by men and women whose forefathers had broken the prairie walking behind a team of horses. The first white farmer to cultivate prairie soil in Logan County, James Latham, had emigrated from Kentucky. He chose to build his cabin on what is now called Elkhart Hill in 1819, planting thirty acres of corn at the foot of the hill. Later that same year, Robert Musick settled on the south side of the Sugar Creek timber.

A hundred years after Latham planted that first field, horses and mules were still being used to farm the garden that was Logan County. The first sign the county was changing was the sputter of a gasoline tractor where the whinny of a horse had been heard. By April 1st, 1915, the *Lincoln Courier-Herald* was reporting that 23 gasoline tractors were in use in Logan County. Granted, the transition was gradual: in 1935, a city slicker could gas up at the Sinclair Service Station while a farmer was having his harness repaired at Lauer Brothers Hardware. But as the tractor replaced the horse, the ground could be worked faster and by fewer people.

Because it wasn't as easy to farm up to the hedgerows with tractors as it had been with horses, the hedges were cut down and grubbed out; and the animals had to find new homes.

While the farmers were tilling the soil, the scientists were busy in their labs. The first hybrid seed corn was sold in the U.S. in 1922; by 1939, Lester Pfister was writing a newspaper column telling farmers how to

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Turn On The Lights!

Electricity

"Farmers needed electricity more than anyone," contends Elmer Brautigam. But they had to wait long enough to get it.

Before rural electrification, Brautigam claims, "most farmers had a bunch of little boys" to pump water for the animals. Brautigam was a bachelor, though, who relied on a gasoline engine in later years. Sometimes the engine would fail, and he'd be back to pumping water for his cattle by hand.

Farm wives stored food in an icebox, while their children studied by the light of the Aladdin lamp. Brautigam remembers sour milk, while Ruth Robertson Musick remembers



A Logan County farm in the early 1930's.

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Publisher's Notes

When I first dated the girl I later married, I arranged to eat Sunday dinner at her parents' house on the days the "man" was scheduled to do chores. Once in a while I got the days mixed up and was a guest on the wrong Sunday—when it was Jane's family's turn to do chores. On those days, as the winter sun melted into the gray of twilight, I donned a spare pair of rubber boots, coveralls, and stocking cap and slushed through the snow to the barn with Jane, her brother and her dad. We threw bales of hay to the cows, softened their beds with fresh straw, and shoveled corn for the pigs. That doesn't seem so long ago; but when we return to the same farm, where Jane's brother now lives, there are no cows, no pigs, no "man," and no Sunday afternoon chores. Life is good, and boyfriends hang around every Sunday afternoon.

None of us is far from farm life—a generation or two or a mile or two at most. We idealize farm life, of course, because it represents the most visceral American longings— independence, freedom, family, neighbors, land, and the sweet rhythms of nature. So still today we live out our lives hoping to earn enough money to move to a farm where someone else will do the work and we will enjoy the view. But that is an ashen dream; the work is what holds the family together and makes the neighbors necessary.

Half my friends were farm kids when I was a boy, and the other half lived in little houses in the little town with me. The farm kids annoyed us at times, drawing into their tight circles of camaraderie to boast about their sixteen-bottom plows and 3020's and M's and 30-foot harrows. What were these things, we wondered? But then farm kids never understood the pleasure we took in pelting cars with tomatoes from atop Fat Brown's garage. For the most part, farm kids didn't break rules, except for driving pick-up trucks when they were nine years old.

My wife remembers the day her dad

sold the last of his dairy herd. He stayed in the house to avoid watching the cows being led up the plank to the livestock truck. Not that he hadn't delivered hundreds of beef cattle to Chicago for slaughter over his lifetime, but the dairy herd was something else. And the remnant, the last few Holstein cows, were part of the family; they had names, and they had borne calves who also had names. Their udders had warmed the hands of Jane's father on winter mornings since before Jane and her brother were born. Their leaving was inevitable, as small dairy herds became economically impractical; but their leaving did not have to be witnessed.

