

Our Family Farm

A Turn of the Century Market Garden in the Mohawk Valley

BY RUTH CLARK

The Move to the Farm

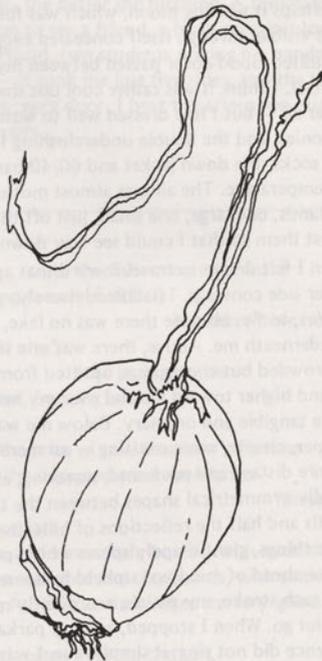
Soon after I was four and my brother was two we moved from our grandmothers house to a farm. My father was going to satisfy his ambition to grow things. My mother was not too enthused, but in those days wives went with their husbands, not always silently. I have a vivid memory of going to what would be our home for the next ten years. My father, brother and myself rode on a wagon. What made this a banner day for my brother and myself was that our father let us drive the horse. That was the first of our horses 'Old Kit' and she must have been quite old then. She died of natural causes and for years we picked wild flowers and put them on her grave.

The house we moved into was quite isolated only one other was within shouting distance, but as both of the houses had been built by an old man trying to please a young bride, they were a little better than some. We had an indoor bathroom, running water (not to drink) a furnace and a telephone. Within a short time electricity was extended that far and we had electric lights. That was as far as modern living had progressed by early 1900's. Our drinking water was carried from a short distance away, crystal clear and ice cold water. Some people still around mention that water to me.

Ours was a market gardening farm and at that time there were only two of these around. The Marshall's had a produce farm on the flats by the Mohawk River. They were the only other. The rest of the farms were dairy farms, even then. People grew alot of hay on those farms. In the wintertime my father and another man would buy hay up from farmers and ship it to New York City. There was great rivalry between the two families in early summer to see who had first tomatoes, melons, etc.

Market Gardening

We sold vegetables through-out the region. We sold more to Johnstown and Gloversville then in Amsterdam because they were more isolated from the main line. The farmers got better prices for their merchandize. The vegetables were picked late in one day and placed on this wagon. The wagon was of a type that was especially built to hold vegetables. The wagon was of a type that was especially built to hold vegetables. There were two side pieces to the body then the center part. What I remember particularly is the side pieces having bushels of tomatoes on and the center filled with bags of corn, a hundred ears of corn in each bag. This was really a wholesale business to the stores. To reach Gloversville early in the day we would have to start out at three o'clock in the morning. Sometimes my father drove and sometimes we had a man working for us drive. I remember I wanted to go so badly one of those trips. So one time my father was driving and he said alright, I'll take you and I went. I was



so tired before we got home because that was a long trip by horse and wagon --- there and back in one day.

The stores were mostly grocery stores. There were no supermarkets of course so they were all individual grocery stores and meat markets. There weren't the restaurants at that time that there are now.

The only other place we sold was to the Antlers Country Club and that was just two fields from our house. At that time it was a high class wealthy club so they specialized in very good food. We would sell maybe a bushel of melons to them a day. Of course, we did also sell to other local people. I have a little account book that shows sales to local people. A hundred pickles a certain size or two hundred pickles. Everyone around bought something from us. There were stores in Ft. Johnson that sold everything and they sold our produce. Our main sales were on the three days a week we went to Gloversville and Johnstown: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

