

“Make sure you gather up the heads!”

The role of women and children on the farm in the 1920’s.

By Josie Crilly

Back in the 1930’s rural Co. Armagh was still largely an area with poor roads, no mains-water, no sewage system and no electricity. Rural areas had a sparse population, which had been declining for nearly a century, and few families possessed any means of transport other than perhaps a horse or donkey and cart or maybe a bicycle.

In those days, when farms and fields were small and gates were narrow, when the horse was still king and the pace of life was slow, women and children played a vital role in the traditional small farm economy. By reducing labour costs and providing extra hands at busy times, such as harvest, they made many a small farm viable. At harvest time one of the chores, typically left to the women and children, was that of ‘gleaning’ the corn fields, i.e. gathering any ears of corn dropped by the farm workers. Locally the odd

stalks of corn missed by the harvesters were known as ‘heads’ so those performing this menial, but vital, chore were instructed to, **“Make sure you gather up the heads”**

One very time-consuming job, which was common to all areas, was that of gathering sticks. Gathering sticks was regarded as a job for women and children. The children gathered sticks after school or at weekends. Young children gathered fire lighters while their older brothers and sisters and their mothers were responsible for gathering the thicker roots used in cooking and baking bread. Lighting the fire in the morning was that bit easier if there was a fan bellows and the fire had been ‘banked up’ the night before.

The first chore of the day for the farmer’s wife was making the breakfast for the family. A pot of porridge would have been made



The Gleaners



Haymaking at Peter Campbell's, Drumbanagher

the night before and there might be a boiled egg or a slice or two of home-cured bacon as well as tea and bread.

Cooking and baking was done on an open hearth, with the traditional crane and crook common to all farmhouses. Bread was baked daily either on the griddle or in a pot oven. Soda farls were baked on the griddle. Baking in a pot oven was a skill, which had to be acquired, as the cook had to judge how many pieces of turf, or sticks, were needed on top to bake the cake without burning it.

Most farms had a small orchard with a few apple trees both for baking and eating. Apple tarts were baked in the pot oven. In autumn, when apples were plentiful, Hallowe'en was marked with apple tarts and various games and activities involving apples.

It was said that if a housewife baked an apple tart on a Saturday she had no fear of an unexpected guest dropping in on Sunday.

Every farm had a cow or two that had to be milked, and often on a small farm the farmer's wife would take her turn at milking when the

men-folk were busy elsewhere. There was often a calf or two to be fed and a few pigs to be seen to and, of course, there were the hens and various other poultry around the farmyard, which were exclusively left to the women folk. The sale of eggs and poultry generated very important income and was often put aside by the farmer's wife *'for the rainy day.'*

The carrying of water was a very important and time-consuming job and was usually left to the women and children. All the farmyard livestock needed water and water was needed for washing and cooking. If there was a well and pump in the farmyard then the chore was not so tedious but often water had to be carried from a stream or a well some distance away. Rainwater was collected in barrels but in dry summers, when a well or stream might run dry, the carrying of water to livestock often took up a great proportion of a farmer's time and perhaps involved filling barrels and using a horse and cart. Where possible the same water was used for several different chores. Water used for washing the clothes might then be used to scrub



When a crop of corn was tall and likely to fall in on the mower with the scythe, a child went alongside holding a long rod against the corn. This was called "rodding the corn."



A woman milking a cow in the field. When just one or two cows were kept, it was the custom in a nice summer for the cow to be milked outside. A child very often held the cow's wet tail to keep her from switching it round the woman's neck

the table and then for washing the floor.

Apart from the normal round of daily chores, most farmers' wives had a weekly routine as well with some particular job being taken care of on a particular day of the week. They might wash the clothes each Monday, for example, sew and darn on Tuesday or churn on a Wednesday.

Washing day involved carrying great amounts of water and boiling it over the fire before the tedious job of hand washing and rinsing and wringing began.

