

# Early Farm Life

Farming then was different from now. The main crops were hay, wheat, oats, corn and some mangolds, for the cows. There was not nearly as much corn grown then as it required too much hand labour. Corn was cut with a sickle. Two stalks or hills were left standing and their tops twisted together. Then armfuls of corn were cut and stood against this framework. When the shock was large enough, corn stalks were used to tie it around the middle. After the corn had dried, it was husked by hand and put into a wagon to be taken to the corn crib. The stalks were re-shocked into large shocks and later taken to the barn for cattle feed. Very little of the grain grown on the farm was sold as a cash crop. It was fed to the livestock. Grandpa kept horses, six or eight cows and some pigs and Grandma had chickens and geese.

There was always a garden to supply vegetables and fruit was home grown too. There were several varieties of apple trees, pears, plums, grapes, red currants, black currants and gooseberries. There was also one peach tree. Wild thimbleberries grew along the east line fence.

For winter use, apples, potatoes and mangolds for the cows were stored in a room in the barn, under the hay mow and next to the cow stable.

There seemed to have been several small buildings in the door yard. As well as the old kitchen, there was a milk house, an ice house, a smoke house, and even the potash kettle was partly covered. It had a roof over it and three sides.

In the winter farmers took their teams and sleighs to Belle River and cut blocks of ice. These were brought home and packed in sawdust in the ice house.

When a pig was butchered, it was scalded in the potash kettle. Some meat was put in brine in barrels. Some was hung in the smoke house. This was a hollow tree trunk with a lid on top and the smoke was produced by burning hickory wood and corn cobs.

The potash kettle was also used in making soft soap. The ashes from the living room stove were carefully saved in another hollow tree trunk which had a solid bottom. In the spring, water was poured over the ashes and the lye leached out at the bottom into a kettle. This lye along with the fats that had been saved were used to make soap. This soap was stored in a barrel in the old kitchen, and, on washday, a long handled dipper was used to scoop up the



required amount.

Grandmother often said that they had a good living on the farm. There was plenty of food but cash was scarce. At one time they sold a good four-year-old horse for \$50.00. A big fat hen would bring 25 cents.

Every three weeks Grandfather went to market in Windsor (Ontario, Canada) with butter and eggs. Some of the butter was put up in pound prints, using a wooden mold but most of it was packed in crocks. One customer regularly took ten pounds in a crock. One spring a customer asked if Grandfather would come more often in the warmer weather. The answer was no. He assured her that any butter that did not keep properly would be replaced.

Inside the house things were different too. Most of the floors were bare wood or painted. Homemade mats were used. Some were braided; others were woven. The housewife never wasted worn-out clothing. Heavier cloth, such as used in men's pants, was cut into strips and braided for mats. Cotton cloth was also cut into strips, but narrower, and the ends were sewn together and wound into balls. When enough balls of carpet rags were accumulated, they were taken to the weaver. There was wall to wall carpet in the living room. This was made by sewing lengths of rag carpet together. The underpadding was newspapers and the carpet was held down with carpet tacks.

Heating equipment usually consisted of two wood stoves, a cook stove in the kitchen and a heating stove in the sitting room or parlour. Because of the dust from the ashes, there was also sweeping and dusting to be done.

The usual cleaning equipment was broom and dustpan and sometimes a carpet cleaner. A goose wing was handy for dusting the stairs. The tip could get into the corners. None of these were as efficient as a vacuum cleaner. While heavier particles of dust were picked up, the finer particles were merely re-arranged.

Spring cleaning was a necessity. The carpet would be taken up, draped over a clothesline and beaten with a carpet beater. The old newspapers would be burned. The floor would be scrubbed and fresh newspapers put down and then the carpet would be relaid.

Another spring cleaning job was taking down the stove pipes. They were taken out into the yard and the soot tapped out.



Some houses had a cistern and cistern pump in the kitchen to provide water for washing. Drinking water was usually carried in pails. The kitchen stove had a reservoir on one side, and this, along with the tea kettle, provided hot water.

Quilts were made from pieces of cloth left over from other sewing. Perhaps they were not as beautiful as some that are made now, but they were very practical. My grandmother spun enough yarn to make a pair of blankets. When the blankets wore thin in the middle, she dyed one red and the other blue. From the best parts she cut quilt blocks, about six inches square. The quilt was lined with a dark striped flannelette.

Mattresses on the beds were not spring filled. Perhaps the most comfortable was a goose feather and down-filled tick. Children often slept on ticks filled with straw or corn husks. After threshing time, the straw tick would be taken outdoors and emptied. Then it would be washed and filled with clean straw.

Presentation given by Mrs. Grace Joyce (Christie), February 1988

[www.geocities.com/heartland/hills/6401/joyce.html](http://www.geocities.com/heartland/hills/6401/joyce.html)

