

Farming in 1866

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Pioneer newspapers are rich in agricultural as well as political history. On May 4, 1866, "Maggie May" wrote a letter captioned "Happy Farmers" to the *Delaware County* (Manchester) *Union*. It presented such a negative view on farming that a reply captioned "Farmers' Comforts" was promptly penned by a "Farmer's Wife" and printed in the *Union* of June 1, 1866.]

HAPPY FARMERS

I was tired of the old, lonely house opposite my east window — annoyed by the noise of the builders on the south lots, and disgusted at the proximity of the barn on the north side; so I concluded to leave care and trouble and rest a little while with Brother Carter, who is a farmer, and consequently (according to the papers) one of the happiest of mortals.

It took but two days to prepare for my journey; and I forgot all about the noisy carpenters and dismal house, as I, in imagination, feasted on Farmer Carter's "fat things," and wandered like a thistle, into every pleasant nook and corner in his neighborhood.

Wouldn't I have the freshest eggs and the sweetest butter for breakfast? And then didn't the farmers always have lambs, and pigs, and turkeys by the dozen, and chickens innumerable?

And who ever read of a farmer's wife that

didn't have the very whitest of bread, the sourest of pickles, and the best of fruit? There was the garden sauce, too. Oh! I should have a delightful visit, I knew. I started; I arrived at sister Mary's gate; I wished to go into the house, but how could I? First was a broken, patched-up gate, hanging over a mudpuddle; then four yards of five inch mud; next a pile of wood, beyond which I saw the backs of three little pigs, that were seeking delicious titbits in the bottomless mire.

I stood still in perplexity. I wondered if sister Mary's folks had wings, or whether they walked on stilts. Presently, a little boy came round the corner of the house, picked up a long board and came toward me, saying, "I guess the mud's pretty deep there," and down came the board, spattering my new cloak with mud and water. "There's a bridge for you now," said my champion, as he opened the gate, and bravely walked over the board to prove it trustworthy. I followed with fear and trembling, and safely landed on the chip-pile, from which I surveyed the next mudpuddle and my guide, wondering what would come next. "This is the way," he said, and I followed, stepping (at the risk of breaking my neck) on sticks, stones, and bits of board, until we arrived at the back part of the house. We entered a room filled with rubbish and grain of various kinds, through which we stumbled into the next apartment. This I soon found to be parlor and kitchen all together.

Sister Mary greeted me warmly, and I know she was glad to see me. She presented half a dozen boys and girls to be kissed by aunt Maggie, and I went through the operation bravely, although I could not help wishing that they had washed their faces first.

Sister soon said it was time to get supper, and sent Tommy to get some wood, and Harry to look for eggs to make a custard, "For," said she, "I sent every one I had to town this morning." The tea-kettle was set on the stove, and a little three-years-old baby stuck his finger down the spout. Mary went into the rubbish-room and returned with a plate of fat salt pork, (I had a barrel full at home,) which she put to freshen, remarking that "Joseph had been talking of killing a pig for a week or two but had been so busy that he hadn't got at it yet."

Harry returned with one egg, saying that he "couldn't find any more, and guessed Smith's dog had been sucking the eggs, for he saw him running up the road."

Supper was ready, and we sat down to a plate of fried pork, a saucer of flat, flabby pickles, and a few little radishes that were "remarkably strong for their size."

Sister Mary said she was intending to bake some pies and cakes yesterday, but the baby was so cross she couldn't. I told her I was tired of such things, and had come into the country for greens. She laughed and said her "garden didn't amount

to much, for the bugs and worms took everything as fast as it came up."

In the morning Mary asked Joseph to kill a chicken for dinner, but he forgot it, and went to his plowing. After dinner, we went to the garden to gather some currants for tea, but the birds had been there before us, so we got no more than a teacupful. I asked Mary why she didn't trim the bushes and set out more. "Why, I wanted to this spring, but I couldn't get time." *Next spring*, however, she was going to see if she couldn't work in the garden a little more. We pulled some stringy-looking pieplant stems to cook with our currants; instituted a search among some tall weeds for some young onions, and returned triumphantly to find Susy screaming with terror, because the baby had swallowed a button, and Lizzy in a fit of sulks, because we had not taken her ladyship with us.

Brother Carter soon came in, and said the cattle had broken down the fence and destroyed ever so much corn, and he couldn't kill the pig that evening, for he should have to mend the fence. Then he told me how his best cow, that gave milk all the year round, had been bitten by a rattlesnake, and died in spite of doctoring; how five of his best lambs gave up the ghost, in contempt of care; how his wheat has musted and only brought half price; how his oats were so heavy that they all fell down and were half wasted, and that his best horse had

been sick, so that he could not draw lumber to build his granary, and so had to keep his grain in the kitchen. Then, after he had gone to his work, Mary told me what a hard time they had to get their farm paid for. They had worked hard, and lived on the poorest fare, to lay by enough to meet the payments, and she had sold butter and eggs, cheese, chickens and turkeys. Then some winters the chickens would freeze to death, and sometimes the turkeys wouldn't hatch. She had set out ever so much shrubbery, but it was always destroyed in the winter, and —— but that is enough. I no longer wondered that the farming community furnished more inmates for our insane asylums than any other class, but was astonished to find that my brother and sister were not candidates for one of those retreats. But then they were so hopeful. Their stock was increasing, the children would soon be some help, the farm was paid for, and now they were "going to fix up a little round the house." I returned home a sadder, but I hope a wiser woman. I found the carpenter's noise as pleasant as the squealing of pigs, an offensive barnyard as endurable as a dirty door-yard, and the clatter of loose boards and shutter no worse than the mending of wagons and plows.

MAGGIE MAY

FARMERS' COMFORTS

Mr. Editor: Having seen a communication from Maggie May in your paper depicting the happiness of farmers' wives (as she calls it) in glowing colors, I think it the duty of some one of that class to say a word in favor of themselves and their calling. I have no desire to change my position, and would say to all young ladies, they may do far worse than marry a farmer. I *know* they do not all have mud-puddles before their doors, in fact I do not know of one that has, and Maggie May might sit down anywhere in my yard and not soil her nice dress or new cloak. Neither do we go over the chips or wood to get into the house. We have nice white bread and graham bread, pickles, and as yellow butter as one can ask, a very good garden, lots of currants, rhubarb, strawberries, and live in hopes to have all kinds of fruit in time. I have plenty of eggs, and chickens to kill when I want them, and among the farmers' families of my acquaintance they are all as comfortable, and more so in some respects. Most of them are getting started now, and in time they will have larger houses and ride in their carriages.

I have any amount of flowers, and it yields me many hours' enjoyment taking care of them; and my husband is always ready and willing to assist me in any way that I ask him, and to spare a little money now and then to buy a choice flower or shrub for me. I have another source of pleasure on

a farm I could not have in town — the live stock, from the tiny chickens to the great horse. I love to go out after sunset and smooth the sleek sides of the cows, and speak to them; and have the sheep come and put up their pretty faces for a pat and pleasant word; and watch the cunning little lambs frolic, which the finest town lady could not help laughing at and enjoying. Take it all in all, there are many things worse in life than living on a farm. I do not think because one lives in the country they need not know anything. I enjoy reading as much as any one could, and nice dressing also. Town people are, many of them, like a young man in the *city* of Manchester, who made the remark about one of our neighbors in his hearing, "Oh, he don't know anything — he lives in the country." Now, my private opinion is, *that* gentleman knows more than that young man ever will know.

FARMER'S WIFE