

Victorian Farm Wife Featured in Farm Show Display

BY SALLY BAIR
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A visit to the exhibit by the Pennsylvania Farm Museum of Landis Valley will offer a nostalgic trip for some Farm Show visitors, and an educational experience for others.

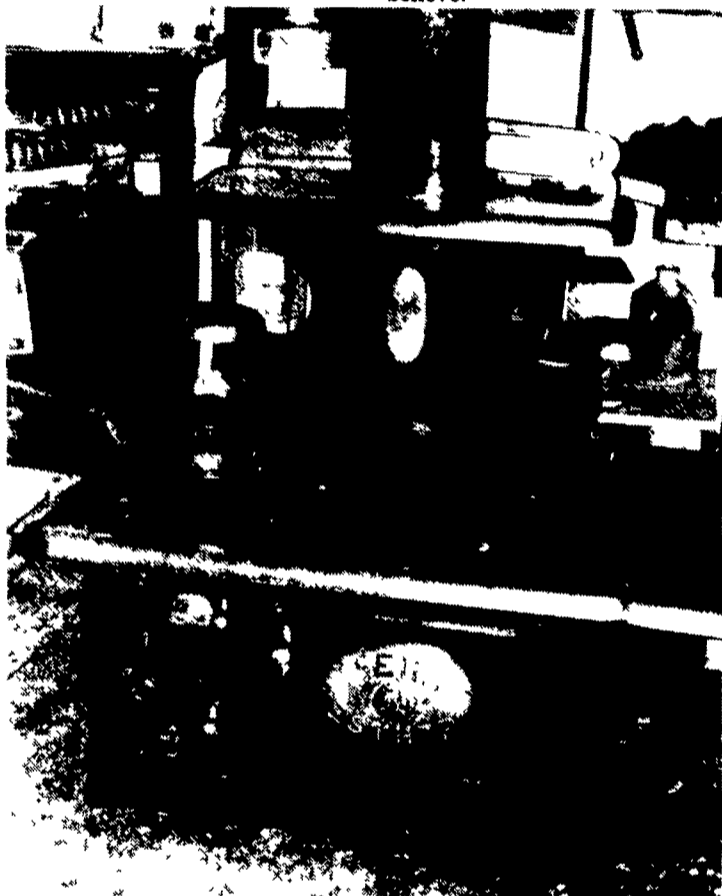
In a departure from their customary displays, the museum staff is featuring the Victorian farm wife and offering an insight into the life of a farm wife from about 1880 to 1910. There will be readily recognizable tools and household equipment along with the "latest" in vacuum cleaners and washing machines.

Kim Becker, an anthropology major at Franklin and Marshall, helped prepare the exhibit as part of an internship which she served at the museum during the fall

term. Kim says, "We wanted to emphasize how valuable the work was that the farm wife did. She was doing basically the equivalent of what the male was doing."

Indeed, a quick glance at the variety of equipment used by the Victorian farm wife quickly establishes the wide range of activities which fell to her to do. There was not just house work, which took many hours for the simplest tasks, but there was also gardening and often field work as well. On most farms there was the added chore of turning milk into cheese and butter for family consumption.

Nadine Steinmetz, a curator for the museum, says, "Things weren't nearly as simple and easy in the good old days as we like to believe."



A wood stove stood prominently in the farm kitchen and was used not just for heating, but also for cooking. This stove was painstakingly cleaned of its rust so it could make an appearance at the Farm Show.



Turning milk into other dairy products took a lot of time for the Victorian farm wife and her family. Here is the butter working table and the butter churn, both of which would have been used regularly on the farm.



Kim Becker poses with the sign she painted to accompany the Farm Museum's exhibit at the Farm Show. "The Victorian Farm Wife" will depict many of the items used by farm wives in their daily chores around the 1900's.

The farm wife's day started early, and she rose before her husband to prepare a hearty breakfast for him to start his day. Of course, three hearty meals were expected, along with canning and preserving. The cook stove played a large part in the farm home, and it will also figure prominently in the Farm Museum display at the Farm Show. The stove on display is a Penn Esther, manufactured in Reading, about 1880.

Kim proudly relates that she worked at restoring the stove to its present condition from a very rusty one. The project took several days, and Kim says she used very fine steel wool and turpentine, an approved museum method of working on an old cast iron stove.

Kim points out that the stove would have been used on a regular basis throughout the year, and they were mostly kept running with coal.

Dairy items are also dominant in the exhibit, reflecting their importance in a farm home. There will be a butter churn and butter working table, in addition to a cheese separator, a butter press and a cheese press. The butter press is especially interesting, because it allows a decorative stamp to be added to the butter with just the press of a lever.

Washing the family clothing was another chore that took a lot of time in that era, and a washing display will feature some of the equipment a farm wife would have used. On display will be a copper wash boiler, in which clothes were actually boiled to help in the cleaning process. There will also be washboards, but there is also a "washing machine" of an early variety.

The washing machine is a half moon tub on legs, with a lever allowing the user to move the barrel to produce a sloshing effect to help clean the clothes. The machine had to have the water dipped out, or had to be tipped over to empty the water. There is also a wringer on display, and, of course, a bar of lye soap which was a necessity.

One of the more interesting "appliances" Kim found in her research is a very early vacuum cleaner. It is a hand powered upright cleaner, manufactured around 1900. The instructions for use are still on the machine, and one of the more succinct directions is, "Never pound on machine," Nadine says, "It was really a boost, and would be like any new gadget."

Nadine points out, "The work load did not decrease with advances in time. All that is different is the technology, which was not

that advanced. Work time was not that much diminished."

Wall displays will include tools used in the garden such as a shovel, a grubbing hoe and a root chopper. There will also be a carpet beater and a bamboo broom, and a picture of women working in that era. Nadine says the photographs were made from original glass plates which were in the possession of the museum.

Of course food preparation took

a large part of the day, and there is a walnut gateleg table which holds a saw cutter, a wooden tray for drying and rye straw baskets. Another item on display will be a charcoal steam iron, dating from about 1880, a step up from the irons heated on the stove.

There will be a baby in a high chair, since child care consumed a lot of time for a farm wife. The high chair has no tray, and Nadine

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Homestead Notes



Nadine Steinmetz, curator at the Farm Museum, demonstrates the use of a "modern" hand powered vacuum cleaner, which took a strong hand to operate.