I remember a moment when I was completely aware of immediate happiness. I was 16 and sitting on a hayrack in a field of fresh-cut clover, drinking from a dipper of cold well water. The midsummer sun squatted behind a tree row, thinly lighting the band of blue sky where swallows flitted above the orange glow that hung low to the ground. A cool breeze touched my white t-shirt, soaked with a day's sweat earned from bucking 60-pound bales. We spoke in low tones—the farmer, his man, the other boys and I. I had \$12 cash in my pocket, gas in my pick-up, a stem of clover in my teeth, and an indescribable sense of worth. Not exactly "boyhood's painless play," but enough to make farmers the envy of this barefoot boy. **SR**

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catching her hair ribbon in the lamp's open flame; the hired woman had to beat the fire out with her bare hands.

Ruth also remembers the year her mother won first prize for her bread at the state fair and used the \$5.00 gold piece to buy a modern gas iron. "She thought she was really going places," says Ruth, "to not have to use a flatiron."

So farm families coped. Some of them had their own power plants. Adolph Gehlbach bought a generator during World War I that mixed

carbide crystals and water to produce acetylene gas that was piped to the house and barn for lighting. Located in the garden, the generator was surrounded with a double fence that was packed with horse manure in the winter to keep the water from freezing.

The Delco electrical plant Harold Apel's family bought in the 30's used a wind charger tower with a generator. The electricity it created was stored in batteries and used as needed. Other farmers used gasoline engines to run their generators.

Ruth Finke Opperman remembers that you could only use certain appliances at one time—not like today, when the clothes washer and dryer are going at the same time.

Finally, where enough farmers were willing to sign a contract promising to use a certain amount of electricity, the private utilities would string a line. However, in 1933, 9 out of 10 farms still had no electricity; it took the creation of the Rural Electrification Administration in 1935 to get electricity to most farmers.

In the first five months of 1937, 8,000 farms in Illinois were electrified, bringing the total number in the state to 38,000. The focus of Farm and Home Week at the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois that January had been how to make use of electricity on the farm.

In 1939, the REA Farm Equipment Demonstration toured eight states, demonstrating everything from feed grinders to washing machines to an eager group of rural folks.

Clem Garton, writing in his *Courier* column, "East O' Town," commented, "With warm weather coming on, farm women are talking about their new frigidaires, or electric ice boxes. Crisp tender lettuce, a glass of cold milk, ice cream for the supper repast and there you have it, electricity a la mode" (May 13, 1939).

There may have been one more unspoken advantage. As one Logan County farmer puts it, the most exciting thing about getting electricity was that "you felt like you were equal to the city folks." ■

Scully Estates

Cash rents for farmers

Violet Scully was a walker. She liked to stroll through her fields, on the lookout for problems. When she observed gullies that "even a horse would balk at," as Jim Walden, agent for the Scully Estates puts it, she went right to work—making sure the old "purse dams" of wire and stones were replaced with concrete dams.

Conservation was important to Mrs. Scully, as it had been to her husband Thomas. He had inherited vast holdings from his father, William, an Irish peer who accumulated almost 200,000 acres in Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska before his death in 1906.

William Scully began buying land in the U.S. in 1850, having spent two years traveling through the Midwest on horseback, sampling the earth with a spade. With his own inheritance and 10,000 pounds borrowed from his brother Thomas, William Scully bought almost 30,000 acres in Logan County, mostly government land at \$1.25 an acre.

When Thomas Scully was killed in Ireland, William inherited the bulk of the Scully estate. After several stormy years as an Irish landlord, he returned to the U.S. to purchase more land and see to its rental.

Scully's procedures were a little different than most. He collected cash rents, rather than a share of the crop; his leases were for one year at a time; and tenants had to make their own improvements, which they could sell to the next tenant. To this day, Scully leases are handled the same way.

As an Irish landlord, Scully was well-suited to deal with the boggy, swampy land he had bought in Logan County. He spent 40 years having his land tiled. Many of the same families did the tiling; Walden says that when the fathers died, "their children took up their shovels."

As for Violet Scully, she took her responsibilities to her Logan County home seriously. If "Lord" Scully and his son Thomas had seemed distant in their old-world way, she set out to remedy that situation. She served on the hospital board, held picnics for the tenants and their families, and donated the land for Kickapoo Creek Park. When she died in 1976, *The Lincoln Courier* noted that Lincoln and Logan County had "lost a very good friend" (August 20, 1976).

