

On Being a Farm Wife

(and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



So there I was, hustling about the calf barn, my brain focused on what I could write here about mothers, while my hands fixed bottles for our bovine babies.

Mothers are our lifeblood on the farm. We have mothers in the barn and mothers-in-waiting in the meadow. We have mothers at the ponds — one with a fluffy gosling and others in progress. We have our first turkey mother, proudly patrolling little balls of streaky-brownish fluff stealthily sneaking through forests of grass. We have mother robins and mother bluebirds, mother groundhogs, mother squirrels, mother deer. They're all part of what we do.

So, there I was, deep in thought while filling bottles, when a loud wailing erupts, liter-

ally, at my feet. A glance down and I make eye contact with the frightened, howling face of a chubby, tabby cat. She is one of the rodent-patrol barn cats but friendly enough to mingle with the rest at feeding time.

This cat is half-squatted and straining, half-way in and half-way out of the door. Her ear-splitting howling-meowing couples with fear and confusion in her wide, yellow-green eyes. While it is obvious to me this cat is about to give birth, she apparently doesn't have a clue. Also obvious is that she has come for help, terrified by whatever is happening to her.

So I reach down to pick her up for relocation to a more private spot. She thanks me by lunging around and biting my hand. I am

not offended. This cat is scared and in pain, and, for all she knows, I might intend her more. Since I'm still wearing a pair of latex gloves from milking, her lash-out doesn't penetrate. A second attempt at picking her up earns a re-run of the bite attempt.

By wrapping the howling cat in a hand towel snagged from the sink, I am able to move her, without hazarding my health, the few steps to an empty, well-bedded calf pen. Gently laying her down, I stroke her back; and after a few moments, she settles down. I walk away, grab a bottle of milk, slip it into a holder for the waiting calf, turn around and nearly fall over the tabby cat sitting back outside the pen. Quietly. A peek into the pen reveals a soggy, orange-tinted, tiny newborn, mewling softly.

I retrieve the cat (she doesn't bite me this time), pet her a bit more and set her back inside the pen, stroking and talking to her. Gently, I nudge the wee bit of wet fur close to her warm belly. After a few moments, she settles down and begins to lick her baby clean.

Five minutes later, I glance in again to find the cat pushing shortly thereafter a soggy, solid-

black kitten arrives, getting prompt and enthusiastic motherly attention. When I reach in to stroke our new mother, she nudges back at my hand with her forehead, but makes no attempt to leave this sudden new responsibility.

Uncertain that she is totally settled down, I set containers of food and milk inside the pen, so she doesn't feel a need to take off hunting for dinner. She responds by practically inhaling the offering, then returns her attention to cleaning up the kittens.

A peek into the pen is the first order of calf feeding next morning. It appears our new mother has not budged from the spot, and remains tightly snuggled around her babies as they nurse. She purrs vigorously in response to being petted, but stays glued to the spot.

How swiftly and strongly the bond of motherhood forms.

In the cat's trembling body and confused fearful face, I could almost see reflected the indelible memory of my own new mother-

hood. Slightly confused, somewhat frightened, threaded through with a sense of tremendous pride, is exactly how I remember the first few hours of new motherhood. Friendly, understanding hands can help, but only one being — a mother — can actually, physically, "walk the walk" that brings forth a new life.

That experience, somewhat awestruck and at least a little frightening, almost without fail swiftly grows into a bond of fierce pride, defensive protectiveness and tremendous tenacity.

Mom comes in all shapes and sizes — and, here on the farm, furred, feathered and spotted-hide-covered as well. But they all seem to share one trait: an almost instant and abiding streak of Mother Love.

So to all you moms out there who can identify with the jumble of emotions shared by at least one new mother cat...we offer our love and our thanks.

And we ask God for an extra measure of blessing for mothers everywhere!

Food Safety Workshop May 16

CREAMERY (Montgomery Co.) — Montgomery County Cooperative Extension is hosting A Basic Food Safety Workshop for non-profit organizations such as churches, fire companies, fraternal organizations, and school groups, May 16 at the Montgomery County 4-H Center.

The cost of the program is \$6 and includes materials and refreshments. The "Cooking for Crowds" class will be offered twice — 1-4 p.m. and 6-9 p.m. Call to register by May 13 at (610) 489-4315.

The Montgomery County 4-H Center is located on Route 113 between Route 29 and Route 73 in Creamery.

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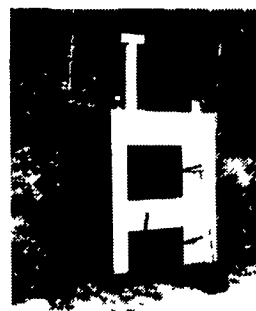
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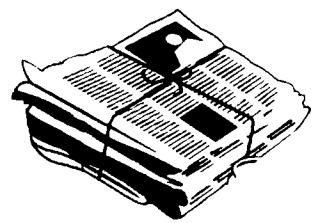
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