

Eight Hours, I Wish!

My Life on the Family Farm

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L'auteure, une apicultrice, parle de ses expériences et de ses luttes pour gérer sa petite ferme familiale et la nécessité pour elle de recourir à des emplois ailleurs, souvent saisonniers, non-payés et des contrats à temps partiel pour combler son manque à gagner sur sa ferme.

Sometimes I call myself a beginning farmer because I am still learning so much. However, I don't think the statement is accurate. I have been putting in up to 54 hours a week during the harvest season (July and August) for over 20 years. Maybe I should just say that my farm is in transition. Though, between people coming and going, and crops changing over the years, it's been in transition for as long as I can remember!

Let's just say I'm a 30-year-old, single, female farmer. As a fifth generation beekeeper and a third generation farmer in Canada, I am deeply rooted to the land I farm with my parents, an aunt and two uncles. We produce honey. It's a medium-sized farm 30 kms. from Cut Knife, Saskatchewan, the closest town, and 100 kms. from the nearest small city. Cut Knife is where I pick up my mail and buy basic groceries. For anything else, I have to make a trip to the city.

I started working on the family farm half-time during my summer holidays when I was nine years old. By the time I was 12 I was working full-time. At 15 I was directing other

employees and, after 18, I worked in either the spring or fall as well and often both. Basically, I have worked on the farm whenever I've had time and the farm has been able to afford me. It has been almost ten years since I became a minor shareholder in the corporation that is my farm.

Knowing how many years I have been a crucial part of our operation you might expect me to be both respected and acknowledged by society as a farmer. Instead, I am still surprised by the number of people that continue to wonder what I am going to do with the rest of my life! This spring, my aunt and uncle moved to town with the intention of eventually retiring. I then moved into the main farmhouse that had been their home. "Karen is a local entrepreneur" and "What! Don't you have any hopes and dreams?" are some of the comments this move generated.

I am entering the third summer in which I have managed the honeyhouse by myself. Before then my father helped me by fixing machines, filling barrels, and staying on top of the odd jobs needed to keep the farm functioning while I managed the extracting crew. Through those years I have learned many things besides beekeeping, producing honey and managing the people I hire to help. I have acquired a variety of skills including fencing, plumbing, wiring, building with wood as well as

with various types of metal, to name only a few. As I needed to, I also learned the technical language associated with these particular skills. My experience tells me that we all learn skills as we need them, regardless of our gender. Yet, I continue to face obstacles simply because my voice is an octave higher.

Here is a glaring example. Until last summer, my familiarity with belts had been restricted to those related to honey pumps. If a belt started to slip on its pulley, I knew the pump was jammed and proceeded to fix it. But that year we bought a used uncapper with belts on it not related to pumps. The first time I used this machine and began extracting honey, I could smell a slipping belt. I isolated the belt and tried, unsuccessfully, to identify the problem. I just couldn't figure out why this belt was rubbing and chewing up rubber. I tried phoning my father for help, but couldn't reach him. I had to keep extracting while continuing my attempts to locate my father.

I finally was able to explain the problem to my uncle who showed up after lunch. I hoped he could fix it. "Did the machine stop working?" he asked. Then he felt the belt. Since the belt didn't feel hot, he assumed there was no problem even though the machine had been shut down for an hour over lunch. He left without acknowledging that I had indeed ex-

perienced a problem with the machine. However, he did find me the owner's manual before he left.

My next step was to call the company that manufactures the machine. An older woman answered the phone and asked me for the size and number of the belt and told me her husband would call me later. I ordered another belt. I went back to extracting

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and to the smell of burning rubber. At quitting time that night, I still hadn't heard from the company, so I thought that my father and I would have to try to fix it after supper. At that moment the phone rang. I heard my father say, "No, you want to talk to Karen. She called you. I don't know what the problem is. You really need to talk to Karen." At this point he handed over the phone.

I proceeded to explain the problem to the man on the other end who was skeptical that I might know anything. He asked which belt it was. Given that there were only three belts on the whole machine, this shouldn't have been difficult. However, it took several minutes and several misunderstandings before we were talking about the same belt.

Finally, we got to the heart of the problem. He asked me, "How far down is the belt?" I wanted to know what he meant. Did he mean how far down the shaft or how far down to the floor? He repeated the question exactly, only louder this time. Again, I asked for clarification and he went

back to trying to figure out which belt I was talking about. At this point, I handed the phone over to my father in frustration saying, "You talk to him. We're not even talking the same language!" After a few "uh-hums," my father hung up the phone and explained the problem and solution. It turns out that "how far down is the belt" means how deep into the pulley is the belt. The belt was running too deep in the pulley and after a simple adjustment, the problem was solved.

