

"GOING TO SPANK COWS?"



Strictly for the girls

with Mary Brown

EYEBROWS were raised when news leaked out to the prosperous, tight-knit little sheep community that we were off to try our luck on a dairy-farm. "Going to spank cows?" was usually the incredulous comment; heads were shaken at the thought of a farm without sheep.

It was really a question of economics rather than sentiment. We exchanged the care of 1600 acres of sheep and run cattle belonging to someone else for the responsibility of a small herd of factory supply cows which we hoped would soon be our own. From a panorama of rolling downs, tall shelter breaks of pinus radiata and a cottage that nearly blew away in a nor'wester, we went to a collection of flat, pocket-handkerchief-sized paddocks alongside a meandering willow-clad river. And the house was built to shelter a dynasty 80 years ago and is ENORMOUS.

The worries of lambing, the drudgery of cooking for the shearers and the "tiffs" with the big house were a thing of the past. In their place came calving troubles, the periodic visit of the herd tester, the trials of Agnes' shed manners, the state visit of the farm dairy instructor, weakling piglets in front of the fire in the kitchen and all those other joys and sorrows that make a dairy-farmer's day.

But it was all much more than a change of farming. In sheep country, toothache meant a 60-mile drive to the dentist; films, concerts and theatre were even farther. Social life was inclined to be a little on the exclusive side, hobbies and outside interests were limited, local organisations were friendly but narrow. Fish was a prized luxury brought back from a day in town, bananas and oranges rarely reached the shelves of the village grocer and doctors came and went with disconcerting regularity.

N.Z. DAIRY EXPORTER

Take a bow, Mary Brown

This issue of the "Exporter", in which we look back with pride on the achievements of the past, provides an ideal launching pad also for our newest feature. "Strictly for the Girls", as the title suggests, is written with our younger women readers especially in mind.

The pseudonym "Mary Brown" masks the identity of an able journalist who is a fairly recent recruit to the ranks of dairyfarm wives. In this feature each month she will present a distinctive viewpoint on the dairying scene and on current issues that, we feel confident, will attract a wide following among our readers.

Our cow farm is only 16 miles from a major city with all the medical, educational and cultural facilities you could wish for. There are neighbours within sight and hearing, the paper comes before we are awake and the bread is delivered fresh before breakfast. Biggest change came over the children who now see trucks and cars driven past, neighbouring farmers with strange-looking gear behind their tractors—in fact our pre-schooler became convinced that the balaclava-clad farmer who collected a load of choux moellier from farther up the road every day must be a local edition of Father Christmas.

There were the "disadvantages" of course. The four-bed country maternity hospital was so cosy and friendly that

the patients answered the phone and made the afternoon tea when staff was short. The post office clerk always had time for a smile and a cheery good day, and the grocer didn't squeal if the bill wasn't paid by the end of the month.

All the same, three dry seasons in a row have failed to diminish our enthusiasm for dairyfarming and the lowland way of life. The onset of August calving and those long, wearying days for "himself" are offset by the winter break when he's got time to unblock the washing machine and often gets in in time to bath the children before tea.

I've managed to steer clear of milking duties so far, but the pressure is on this spring with all those heifers coming in! A bit of wallpaper and paint and indulgence in one of those wonderful night storage heaters have made half the house warm and comfortable and the other half just proves that the more room you have, the more rubbish you accumulate.

We even had a good year in the garden this year. The strawberries cropped well until a calf got in and grazed them to ground level; the petunias and pansies were a big improvement on last year's show of flowering thistles, and the bull has been eyeing my winter cabbages with an appreciative leer.

I've got used to cooking man-sized breakfasts for a "poor man who's done half a day's work before you lot come out for air," and I know to rush down with the bottle of that anti-bloat stuff when I hear frenzied shouts from the cow-bail on a mild spring day.

And we still haven't got over the thrill of the arrival of a new litter of piglets. Of all God's creatures a little pig must take a prize for being one of the most droll and entertaining. Our "towny" visitors make

straight for the piggery, and need I add that we don't need any encouragement to gawp and smile with them. At least mother pig is not denied the satisfaction of rearing her young—the bellows of orphaned calf and deprived mum cow are nearly as bad as that time the lambs were weaned into a paddock outside our bedroom window.

Some of the politicians refer rather nastily to us as "peasant farmers"—a somewhat derogatory term for a business enterprise as hardworking and efficient as most of the dairy-farms we know. The one-man dairyfarm still plays an important part in the economy of the country. Take away a man's independence and self-sufficiency and put him in a labour force and much of his incentive to



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work hard and efficiently will be gone. What with these British TV programmes trying to make out that New Zealand farmers live a charmed life and those big noises over here calling us peasants, it's about time someone got us dairying folk in our right perspective.