

There's no easy start in farming

BY SHEILA MILLER

FRYSTOWN — Getting started and staying in farming is not, nor has it ever been, an easy task. It takes commitment, hard work, scrimping, scraping, and a certain faith that things can work out.

Under the best of conditions and 'luck', the effort to make a go of it as a farmer is enough to make all but the stout-hearted throw up their hands in defeat. For those who also face the agony inflicted by drought, accidents, and disease, the struggle to survive requires an almost superhuman strength and desire to go on.

One couple who battled the elements and obstacles confronting the new farmer and emerged the victor is Carl and Eva Bross. After a 20-year, uphill fight, this Berks County couple can be considered successful dairy farmers.

They aren't, however, the largest operation in that county—with 112 acres of corn and 100 acres in alfalfa hay and pasture. Nor are their 70 head of grade Holstein at the top of the DHIA list—with a rolling average of 14,719 pounds milk and 519 pounds of fat. But this couple serves as an inspiration to their children and those who know them that it is possible to make an honest living on the land.

"No start is easy," confides Carl in a quiet voice, tinted with a German accent. His start in farming on his own began at the age of 25 when he bought a 65-acre farm (the present home farm) in 1957.

"I was operating with borrowed capital then," he recalls, "and that's still a problem today, making it hard for anyone to get started. It's a time of high interest rates and depressed prices in all of agriculture, and it's beginning to reach into the dairy industry."

The question of profitability in farming is not a new one for Carl who answers it with stubborn optimism. "The land is there to till and plant and to do what I know how to do. There's a certain blessing we seek, and the other things seem to fall into place."

Carl began his soil stewardship career with a sound background, having worked on his father's neighboring farm where they raised chickens and milked 26 cows.

"When I bought my first farm, my father was ready to slow down so I took over the herd of cows," he recalls.

Before becoming a land owner in his own right, however, Carl was called to serve his country. Because of his religion, he was assigned to alternative service, working with other Brethren volunteers in Europe. It was during his stay in Kassel, Ger-

many, where they were rebuilding a school, that he met and became friends with Eva. A native of that war-torn city, she was working as a nurse at the time.

Carl returned to the U.S. after his two years of service was up, but traveled back to Kassel at Christmas time in 1958.

"That's when the chemistry started boiling between us," Eva laughs. "We wrote only one friendship letter to each other after Carl had gone back to the U.S. It surprised me to see him again that Christmas...but in February we were engaged. Three days later, Carl left to go home to farm. We were separated for nine months until Carl came back on November 30, 1959. We were married on December 19 and sailed for the U.S. on January 3, 1960.

"I was from the city, so coming here to the farm was so much to adjust to," remembers Eva. "But now I love the farm probably more than someone who grew up on one. I would never go back to the city."

Eva's first impression of the U.S. farmland as she came to this country as a newly-wed German bride still stands out in her memory.

"It was amazing to see field after field of corn — it was so tall. When I left Germany there was no corn. But when I returned for a visit in 1977, German farmers were growing corn for silage, possible with breakthroughs and progress in genetics."

With his new bride and first farm, Carl began farming in earnest in 1960. In order to expand his operation, he purchased a nearby farm adding 95 acres to his original 65. And for three years, the Brosses were farming with good fortune at their side.