The Scully estate in Illinois is now held in trust for Violet and Thomas's sons, Michael and Peter, and their families. ■



"Kickapoo," the Scully family estate north of Lincoln, in the 1950's. Courtesy Larry Shroyer Photographic Collection/Lincoln Public Library District.

A Farmer Tells His Story

Harold Apel remembers.

In 1930, when Harold Apel was a child, farm days started at 4:00 A.M. The family and the hired man yawned and stretched and went their separate ways—the men to do the chores while the women prepared breakfast.

Morning chores meant taking care of the livestock—feeding and currying the horses, to begin with.



The Apels take up the reins.

Sweat and collars could make a horse sore, so keeping the horses clean was the hired man's job.

Meanwhile, Harold's dad would feed the pigs, milk the 6-8 cows by hand, and separate the milk and cream. The hogs and kittens lapped up the skimmed milk; but the Apels stored the cream in a dug well until they churned it into butter.

Saturday mornings, Harold, his brother Vernon, and their parents drove into Lincoln and went house-to-house, peddling their butter, eggs, Leghorn chickens, and potatoes. In the winter, they trapped rabbits and the occasional possum; the rabbits brought 25 cents apiece from Mr. Krotz, while roasted possum was a delicacy to the coal miners at the North mine.

By 5:30, when chores were done, everyone had worked up a hearty appetite for a breakfast of pancakes, sausage, bacon, fried potatoes, eggs, and cereal. Then it was out to the fields to begin the day's work.

The Apels' 160 acres was a good-sized farm in 1930. About 80 acres were devoted to corn, with the rest in clover, timothy, wheat, and oats. It took a fair amount of land to support the Percherons and crossbreeds which the family used for work horses. While some farmers used mules, because they could stand the heat better and worked hard, Harold's father didn't like them; they were tricky, and they kicked!

The ground was plowed using a moldboard plow behind the horses. "My grandfather De Tour used a John Deere walking plow behind a horse," Harold reminds us. Harold did some walking of his own, tramping along behind a harrow. By nighttime, he comments, "you were dragging." He was glad when his father finally bought a harrow cart so he could ride.

The Apels used a two-row corn planter. Because chemicals to keep the weeds down had not yet been invented, they planted their corn in hills, checkerboard-style, so the corn could be cultivated in both directions.

Harold says the greatest improvement in farming has been the development of hybrid seeds. In the old days, a farmer walked through the corn fields in the fall with a sack on his back, selecting the stalks with good ears and drying them to use the next spring.

But all that was about to change. In 1930, the average yield on the Apel farm was 30 bushels/acre. In 1937 Harold's dad bought three bushels of Pfister's hybrid corn, and the yields jumped by 30%!

After a morning's hard work, the farmers were ready for a full dinner (always including pie) at 11:30. The horses were unhitched and fed oats and timothy hay. Then back to the field, to finish the day's work. After the corn

was planted, cultivating began and continued until the corn was too high to get through. Then it was time to wait for it to mature, after which it was harvested by hand.

Husking corn was a tough job. The farmer used a shucking peg to rip the husk off, then broke the ear loose and threw it up against the backboard of the wagon. A good corn husker could husk 100 bushels a day, and Harold's dad could do 110. Farmers stored corn on the ear; shelling corn in the field wouldn't happen for many years.

About 1935, the Apels bought a Hart-Parr two-cylinder tractor. About the same time, they bought a threshing machine; before that, threshing was contract work. Harold remembers driving a team of horses to the creek to get water for the steam engines that powered the threshing machines.

Harold's father bought his first combine in the late 30's. He had been raising soybeans and mowing them off to make hay to feed to the cattle. Raking the hay into windrows and loading them into the rack wagons by hand was something the Apels only did for a year or two. The bean dust was so itchy you could hardly stand it, and the work was too dirty—and too hard. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when Harold's dad bought a used International Harvester combine from Baker and Gehlbach Hardware.

As the Apels came in from the fields in 1930 to finish their chores and have supper, they probably didn't realize that times were about to change—and not for the better. Harold's father did manage to hang onto the farm during the Depression, and Harold's brother Vernon farms it today. Other than 6 weeks of working in a factory in St. Louis when he was 18, Harold has always farmed. He met Rosemary LaForge at a Farm Bureau Rural Youth Meeting, and they were married in 1945; they have raised four children, who are all farmers as well. Harold has been active in the no-till movement and won the county award one year. ■

A Farmer's Wife Tells Her Story

Rosemary Apel remembers.