One of the largest difficulties that I face as a woman farmer became clear to me that day. I had one man that couldn't diagnose or fix the problem and therefore assumed I was wrong and I had one man that could not get past my gender and answer direct questions clearly. Both of them treated me like I was stupid. This happens all the time. Men, and even women, discount my knowledge and practical experience because they do not acknowledge me as a legitimate farmer. It isn't enough to have a general knowledge of anything. I need to know exactly what I'm talking about and prove it before the parts person, the equipment manufacturer, or the other beekeeper will even have a conversation with me.

Money is another problem I will continue to tackle for the rest of my life. My family and I are trying to figure out the best way to transfer the farm assets so that my parents, uncles, and aunt can retire without sinking the whole operation. My farm is worth more than one million dollars. The assets of the farm are my family's retirement fund. If we divide the farm three ways, their retirement fund would be approximately \$350,000 each. Unfortunately, I don't have a million dollars in my back pocket to buy the farm. In fact, it is unlikely that I will ever have a million dollars even to the end of my lifetime.

In 2003, *The Canadian Farm Family at Work: Exploring Gender and Generation* was released. It reports on a study initiated by women in the National Farmers Union (NFU) and overseen by the Centre for Rural

Studies and Enrichment (CRSE). The study focused on farm families across Canada researching everything from farm values to decision-making to work load. In this study, 34 per cent of the farms were worth more than a million dollars, but 32 per cent of those farms had a net annual income of less than \$10,000. Fifteen per cent made less than \$20,000 a year (Martz and Brueckner, Table 1.5.4 and Table 1.5.5: 27). Assuming that I work another 40 years, until I'm 70, and that I'm part of this almost 50 per cent of farms making less than \$20,000 a year, I might earn between \$400,000 to \$800,000 during the course of my lifetime. That's not enough to cover the value of the farm now. To preserve this farm, both my parents' generation and mine will have to continue to work hard, plan carefully, and hope for good luck.

Therefore, like many farmers across the country, I am always looking for paid non-farm work. This is defined as work that does not directly relate to the ongoing operation of the farm. For example, a farmer may have a trucking or welding business on the side. While the other business is necessary to pay for the farming, it is not directly related to the production and harvesting of crops. Non-farm work is usually, seasonal, part-time, contract or any other type of piece-meal work that can be fit around the farming season. For several years, I left the farm in the winter to find non-farm work elsewhere. Now I look for work that I can do nearby or at home. There has not been a year that I have not had at least one non-farm job. Many times I've had three.

The Canadian Farm Family at Work: Exploring Gender and Generation conveyed similar experiences. Almost 50 per cent of the adults reported non-farm employment income and 68 per cent of the farms had at least one adult doing non-farm work (Martz and Brueckner, Table 5.1.1, Section 2.3: 29). The number of farm women and men working at non-farm employment has increased by more than 50 per

cent from the 1982 study, *Employment Practices of Farm Women* (Martz and Brueckner, Section 2.4: 30). The main reasons cited for taking on non-farm work were to earn extra money and to supplement farm income (Martz and Brueckner, Table 5.1.9). Not surprisingly, compared to the Canadian population aged 35-44, farm adults in this study worked eleven hours a day and had approximately two hours less leisure time a day (Martz and Brueckner, Table 3.1.22). The study acknowledged that the numbers were likely low as many of the participants did not fill out their time diaries because they were too busy and those that did, tended not fill them out during the busiest times of the year.

I never planned to be a workaholic. Unfortunately, it is a systemic requirement for the occupation. Five years ago, I slept in the honey-house, taking turns monitoring equipment throughout the night. Three summers ago, I was getting up at 5:00am to work at my one non-farm job. At 8:00am I was working at the farm and at 6:00pm, I was driving to Cut Knife to work at my other non-farm job. I tried to be home by midnight so that I could get some sleep before starting again the next day. Last summer, the farm work increased so much that I had to shelve the non-farm work and household work until harvest was over. That meant I washed dishes as I needed them and I sometimes washed the honey-house floors at midnight in preparation for the next day. I continue to pray that these are just anomalies, but I'm just in the throws of this summer and already I have seen 5:00am and midnight several times in succession. My parents also worked incredibly long hours and the adults in the study averaged 77 hours a week of work every day of the year (Martz and Brueckner). My work schedule is thus not an anomaly!

We are taught to be workaholics at an early age. Some people call it child labour, but the Canadian farm population calls it teaching their kids to

farm. They fill in for their parents while their parents are working at non-farm work (Martz and Brueckner, Table 5.1.18), or are responsible for farm tasks because their parents cannot afford to hire help. I wasn't unusual. The youth, from 12 to 19 years old, in the study aged spent 2.7 more hours per day at work and 3.2 less hours per day at leisure than the average 15-18-year-old Canadian (Martz and Brueckner, Table 4.18.10).¹ Their labour is crucial to the survival of Canadian family farms.

