

LIFE on the farm

By Dieter Krieg, Editor

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It's true. A woman's work is never done.

I've become gradually aware of that fact, and each year that belief is reinforced more and more.

Now, there are those ladies who let the dishes pile up in the sink while they're watching soap operas instead of suds, and their work - to no one's surprise - is never done. Then there are those who fuss too much about fingernails, hairdos, complexion, figures, etc. and they never catch up with their chores.

My mother is one woman who seemingly is always behind with her work too, but it's not because she watches too much television or indulges in too many naps.

She just simply has too much to do.

Long after supper has settled into the depths of satisfied tummies, and many another housewife can begin to relax, my mother changes into her work clothes and walks to the barn. Her path is lit only by the moon and bright stars. Although the night is still young, the day is quite old. There is still lots of work to be done.

Her destination is the calf barn. A dozen - sometimes several dozen - calves welcome her with a chorus of distinctive bawls. There are strong and weak voices in the crowd. The

more vigorous ones are quite vocal; the weaker ones bawl only meagerly, and the very ill calves can only muster a faint squeal for help.

Mom hears them all, even if they make no sound at all. She's dedicated to her work, which is why she's still at it late at night. The sparkling stars above mirror her devotion.

In a small room of the calf barn, an electric hot-plate is plugged in and a kettle of tea is coming to a boil. A pot of oatmeal sits nearby. Strange as it may seem, they're both "special menu" items for weak calves. Mom has doctored thousands of the cute little creatures and has found both tea and oatmeal to be helpful.

Colostrum and other milk which is not potable have already been brought over from the milking barn, where 10 machines were pulsating only a half hour earlier. The men's work has ended for the day, but a big job is just beginning for Mom as she prepares to feed her many calves.

Some calves receive colostrum, others get whole milk, and still others get a mixture of warm water and milk replacer. A few get the special order of tea or oatmeal. All get full measures of attention.

The calves show their appreciation in the usual ways, depending largely on their state of health.

While Mom doesn't like having a bucket slammed into her legs, with the contents covering her from the lap on down, that hearty thrust of the head is at least a sign of vigor. She doesn't have to worry about those frisky individuals. With tails slapping from side to side, and heads straining eagerly to get a taste of the warm milk, there's no doubt those calves appreciate their feeding.

Love is the key. Mom loves them all: from the strongest to the weakest and cleanest to dirtiest. She'll spend a half hour feeding a single calf if that's what it takes. In between she doctors them with medications and grooming. She's a veterinarian, nurse, nutritionist, and cleaning lady.

The night grows longer as she continues to go about her work in very methodical fashion. I might think she's done, but no, she's not.

She makes sure that all of the dry feed is within easy reach of those that are to have it. A final check is made to be certain that every calf has as clean a bed as can possibly be provided. If there's a draft, or it's cold, something is done about that too.

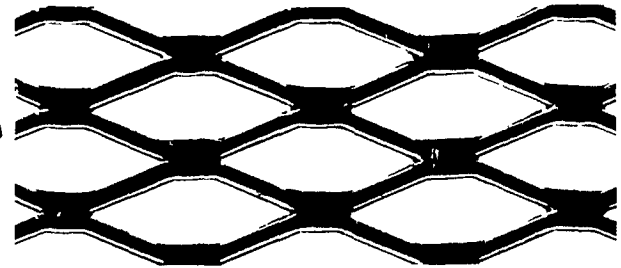
But before any of those final rounds are made, one other important task needs to be taken care of: 16 cats are waiting for their milk and food.

Missions accomplished, Mom turns off the lights and returns to the path which is lit only by the moon and stars. It won't be long before the same routine starts all over again in the morning. And just because this portion of her work is taken care of, it doesn't mean that all of her work is done. There's mending to do, meals to be planned, letters to be written, plants to be watered...

A woman's work is never done. My mother's duties are as plentiful as the stars.

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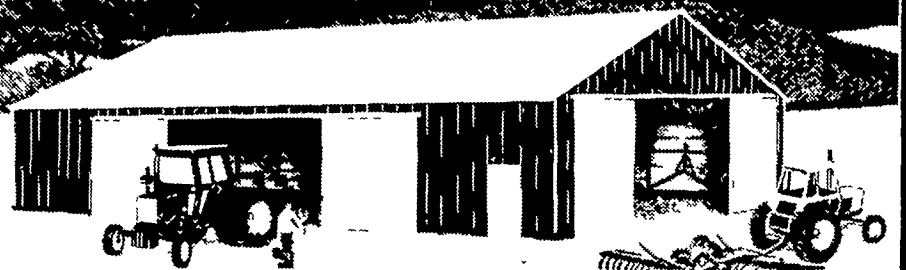
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