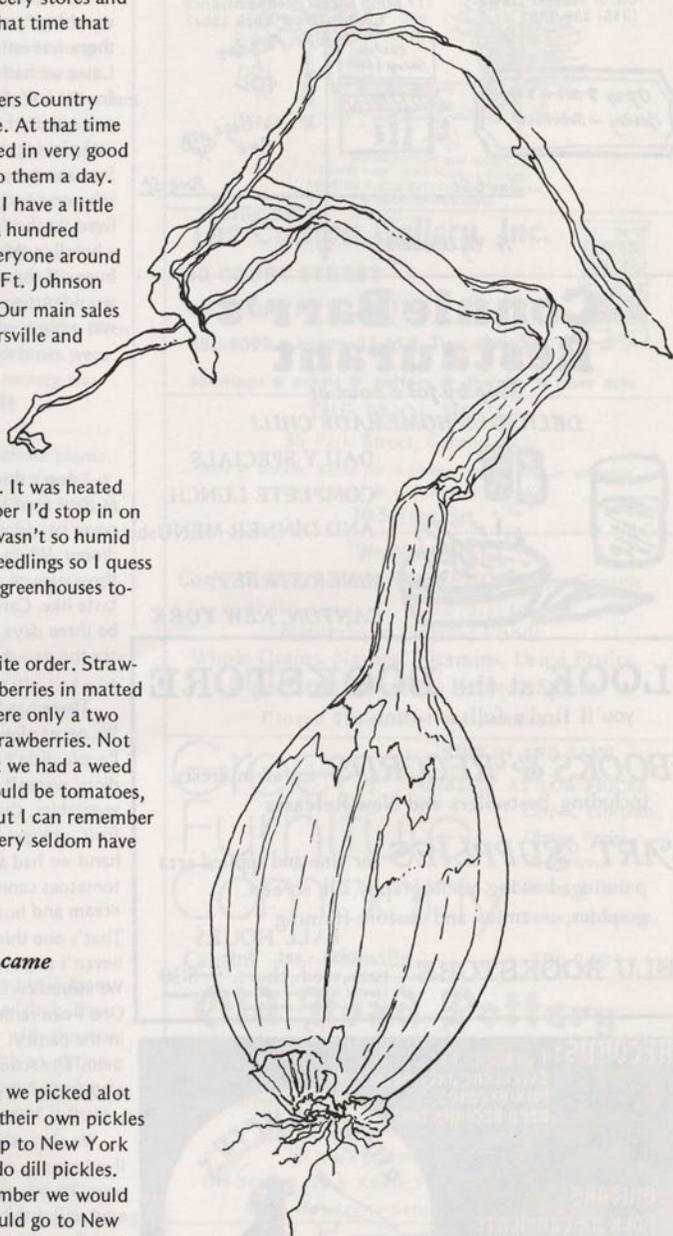
Planting Seasons

We had a nice greenhouse to start seedlings in. It was heated with a coal stove. It was very nice, I can remember I'd stop in on my way home from school I liked it so well. It wasn't so humid as they keep their greenhouses now. It was for seedlings so I guess it didn't need to be as hot and wet as they keep greenhouses today.

When the crops came in they came in a definite order. Strawberries were early in June. We planted our strawberries in matted rows. My father always said that Strawberries were only a two year crop. After that you should replant your strawberries. Not train the runners like they do now. I don't think we had a weed problem. Peas was the earliest big crop. Next would be tomatoes, tomatoes were earlier then. I don't know why but I can remember in late July you would have tomatoes and you very seldom have them now --- maybe on the hill you would.

When the crops came in they came in a definite order.

Pickles would be next. Instead of cucumbers we picked alot smaller cucumbers because so many people did their own pickles then. We had a certain size that they used to ship to New York City to one of these places where they used to do dill pickles. They all had to be the same size and I can remember we would pick them and put them on a train and they would go to New York City. Corn was always later --- corn was in August. Late in the fall we would pick a whole load of cabbage. We had this man who was working for us. He was a very good peddler and he would take the load of cabbage to Amsterdam when it was time for people to be making sourkraut and he would just go along the street and say, 'Cabbage for sale ', and sell a whole load. We also had onions and beets but not in any quantity. Those would be smaller items.



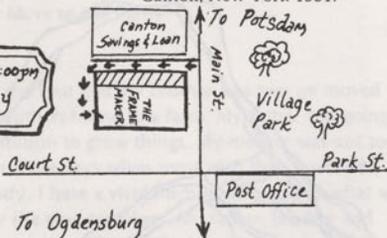
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Farming Methods

During summer we spent nearly all waking hours outdoors. We spent a lot of time with my father and I know I absorbed through watching how to plant, cultivate and harvest. In the early years there was only the one horse and my father plowed the land himself. Later we had more stock and the horses and cows supplied manure for the soil. My father also always bought fertilizer. Superphosphate was one that I remember. The kids in town would work weeding and picking. We had a wheel-hoe and up close it was hand weeding. Squash and pumpkins were grown for our own use. That soil wasn't too good for potatoes. I can remember buying potatoes when I lived on the farm. We did try and grow them some years. This is a horrible thing. We would get maybe a penny to pick the potatoe bugs off the potatoes and put them in a can. At night my father would put gasoline on the potatoe bugs and set it on fire. That was a big event for us to burn the potatoe bugs.

