

# Things in Motion ...

All things are in motion and nothing is at rest...you cannot go into the same (river) twice. --Heraclitus (540?-480?)B.C.

## *THE FLIP SIDE OF FARM LIFE*

**A** friend suggested that since I love to write about the joys of growing up on a farm, why not write also about the unpleasant things in that sort of life during my early years. This, then will look at the less pleasant aspects.

One of the most inconvenient facts of life on the farm in the thirties was the lack of indoor plumbing. This inconvenience was not limited strictly to the farm, of course, but it was a part of farm life, and a visit to some of the larger historical plantations will show that the outhouse was often an architectural part of the farm manor, and was more often than not treated with as much finesse as the manor house itself. In perhaps most cases, an outhouse was removed from close proximity to the “big house” and was often screened from view by shrubbery. The more elaborate ones had seating for up to six, but most were two-seaters. Few had windows, but all had doors that could be latched from the inside. There was, of course, no heat, and a visit at night required the use of a lantern or, in later years, a flashlight unless the visitor had no concern for snakes, rats, bats, or spiders—or wasps. The more cautious farm inhabitants usually avoided night visits by using an old fashioned chamber pot which was conveniently located underneath each

bed near the foot. During inclement weather, a visit to the outhouse was an annoyance, and for those with sensitive noses, it was never a pleasant experience whatever the circumstances.

The lack of indoor plumbing meant that all water used for cooking, for drinking, and for bathing had to be brought into the house, usually in buckets. Water was supplied either by wells or springs, both of which required a significant effort to maintain an adequate supply in the house each day; again, inclement weather played a role in adding to the misery of those who fetched the water.

Summer on the farm meant scorching days and nights when sleep was accompanied by sweat and mosquitoes. In houses with dog trots, it was common for men to sleep in that space on hot nights, sometimes on pallets fashioned from quilts, sometimes on the bare boards. A dog-trot was a roofed passageway between two parts of a house.

Winter kept most of the rooms in farm houses cold. The kitchen was usually the warmest room, and there was a sitting room where a fireplace threw out some measure of heat, but bedrooms were almost always cold, regardless of the fireplaces that bedrooms often had; unless there was a sick person in the bedroom, fireplaces were seldom used for the length of time necessary to warm the whole room. The expression “burn on one side and freeze on the other” was an apt description of a bedroom fireplace.



*House with Dogtrot*

Before rural electrification during the decade of the forties, kerosene lamps and lanterns provided light for farm houses. At best, it was largely inadequate, yet it was the standard for many years, relieved briefly by a few installations of Delco battery systems and finally by the Aladdin Lamp, which provided brighter light, but employed a mantle which tended to overheat and burn.



Aladdin Lamp Without Shade

Health conditions on the farm were not up to the standards we expect today. Ailments were often treated by unproven folk remedies and injuries such as cuts, abrasions, and punctures often received only applications of kerosene or turpentine as treatment. Pork fat was applied to the site of deep-seated splinters as a method of drawing the splinter out, and skin infections called “ground itch” were treated with ineffective applications of Mercurochrome—these sites were usually caused by hook worms which would require a worm treatment later. Going barefoot was a fact of life on the farm during warm weather and bare skin was the only protection in risky environments such as barns, pig pens, chicken yards, and fields, pastures, creeks and ponds. Nightly baths were not always taken, but feet, at least, were washed before bedtime.

Food was generally sufficient, most of it being grown by the farmer. Meat was often pork supplemented by wild game. Beef was less common because of the difficulty of preserving it, whereas pork was commonly cured and kept in smoke houses for long periods of time. Chickens also served as a source of meat as well as eggs and yard run chickens were generally able to feed themselves. Where there was access to creeks, rivers and ponds, fish was also a part of the farm diet. The average farm grew some variety of fruit, also, including peaches, pears, and grapes and was able to harvest wild berries and plums. Cane provided syrup; corn provided meal and any excess was sold or swapped to obtain staples not produced on the farm. There was no shortcut to the hard work required to grow and harvest food on the farm.

Before winter set in, a supply of wood and kindling had to be gathered and this stock of fuel for the stoves and fireplaces was kept at one spot known as the woodpile. A supply of wood had to be cut into lengths suitable for use in the stove as well as larger sizes for the fireplaces. The stove wood was needed all year, but fireplace fuel was cut only for use during the winter. Many farm houses had a place on the porch where wood was stacked first so that dry wood would be available even in wet weather. Chopping wood was an onerous task.

Caring for the livestock on farms was also a daily chore. Mules, cows, hogs, and other animals had to be fed and milk cows had to be milked every day regardless of the weather. Sick animals required treatment. A farmer often had to learn veterinary skills. For all the work and hardships of farming, it was still a rewarding way of life for many.