"We did have a lot of things to do, didn't we?" remarks Rosemary La Forge Apel. "We think we're busy now!"

Rosemary says keeping house hasn't changed as much as farming; she should know, because she's done both. In fact, her mother worked in the fields when Rosemary was a child, which was unusual. Her parents farmed 240 acres, "a big chunk of ground" in those days; and her dad needed the help. When Rosemary was a little girl, she rode on a box on the cultivator while her mother cultivated the corn.

Rosemary herself walked behind a harrow and thought, "There's got to be an easier way to do this!" But she has done her share of running a farm home as well, and she does notice some real changes.

Washday, for one. Before Rosemary had a washing machine with a gas engine, she remembers boiling clothes and rubbing them on a board to get them clean, then hanging them on the line to dry. And that was just the beginning. Then came the starching of all the good pieces, the sprinkling and rolling, the ironing with a flatiron heated on the back of a coal stove. Every housewife had at least 2 flatirons so she could rotate them so as to always have a hot one. Homemakers stripped the beds and changed the sheets every week, and some meticulous women starched their sheets and ironed their towels.

Rosemary used a pitcher pump to pump rain water from the cistern for washing, baths, and shampooing hair. All other water had to be carried in. Needless to say, Rosemary was thrilled to get a bathroom when she moved to New Holland at the age of 19. Cleaning the chamber pots that were used at night was "quite a job" that she was glad to be rid of.

"Families wanted lots of girls to sew and cook," says Rosemary. Cooking was done from scratch—"no box cakes, that's for sure"—while home canning preserved the fruits of the garden. Sewing was done on a treadle machine; Rosemary made almost all of her first two kids' clothes and most of her own, getting her new ideas from Home Bureau lessons.

Rosemary still takes the house apart for spring cleaning: taking the curtains down and washing the windows, moving the furniture, and washing everything. Although it takes a lot of time, at least these days she doesn't have to

take the rugs out and hang them on the line to beat them clean.

In addition to the regular chores, of course there were the special jobs—like butchering. By starting at 4:00 a.m., the family, a neighbor with butchering skills, and 4 or 5 other neighbors could get the job done in one day. The operation required a lot of equipment: big black kettles, scalding tanks for scalding away the hair, hand scrapers, a lard press, and a sausage grinder.

The men did most of the butchering, while the ladies cooked the noon meal. Cuts of meat were baked and put in jars or put into smokehouses. The grandparents had cured the meat by building a hickory fire in their smokehouses, but Rosemary's family used Morton's sugar cure. They laid the meat on a

table and "salted" it every few weeks until the flavor was right. Then they hung it in the smokehouse, where it stayed good until summer.

Harold's family cooked the heads, tongues, hearts, liver, and pigs' feet to make liverwurst. Casings for sausage were made by turning the intestines inside out, scraping them clean, and soaking them in salt water. Some farm wives fried the sausage, spareribs, and chops and stored them in grease.

Rosemary remembers cutting the fat from the meat into small pieces and cooking it over a fire in black kettles, stirring it with a big paddle. When it became liquid, she poured it into a stone crock to use in making flaky pie crusts. Many farm folks can still taste the cracklings, the crisp brown skin left from that rendering process.

Rosemary has another memory of lard that is not so pleasant—losing a ring in the soap that her mother made from lard and lye.

Butchering meant that not only did farmers eat well, but that they had some variety, too. Because they sometimes needed a little coaxing to eat the more unusual cuts, Miss Glenna Henderson, home economics extension specialist in foods at the University of Illinois, gave homemakers recipes for the special cuts that were only available at butchering time (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, January 9, 1937).

Life on the farm wasn't all work. In the evenings, after the chores were done, Rosemary's family played games—checkers and dominoes by the light of a coal oil lamp. Big families would often sing. But everyone usually went to bed by 8:30 or 9:00. Another busy day would be starting soon enough. ■



The Apels shift gears.

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Scully drainage crew, late 19th century. Courtesy of Scully Estates.

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