

On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



If I didn't know better, I'd declare sometimes they were figments of my imagination.

Their presence is more sensed than seen. Like classic ghosts, though, they leave behind distinctive clues. Objects moved around. Clutter strewn about. Cupboards and refrigerators emptied of their contents. Fingerprints.

You know they're there. But just try and find them when you need 'em.

The Phantom Farmers.

Springtime planting season stirs their elusive activities with renewed frenzy.

They stir on schedule, early every morning, leaving currents of air swirling through the kitchen in

their wake. Their nebulous travels seems to center around in the area of the milk jug and powdered chocolate mix, the coffee pot, the fruit, cookies, and granola bars.

Soon after, they turn noisy, marked by banging, clanging, pounding and roaring sounds echoing from various directions around the farm. On occasion, then even clank and rattle chains, the heavy sort used to tow stalled or stuck equipment.

Hammering from the direction of the farm shop tells tales phantom fix-it sessions. And a steady clatter of drag chain and heifers crowding around the feed bunk says a phantom is running silage. But just try and find one of 'em.

The phantoms whisk by on tractors, bundled in hooded sweat-shirts and coveralls if the day is cool and windy. Though their faces are a blur at best, familiarity with clothing patterns usually offers fairly-dependable identity

clues.

Sometime I pick up the office phone and hear a phantom voice on the barn extension hooked up to a vet, equipment parts dealer or feed firm. Or the sound of foot-falls overhead or a slamming basement door hints that a phantom has again crossed the threshold.

Yet, even with my fastest 50-yard-dash time, or leaping two steps at a time, the elusive presence will have vanished in the time it takes to gallop that direction and holler, "Hey, are you there?"

They aren't.

Sometimes they leave behind solid evidence of their passage. Dirty boots. Dirty dishes. Dirty clothes. Greasy bearings or torn sections of hydraulic hose. Hunks of dairy barn manure or size 12 muddy footprints. (Three size-12 pairs of feet can leave a LOT of phantom tracks.)

And phantom notes. Like "Need two plowshares." "Order minerals." "Bossy in heat." "Planting at Grandma's," or "Won't be back for lunch."

This last usually found after I've just finished putting lunch together. One thing for certain. Though elusive and barely glimpsed, phantoms do consume

staggering quantities of food, albeit at strange hours and sometimes strange places far from the kitchen table.

Through this most intense season of the phantom phenomenon, packed lunches and thermal-jugs of lemonade disappear from the kitchen, seemingly into thin air, to be consumed by these unseen ghosts with ravenous appetites. The returned trash, however, is very real, including thick and durable coatings of field dust on the white lids of the drink jugs.

Phantoms occasionally surprise you with mysterious "leavings" — a bunch of your favorite wild daisies from a fencerow, an armful of lilacs from a long-abandoned farmstead, or a couple of Johnny Jump-Up plants rescued ahead of the plow.

Like classic phantoms, they are most likely to show up long after dark, reeking in an aura of oil and grease and manure and alfalfa innoculant and dropping bits of hay and straw as they float on clouds of chisel-dust residue powdering your clean kitchen floor.

They'll edge closer and closer as you shrink back from their frightful (read filthy) appearance, they whisper in a raspy, dust-dry-throat voice:

"Got anything around to eat?"

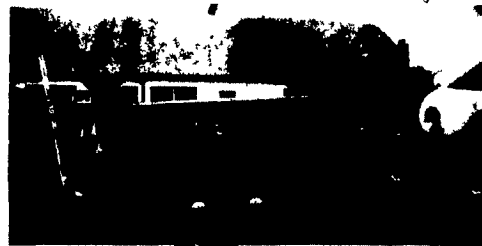
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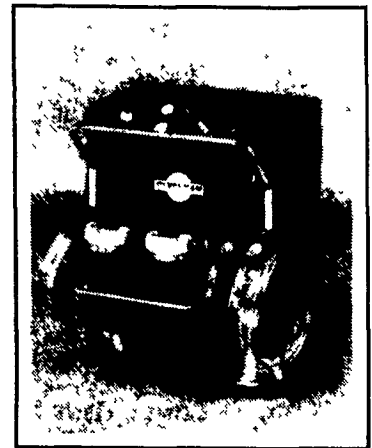
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