

Meet Karen Nesbit:

Fulltime Farm Wife and Store Owner

BY DONNA McCONAUGHEY
MARCHAND — Businesswomen are not unusual in the 1980's. Farm women who own and/or operate businesses are also becoming more common today. But, a farm wife who combines "full-time" involvement in the family dairy farm with "full-time" ownership of a rural general store is not common.

However, like many farm wives, Karen Nesbit of northern Indiana County describes her life as "dull, nothing special." This typical spirit of managing whatever comes along, seems necessary and looks interesting is taken in stride by Karen as just another aspect of a busy life-style.

The Nesbit family farms approximately 500 acres, of which they own 200 acres. The farm is devoted to raising high quality Holstein cows. The milking string currently includes 85 cows with an additional 20 heifers due to freshen soon. Bra-Mar farms is known for producing type cattle, as well as staying on the top of Indiana county DHIA lists for several years.

Karen Nesbit, the mother of four teenagers, helps with milkings and nearly all other aspects of a busy dairy farm. In addition, she has owned and managed, since 1979, one of the few rural general stores remaining in Western Pennsylvania.

Located in the small rural community of Marchand, this store gives one the feeling of going back into the early 1800's the minute you walk in the door.

The store has been dated to at least 1836 and still contains the original counters, stairway, and

bannister, flooring, etc. It has served the people of northern Indiana and southern Jefferson counties in many ways over nearly 150 years. For several years area farmers bought livestock feed and supplies at the store came to the post office, bought grocery and food items and caught up on local news by visiting the Marchand store.

Today you can't buy livestock feed, but you can find the typical "general store" variety of items for sale. And it is still a good place to catch up on the news — especially on a cold, winter evening.

But, how did a farm wife get involved in buying and managing a store? The store is located on property adjacent to, and only a few feet away from the Nesbit home. In 1979, Jerry Nesbit learned that the store contents were for sale. Upon further investigation he found that the property and building could be purchased also. The Nesbits were concerned that the property should be owned by someone who would continue to maintain it in good condition.

Karen vividly recalls the evening that Jerry walked into the barn as she finished milking and said, "well, you have yourself a store". She remembers just as vividly her first thought, "what am I going to do with it?"

As usual, Karen Nesbit did not back down when faced with a challenge. Her five years experience as a clerk for a Thoroughfare market provided an excellent background for her new responsibility.

Karen has total responsibility for

the store. When they purchased the property, Jerry "handed it over" to her. In fact, "he doesn't even know how to run the cash register."

One of the steps to combine this new business venture with the total farm operation was taken when Nesbits began selling raw milk through the store. In fact, the "farm fresh milk" is the feature that brings many of their customers from as far as 15 miles away.

The clientele is primarily local people who pick up a few grocery items between "trips to town". There are a few people who shop at the Marchand store for most of their family's groceries. Karen is quick to point out that she stocks the store according to the requests of her customers.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of this management principle is the wide variety of snuff and chewing tobacco stocked. It seems that each local farmer has his own "brand". They make their request and Karen tries to comply.

In addition to a good supply of their favorite "brand", local farmers can often find friends and neighbors gathered in the store on cold or rainy evenings just to "shoot the breeze". Displayed



A hobby of Karen's is collecting and refinishing antique furniture. She is especially proud of this oak secretary which dates back to the 1920's.



The Marchand General Store serves as a farm market for raw milk produced on Bra-Mar Farm and is one of the few remaining country stores in western Pennsylvania.

near the cash register are newspaper clippings of neighbors who have recently been noted for various accomplishments and coloring book pictures carefully made by young customers. There are even jars of penny candy to appeal to the kids.

Karen has made a very strong effort to foster this type of community atmosphere and has a desire to maintain the authenticity of the store. She admits to being an antique buff and thoroughly enjoys the opportunity to investigate and build on her knowledge of how the store has developed through the years.

This store was originally owned by Dr. Marrow, the last physician to maintain a rural practice in the area. Upon his death in 1936 it passed on to his foster daughter from whom the Nesbits purchased the store.

Displayed above the shelves are the original cash drawer, telephone, and cash register from the store. A long wooden bench located in front of the counter and pot belly stove have seen many a generation of farmers come and go. Also prominent are Karen's collection of milk bottles which includes a rare glass cottage cheese bottle. Proudly displayed is a "Red Man Tobacco" advertising

sign which was found in the building when the Nesbits purchased it.

Karen also found store ledgers from the 1800's. Wouldn't it be nice if you could still buy two yards of calico for 12 cents or three pounds of coffee for 60 cents? Two dozen eggs sold for 12 cents and 100 pounds of dried apples brought 3 cents. In those days exchanges were often made, such as bringing butter to the store and taking home eggs.

As is usually the case, there are many stories carried through generation after generation regarding events in years past. It is believed that one of the United States Presidents stood on the end of the counter in the Marchand store to deliver a campaign ad-

dress. This certainly seems feasible when one learns that Dr. Marrow, store owner, served as a legislator in the late 1800's. There are even several volumes of legislative records from the 1890's stored on the second floor of the store.

Many folks enjoy history and antiques but business is business and the bottom line is always — can you make a profit.

Karen Nesbit excels in this area also. Business has more than tripled at the Marchand store since 1979 when the Nesbits purchased it. Although Karen manages the store, the entire family shares in this as they do in all other aspects of the farm.

The Nesbit family consists of

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Homestead Notes