

Essay Contest 1<sup>st</sup> prize

by Hilda Banks Shapiro

Well.I have been around for a long time.Eighty-five years as a matter of fact.I have seen a lot of changes.Yes,I certainly have.

When I had my children(and I had a lot--twelve to be exact) seven boys and five girls--in nineteen years, it was perfectly acceptable to use formula and bottles(glass) to feed them.Now it would be tantamount to a serious crime.Breast feeding is in, Mother.Don't even THINK of anything else.

My kids survived--all but one who lived to be forty-seven--the rest range in age from 43 to 61.

Car seats were unheard of--driving home from the hospital one cradled the new infant in one's arms as Dad drove slowly and sedately.Later on in the story the kids tumbled around in the back of the station wagon--still later on in the body of the van which Ford considerately made to accomodate fourteen.

Nutrition ??Diet was of little consequence--plenty of milk,cereal and such.We never had much in the way of meat--that is until we went into dairy farming.When a cow went down and the vet tried remedies to no avail,the freezer received the unfortunate case. But we made the mistake(among many others) of naming the ladies of the herd which meant that we were all very reluctant to partake of Susie or Maryellen. We knew little of dangerous pesticides or fertilizer.We were complete amateurs and had persuaded ourselves that one just needed average intelligence and common sense in order to run a dairy farm.

WRONG.

VERY WRONG.

On a dairy farm (no,let me rephrase that)ON A FARM,many things can go wrong and they frequently do.These many things can include Machinery which breaks down,weather which is capricious,animals which become diseased,prices for grains,fertilizers and those accursed pesticides become astronomical,the part time hired man doesn't show up or he does and forgets an important step in a process,etc .I am sure I have left something out.

Oh,yes.The mortgage payment.The monthly catastrophe,the disaster to end all hope.

In order to run a moderately successful farm one needs experience agricultural courses,more experience,still more experience AND NO MORTGAGE AT ALL.

Grandpa has to GIVE you the farm or some similar stroke of good luck has to take place. Even then things are shaky. The price of milk, NOT the price in the supermarket--the price one gets from the company which buys and transports your milk--which by the way gets tested very carefully and very often and which has to be CLEAN, untainted by antibiotics which you may have used to treat an ailing cow. THAT milk has to be withheld from the bulk tank where all the other milk went. You can't make a mistake. You just can't. NO.

Of course I left out the beginning and now I have to go back to it. My parents came from the "old country" Lithuania and I was brought up to understand and believe that man is supreme and woman toddles along behind, always subservient and respectful. Although to be honest, my own father worshipped my Mother. BUT. She Did wait on him. He had the last word in decisions, he had the largest and juiciest piece of chicken on the plate, he was, in every sense of the word, "the man of the house."

The children of such a union naturally adhered to such ideas BUT as they grew up they began to feel that AMERICAN or "modern" ways were more attractive, more "fair." For the first twenty years of my marriage I felt that my husband always knew "how to do things"--he should be listened to, looked up to, consulted on matters etc .

One day I woke up, literally as well as figuratively and said to myself, "Well, but I am a person too. I can make decisions, I can think for myself." I have no idea as to what precipitated this--it was a conviction that had been growing--slowly, stealthily-gaining strength and courage. This caused a great deal of trouble in the family and in the marriage--there were arguments, loud and louder voices, weepings, out and out agitations, times of silence, times of turmoil. We were both at fault--he for being so sure he was always right, I for expecting change overnight, for siding with the children most of the time, for neglecting him as a person and devoting myself to their needs.

One evening he left. He didn't come back. He didn't contact us. He disappeared.

At first I was scared. No, terrified.

I didn't know how to make decisions,how to fix things,how to deal with broken machinery.I DID know how to milk cows(that had been my responsibility)how to deal with unpaid bills,how to ask for help,how to apply for food stamps and fuel assistance.After two weeks I suddenly "took hold."I decided I could function.I could manage.I could go on.

I looked at all those wonderful young faces(there were still nine at home) and I thought I can.I will.I must. And I did.

I had to hold on to the house;it was a roof over our heads.I had to make sure stomachs were filled,unfortunately with poor,cheap choices in food stuffs,school had to be attended,once we gave up farming money had to be earned--we lost money steadily while farming.

I had to believe it would work out.

I had to believe in myself.

It was meant to be.