Home Storage and Diet

I don't think the vegetables in stores today are quite as good as they used to be. They were fresher than they are today. We never would eat corn that had been picked three hours before dinner. When I see people coming out of the supermarket with those ears of corn I don't believe they know what corn should taste like. Can you imagine how old that corn must be? It must be three days, it can't be any less than that. Corn and peas those are the two things that people never should eat when they are old.

There has been a change in diet. We had leaf lettuce for ourselves. We never planted that for sale and there was no head lettuce then. People didn't eat salads as much as they do today. I suppose our diets weren't as good. In the winter we had to eat all canned vegetables, there were no fresh vegetables then. You could get fruit, oranges and bananas, but that was about it. On the other hand we had all our own things. We had maybe a hundred jars of tomatoes canned, corn and other vegetables canned. We had milk, cream and butter that we made. We had a root cellar, a dirt cellar. That's one thing though, in the middle of the winter the potatoes weren't as good as they are now they would be getting withered. We stored certain foods in our pantry. One year before World War One I can remember having a barrel of sugar and a barrel of flour in the pantry. That was unusual but we did buy in larger quantities then. The roads weren't always plowed in the winter. It would be a couple of days before the road was opened.

We always ate a lot of pork because we had pigs. A family that lived near us ran a meat market so we could always get meat anyway. They would sometimes take care of getting us meat in the winter, get the pork and smoke the hams and all of that.

We had an icehouse. They cut the ice in January and February on a little pond up there, put it in the icehouse with sawdust. We could keep things on ice in the summertime. It had enough ice to last through the summer. We had no refrigerator. We didn't even have an ice refrigerator up there. Anything we wanted to keep cold we kept in there. It wasn't any great distance from the house.

The Summertime Events

Highlights of the summer were first the school picnic at Akin Park. The school picnic was usually held the week after school ended. Next would be the Fourth of July which would be a family get together. We had a large screened porch and a long table was set for dinner. We had fricasee chicken, biscuits and gravy, new small potatoes, new pears, a salad --- custard ice cream --- homemade, frozen by hand, - Angel food cake with whipped cream, and always a watermelon. Some years my mother made root beer and then a few bottles were saved for this celebration. The root beer was kept in the icehouse. After an afternoon of eating and gossiping by the older women, play by the children and card playing by the men, darkness was approaching and it was time for the fireworks. My uncle ran a store in the village and all the fireworks left were brought up to the farm. After our fireworks were over it was time to watch for the display from the country club. These were the years that large fortunes were made in manufacturing in the Mohawk Valley and money was spent freely so this display was worth waiting for.

The next big summer activity was the Sunday School picnic. This was usually held at the 'watering trough woods' named of course for the old wooden trough. Water was piped into it from a spring nearby. All I remember from these picnics was the lemonade --- always presided over by one of the Sunday School teachers, described by the bad boys: 'Lemonade, made in the shade, by an old maid'.

Labor day was the time to attend the County Fair. This is one event that still survives over the years, expanded greatly and with auto races now, where sixty years ago there were only trotting races. After the fair summer was over for the children as school started the first week in September.



The Move Back to the Village

We left the farm just after the trucks started coming in from the Albany Public Market. It never was as good after that. That wasn't the reason we left. There was a little trouble with the man who had the lease. Dad had a lease for ten years with an option to buy which was not renewed by the man who owned the land. They got a good price from the cementary. That's what is there now a cementary. That was where the farm was once.

From the very first my brother and I loved life in the country. My mother, however, never really was happy. She didn't like being away from neighbors and the chit - chat common to all small towns. She never worked outside the house, never did any of the things a farmer's wife did. In fact she just was not a farmer's wife. For her the move back to the village was welcome.

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