Regrettably, the biggest tyrant I must overcome if I hope to carry on farming is the Canadian government. In the 1969 Federal Task Force Report, *Canadian Agriculture in the Seventies*, the Canadian government denounced those who "were loath to recognize the need for a widespread exodus from farming" (31-32). That policy direction has not changed in 35 years. As long as this is the stated goal of the Canadian government, it will persist in gearing government programs and safety nets to benefit the biggest farms and therefore continue the exodus from farming. Likewise, negotiating trade agreements and laws to the detriment of small to medium-sized family farms will advance this policy direction. Like other average Canadian farmers, I will be required to swim upstream just to hold my own.

Sometimes I wish that worker benefits or at least regulations applied to or fit farmers. Instead most aren't applicable and if you're lucky they are not an extra cost. The market does not respect minimum wage requirements. Therefore, most farmers survive on low prices by working longer hours and not hiring help even though they know they are working below minimum wage. Employment Insurance (EI) is only a benefit if you are unemployed. While I am required to pay into EI for both my farming (our farm is a corporation) and for my non-farm work, I do not ever expect a payout. Even though the farm may be unable to pay me any wages for my work, I will still

need to do the farm work. EI defines unemployed as not working rather than not being paid for the work. In fact, according to EI, if I were to claim EI while still doing the farm work, I would just be taking advantage of the system. I could conceivably be laid off from my non-farm work, but because the farm work is always there, I will always still be considered employed. We can buy disability insurance which seems important given the physical nature of our work, but unfortunately I learned this summer that it functions somewhat like EI. My father was on crutches because of surgery and we had to hire extra help to be his legs. However, we still needed him to supervise and direct those employees. Disability insurance was only willing to pay out while he was not working. He was cut off when they found out he was putting in 54 hours a week.

On our farm Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) has been deducted intermittently depending on whether our income reached the bottom baseline. When it was deducted we pay both the employee and employer share as self-employed workers. The retire-

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ment funds for most farmers exist mostly in the assets of their farm that hopefully the next generation will be able to finance. Maternity leave, vacation pay, over-time, medical benefits all have to come out of the same pot that pays your basic wages. As you can imagine, since it often does

not pay minimum wage it does not cover those benefits. If we are lucky our non-farm work will have these benefits. Schools and hospitals are key in rural Canada just so that farmers have access to non-farm work with benefits.

As Canada continues to lose farms, I will lose neighbours and, therefore, my community and access to my non-farm work. I will have to travel farther for basic services, which will increase my workload. It's a never-ending downward spiral.

It's on days like this, that I'm going to bed at 1:00 am and getting up at 6:00am the next day, that I ask myself, "Why am I still fighting to farm?" Then I remind myself that it's the sweetest job in the world. Who else gets to eat fresh honey right off the hive, work outside and inside, make things with sheet metal and wood, be a designer, a gardener, a mechanic, an accountant, a janitor, a personnel manager, and anything else that may be required? I just wish I could get more sleep.

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¹The total hours at work included time spent on education. The extra time spent on education by the participants reflected the bus time that farm children endure every day to attend school.

References

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- Employment Practices of Farm Women* Saskatoon: National Farmers Union, 1982.
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VERÓNICA REYES

Sliced Images: the red and brown frontera

Yesterday I flew in from the Southwest
landed in Buffalo airport via Niagara Falls
Traveled down streets layered in hojas
bleeding menstrual sun on the sidewalks
witnessed every summer evening in the desert

Funny, how Tuesday morning I was in El Paso
tip of the west Texas leaning against Nuevo México,
a dry land that doesn't want mexicanos around.
Today in the evening I stand at the northern edge,
A slice of tierra below the great lake.
I am the four corners swaddled in a red rebozo

Hoy, the Texas heat swims in my veins,
but the New York cold blisters my face
The El Paso sun toasts my brown skin
and the Buffalo thin air numbs my ears
In a coffeehouse heaviness swallows me
I sit there eating, drinking, and etching
each detail of this foreign land into my mind
and I am a poet savoring the world around me
*Outside on the lit corner a poem stands alone
Shivering, hovering beneath the brea sky*

On Chippewa street and Delaware Avenue
The names of city streets mask the First Nations
the way Concordia cemetery marks its grave
sites for native people who have walked this land
near the Canadian bank and the Mexican border
and streets of El Paso bleed invaders' names
San Antonio and Santa Fe burn under el sol

*And the poem stares me in the eye, pleading
Where are my people? And the land?*

All nations have been placed on square plots
The Tigua and Ojibwe live on reserved acres
Their sacred lands, their home buried beneath
concrete, buildings and marred with streets

The poem whispers to the black sky