

# THE FARM AT ARGYLE



Our first motherless summer seems to drag on forever. No longer are there picnics planned or leisurely trips to the beach to be enjoyed. At age seven, my resources are limited. My older sister Barbara is far more mobile, and if marooned at home, is inevitably curled up with a book. It was a lonesome time for me.

A surprise invitation arrives from Mother's Aunt Eva, a matriarch living on a thriving farm in upstate New York. A whole community of Scots farmers had settled in the lush valley of the headwaters of the Hudson River and are still flourishing generations later. The Stevenson farm located on the outskirts of Argyle, is operated by Aunt Eva's sons, Will and Howard. Cousin Will married a city girl of Dutch forebears. They are childless which makes the invitation more remarkable.

It is deemed that a simple train journey straight up the Hudson River to Fort Edward is within the ability of Barbara to supervise. Cousin Will will meet us. Father plans to drive up for us at the conclusion of our visit. The New York Central Railroad hugs the east bank of the river, and makes a spectacular journey. This excitement, plus our concern regarding mutual recognition, has us slightly on edge. However, upon arrival, Cousin Will's

acumen is equal to the challenge. We are soon identified and tucked into a buggy. He “gee-ups” and we are off at a brisk trot. Cousin Will has a ruddy, weather-beaten appearance and smells comfortably of the out-of-doors. His jocular sense of humor puts us at ease.

Before long, we turn up a drive to a red brick house. Barns loom about here and there. A well and a small brick building invite exploration. We are welcomed by Aunt Eva, who is angular with grey hair screwed into a tight bun, relieved by a frizz of bangs across her forehead.

Cousin Letta is softly rounded; her prematurely white hair is fluffy about her pink cheeks; Cousin Howard, a bachelor, is shyly inarticulate. An inviting meal awaits us. There is a lovely pink home-cured ham. No defatted, water added nonsense about this ham; it is presented in all its natural glory, fragrant and delectable. Scalloped potatoes and candied yams are a tasty accompaniment. But oh! That freshly picked corn-on-the-cob dripping with newly churned butter is a delight. We scarcely make a dent in the chocolate layer cake.

A tour of the house follows. The spacious kitchen is dominated by an enormous wood-burning stove. There is a sitting area and a special sink adjacent to the side door for quick cleanups upon arrival from outdoor labors. The house stretches on back through pantry, laundry, woodshed, and out-house, all connected, forming a long tail. Off the dining room is a pleasant sitting room with doors to two bedrooms. The entire front of the house is occupied by a formal parlor which contains very stern-looking Victorian furniture. I soon learn to avoid the black horsehair sofa as it inflicts lethal wounds to the bare legs. Stairs ascend from the front hall to four bedrooms. Ours contains a high double bed with stairs to facilitate the climb. There is a washstand containing more crockery than we know what to do with.

The next morning, a nose-twitching aroma drifts up from the kitchen, which indicates a more promising fare than Kellogg’s corn flakes. We are tempted with homemade sausages accompanied by light-as-a-feather hot cakes swimming in local maple syrup. We find a new face at the table. A town boy, Lawrence McWharter, rides out on his bicycle every morning to work as a hired hand.

The milk wagon is loaded and ready for us to ride along to the cheese factory. Barbara soon inveigles the reins from Cousin Howard; we make

the trip in record time. Haying is in progress, which requires considerable supervision on our part. We ride perched on top of the hay until arrival at the barn. Then we have to scramble to the front seat to avoid being fork-lifted to the top of the barn.

The livestock warrants our inspection. I am particularly fond of the pigs and trot along at feeding time. I find to my horror that the little brick building is not a child's playhouse, but the final setting in the ignoble death of my little darlings...the smokehouse! We are sent to fetch the cows for the evening milking, a simple matter of opening the gates since each cow knows exactly where she is going and which stanchion is hers.

The first rainy day shows us how hard the two women work in the house. After washing the breakfast dishes, there are the bedrooms to care for. Chamber pots and slop jars require emptying, water pitchers need filling. The kerosene in the lamps has to be replenished, wicks trimmed and glass chimneys washed.

We are sent out with a basket to gather fruit for pies and root vegetables for noon dinner. By the time we return, Cousin Letta is already rolling out the pie crust. We have to scurry to wash and cut up the fruit. Rural electrification is many years away, so oven temperatures are guessed at. The spring house keeps food cool, but it lacks the convenience of a nearby fridge. Bread is usually rising in a large pan behind the stove. Though supplies are often at hand, they are in a primitive state. Chickens, or any fowl, have to be caught, killed, and plucked. Lamb, hams, and bacon are available. One has to disassociate one's self from the pet running about on the hoof to the meat so artfully prepared for the table.

Recreation takes the form of church on Sundays. Cousin Letta plays the organ in the Dutch Reformed Church. The rest of us go to the Presbyterian one. The church grounds offer a row of open stables to shelter the horses from the elements. When the Chautauqua tent goes up, we hope for a special treat. The entertainment proves to be more like a revival meeting than vaudeville at the Hippodrome. A dependable pleasure is the county fair. The eight passenger Buick touring car is unveiled from its place in the back barn. We quickly lay claim to the jump seats. On a fine day, it is unnecessary to raise the top and install the isinglass curtains. Aunt Eva and Cousin Letta outdo themselves in providing picnic fare.

A towering coconut layer cake vies with meringue pies for top billing. Hampers of fried chicken snuggle up to the potato salad. We are off in a cloud of dust for Hudson Falls and unknown thrills.

The appointed day for Father's arrival is at hand. We are packed and make our emotional departure. In retrospect, the benefits of a farm visit are enormous to children raised in the suburbs. We have a deeper respect for the food so casually delivered to our kitchen door. Several return visits add to our appreciation of rural life. Our farm finale is played out a few years later, but that is another story.