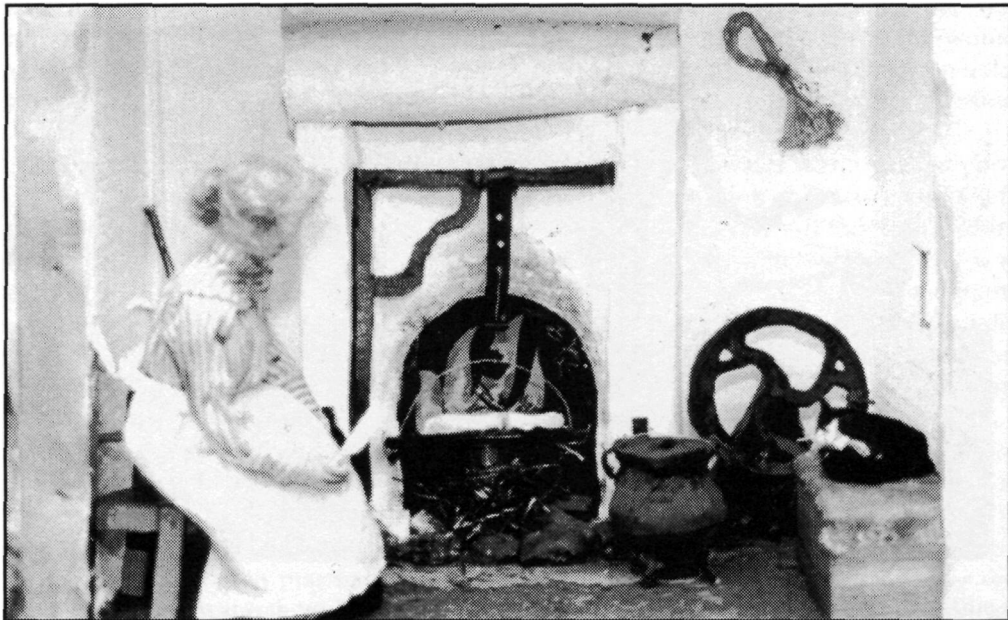
Some milk was reserved daily and the cream skimmed off and stored in crocks for the weekly churning. Churning was one of the housewife's most important jobs. Most farms in this area used a staff churn. The cream was put into the churn and with the staff in place and the lid on, churning commenced. The staff was moved up and down causing the contents to splash until the butter had formed. While this was regarded as the woman's work, everyone, including any visitor during the process, was expected to lend a hand and to take a 'brash' at the churning to show that they wished the process well. When the churning was complete the butter had to be taken from the churn and washed very

thoroughly with spring water before being salted and weighed. The buttermilk was used in baking or for drinking with the dinner.

The butter could be shaped into oblongs or rounds and, perhaps marked with a butter print of a swan or a shamrock or a thistle.

The butter was wrapped in greaseproof paper or in summer perhaps in cabbage leaves. Surplus butter was sold to neighbours, to a local shop or brought to a butter market. Like eggs, butter was an important source of income and the money raised was often spent then and there on necessities such as oil, tea, salt, sugar and flour. A standard mid-day dinner for the men consisted of potatoes, cabbage or turnip and a slice or two of home cured bacon. Sometimes, particularly at weekends, a pot of rice would be prepared as a treat. Darning and patching were regular jobs for practically nothing was thrown away. This work was usually done in the afternoon when the light was good. Jumpers and socks were unravelled and the wool reused in darning or knitting. A rubbish bin was unheard of.

The normal daily round and the weekly routine was interrupted by those highlights of the farming year like haymaking, harvest or the



This woman baking bread on the griddle over the hearth fire



Here is a woman dropping, or planting potatoes. The man is spreading manure ahead of her

annual thresher or by 'set times' such as Easter and Christmas. When the men were working in the fields, at haymaking or at harvest time, meals were carried out to them by the women and children. Often small farmers' children's school attendance was very dependent on the activity on the farm and their ability to be of help at some stage of the sowing or harvesting. This saved valuable time. Haymaking involved all the family for, with uncertain weather, the more help the quicker the crop was saved. The green meadow hay had to be turned several times before it was 'won' or dry enough to be put in small stacks, variously referred to as cocks or shigs or huts. Eventually it would be deemed fit to be brought in and stored in the hay shed. Seed hay had to be tied in sheaves and stoked and built in stacks before being threshed.

During this haymaking process the women did their share of the work and brought the tea out to the field, the tea in a can with a lid and several kinds of home made bread in a basket covered with a cloth. Tea in the field in fine weather was a particular treat. Everyone looked forward to the sweet tea and fresh baked bread in the open air after several hours of hard work. Harvesting corn was a laborious process too, as it also had

to be tied in sheaves, stoked, stacked then drawn into the 'haggard' and threshed.

Harvest time was an exceptionally busy period on the farm and, for the farmer's wife, the day of thresher was the busiest day of the year. In earlier times, and occasionally up to the war, threshing was done with flails but by the 1930's the steam threshing machine was in common use. On the day of the thresher, the farmer's wife had all her normal daily chores to attend to and, with as many as twenty men needed for the various jobs around the steam thresher, there was a lot of cooking to do. The men would be mostly neighbouring farmers who came to help out.

This was a great assistance to the farmer but, in order to repay them, he would have to go to each of his neighbour's threshing days in return. As a result he would be absent a lot and that meant extra work for his wife. The farmer's wife took pride in putting on '*a good spread*' for the men at the thresher, and it would be regarded as a great disgrace if there wasn't plenty to eat at the mid-day meal and at tea time. Perhaps a relative or a neighbour woman came to lend a hand. A lot of water had to be carried to boil all the extra potatoes and cabbage and there was considerable pressure on the womenfolk to have



Before mechanical threshers flails were used. Two men stood opposite each other threshing off the grain onto a winnow cloth spread on the ground. There was a rhythm in this process. When one flail was being raised the other was coming down. A woman usually got the job of loosing the sheaf and spreading it out for the threshers

the meal ready in time and to make sure that nothing was overlooked.