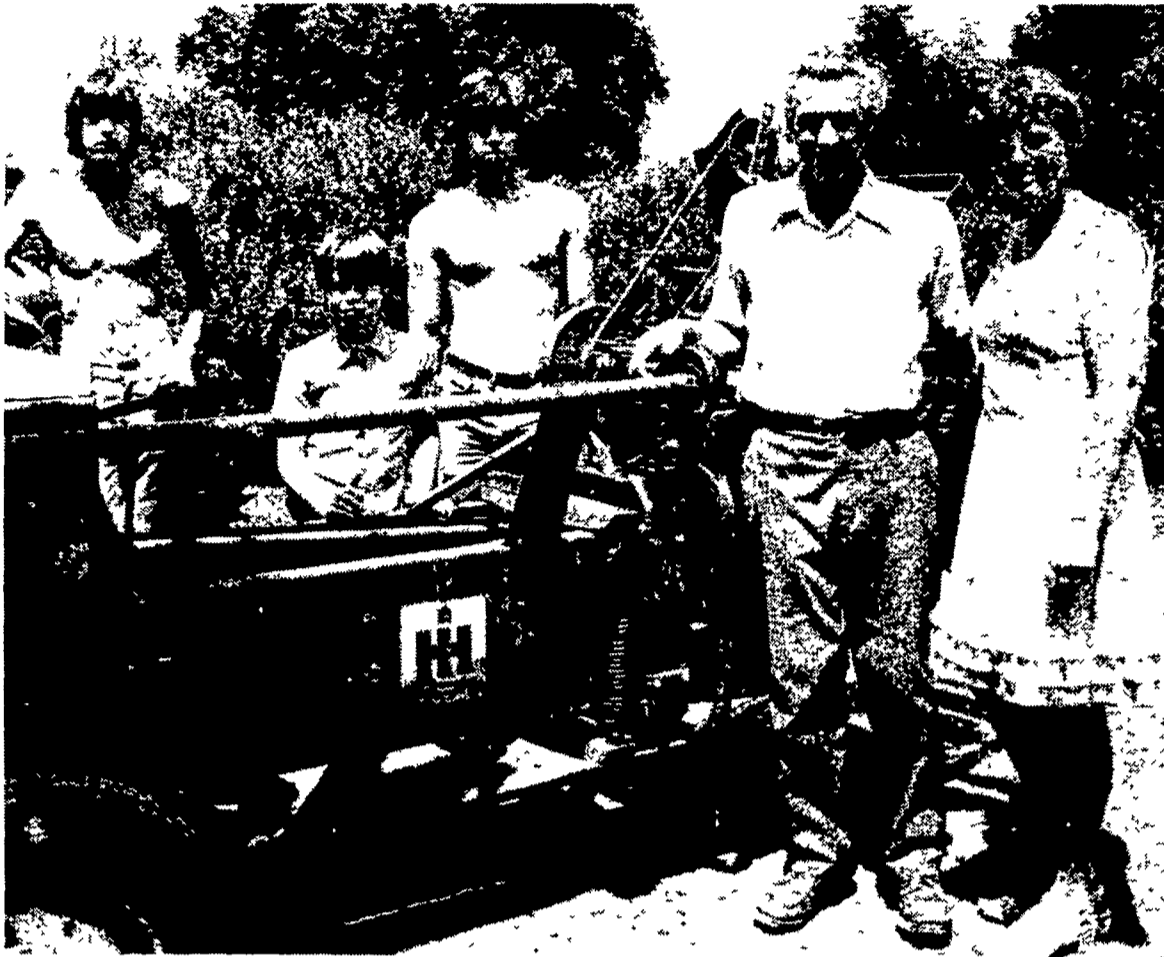
Then, from 1963 to 1967, a severe drought shriveled the crops and dwarfed the corn in fields where it had stood like giants before.

"In this country, everything goes to extremes," exclaims Eva. "It made the beginning very hard. We had to buy feed. I had to get used to thousands of dollars of obligations which was something new. Suddenly we were confronted with an emergency — planting, purchasing, borrowing."

But the drought ended and the Brosses were still farming. Their crops, herd, and three sons, Stephan, Dennis, and Christopher, were growing strong...Then, in 1973, "the props fell," Eva recalls.

That August, as Carl was pushing some fallen trees onto a heap with a frontloader mounted on his tractor, a freak accident left him with a broken back and pelvis.

"I had Chris, who was two years old then, riding on the tractor seat with me and we were pushing the



Carl and Eva Bross, right, began farming near Frystown, Berks County over twenty years ago. Despite drought, accidents, and other almost overwhelming dilemmas, they continue to persevere in the dairy business so

that sons Dennis, far left, 18, Christopher, 10, and Stephan, 20, are free to choose a career in agriculture, whether farming or engineering, or any other profession they want to follow.



The Brosses work hard at farming, having learned a number of hard lessons along the way, not unlike many of their fellow farm neighbors. Their operation is not the most modern, with their milking still being done in

stanchions — what they term their "make-shift parlor" — in one-third of the barn. Replacement heifers are raised in the remaining part.



Eva shares a moment with Chris as they practice a difficult duet on the families' second-hand piano. Having experienced the devastating effects of WW II in her native Germany, Eva remembers the generosity of

the Americans and French who sent food to the demolished cities, like Kassel. "The Quaker speise brought us raisin buns to eat when we had only bread baked with sawdust — a sweet memory in misery."

trees together. For some reason, I decided to set Chris off and a few minutes later I was pinned under a tree that somehow came up over the front of the tractor. Luckily my nephew was there and pulled the tree off me with a chain. I couldn't breathe."

"Our son Dennis ran home to me," adds Eva, "and cried for me to call an ambulance."

The accident put Carl in the hospital for several weeks, and prevented him from farming for three months until everything mended. That fall, fellow church members and neighbors pitched in to keep the fieldwork going and made sure the cows were milked morning and evening while Eva stayed with Carl, helping out in the barn when she could.

With a heart full of gratitude, Eva recounts the day when 60 farm neighbors traveled from miles around to harvest 100 acres of corn silage.

They came at 7:30 in the morning and worked until 9 that night. While they were tilling the trench, Carl insisted on watching

— sitting on the bed of a pickup truck they drove along side the trench...Farming is his life," Eva says affectionately.

Just when it seemed things had to get better, the Brosses felt the sting from their milk marketing cooperative's financial plight. There was no milk check for them in 1974 and the pressures for meeting the farm's obligations to creditors added to their hardship.

"What's happened to us during the past 20 years could scare us away from farming, but we've found somewhere, somehow, things will work out. We survived the drought, Carl's accident, and the milk cooperative's bankruptcy. We lost thousands of dollars, but we're still farming," Eva proclaims.

A recent bout with mastitis dropped the Bross' average milk production by about 2,000 pounds. This setback was overcome by updating their feed supply and milking system.

The cows are now fed a 20 per-