Gathering potatoes was another annual task in which the children played a vital role. They were nimble and agile and better suited to the back-breaking work than adults who would be on hand to carry the heavy baskets of potatoes to the 'bing'. Most rural schools recognised the importance of the children at this time of year and 'potato gathering holidays' for a week or two in October were normal.

Another annual event was the arrival of the local pig butcher to kill a fat pig. The carcass was cut up and the meat was salted. The liver was par-boiled and black puddings were made from the blood and intestines.

The oil lamps had to be prepared daily. The wall lamp in the kitchen was taken down, the oil replenished, the wick trimmed, the globe cleaned and the reflector polished with a damp cloth. Candles were put in lanterns and hurricane lamps for use around the yard.

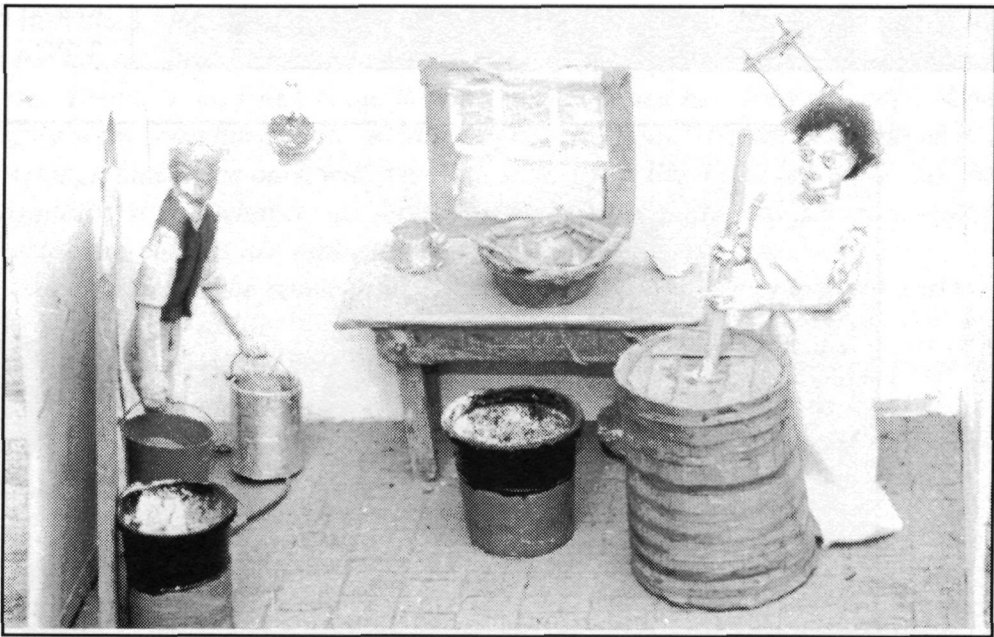
Children had no time to be 'bored'. After school, the girls would have to collect the eggs and close up the hens securely for the night or

maybe hold the cow's tail while she was being milked to prevent her flicking it in the milker's face. Treats were rare and very different from today. Children might accompany their parents on a visit to a relative or neighbour or when they went to town with eggs or butter.

Christmas and Easter were set times to look forward to, but had none of the extravagance associated with them today. Children did not expect to get very much but appreciated the little they got. A boy might get an apple or an orange, perhaps a few marbles or, if the parents were musically inclined, a mouth organ, or French fiddle as it was called, and a Jew's harp. A girl would get an apple or an orange, a ribbon or slide for her hair and a few sweets. At Easter an egg or two might be spared and boiled in a tin with a handful of whin blossom to colour them. The years following the war saw great changes to this traditional, timeless routine. Tractors had, until then, been only relevant to the big farmer but soon they became commonplace with only the odd die-hard persevering with the horse. Then came the milking machine and the binder and the baler and the deep-litter hens. Soon the



This is pulling flax. Flax was not cut. Very often several men formed a group or "Boon" as it was called and went from farm to farm to pull flax. A sheaf of flax was called a beet and 12 beets put together formed a stook. Each man was paid by the number of stooks he had pulled in a day. Flax beets were tied by rush bands. These bands were prepared by women. A woman sat in the field beside a load of rushes tying two lengths of rushes by a special knot.



This woman churning with a plunge churn. The man bringing in a "go"- two buckets of water from the spring well

smaller farms were no longer viable. Yields were not high enough, fields were not big enough, gates were not wide enough, byres were not clean enough and livestock not fat enough. There was no place any more in the new order of things for a 'few' of anything - a farmer had to *specialise*. Gathering a few handfuls of 'heads' was a waste of valuable time. Big was beautiful and everything had to be sacrificed at the altar of 'progress'. It seemed as if nothing

could stand in its way and so, in a decade or two, a way of life that had endured for countless centuries was gone forever. But the memories linger on.

Most of the photographs used to illustrate this article are of models made by Sara Savage to depict traditional farming methods. The notes are by her sister Minnie



Billy Minnis and family, cutting hay for Peter Campbell with his beloved horses



Trottin' to the Fair