

Life on a Dairy Farm/And Share Farming **by Daniel E Fraga**

My parents made it from Texas to the Saginaw Michigan area probably in early 1920. They spent what Dad referred to as a lost 7 years working as migrant farm workers and sometimes some foundry work in the winter months. It wasn't until around 1927 that Dad began sharecropping and this was because of the considerable help and encouragement provided by a wonderful farmer named Jim Cargill. This man provided Dad with one of his farms to sharecrop in the North Branch area and also some necessary livestock and material to help him get started, (For more details on this, read my narrative [Narrative Michoacán to Michigan](#)). Sharecropping this dairy farm was the beginning of the path that would provide our parents with the opportunity to provide us all with a good life and to eventually be able own a farm of their own. I would like to provide a simple description of what this type of farming arrangement was.

My description here of dairy farming is based on what dairy farms were like several decades ago when they were family farms and not corporations as they are now. On a dairy farm, milk cows were the most important asset. These cows had to be milked twice a day around 12 hours apart, 7 days a week and 365 days a year. That did not permit a dairy farmer much available time for traveling or visiting without having someone there to do the milking. Sometimes this meant that one of the boys would be left to do it. During the early years Dad was milking around 10 or 12 cows and each cow was milked by hand. When we moved to the Claude Wood farm we were milking around 30 cows but by then we had a milking machine and some sons at home to help (Jesse, Martin and me). Even when milking machines were used, each cow had to be stripped by hand of any remaining milk after the milk machine was done. All of this milk was then strained into large milk cans and these cans were put in a cooler in the milk house until a truck from the local dairy would come by and collect it, weigh it and pay for it. Typically, this income was shared.

Dad share cropped on the different farms that we lived in from around 1926 to until he bought the one on Norman Road farm around early 1951. Sharecropping typically meant that some farmer who owned more than one farm would rent their extra farm to someone and their family to live on and to work the farm for a half share of whatever revenue generated from that farm that was agreed to. Typically, they each would have some livestock initially that would be identified before hand so they wouldn't be included when they left the farm. In addition, they would come to some agreement as to what would be shared and what wouldn't. A couple examples of this are that typically we raised some chickens for eggs and occasionally for meat and they probably weren't included. In addition, there was an occasional pig that was raised to be butchered that also wasn't included. An interesting side note with regard to the butchered pig and an occasional butchered cow, was that the small town stores that sold meat also had a freezer and they would rent out space in their freezer for people to store their butchered meat, which we used from time to time. My brother Martin briefly worked in this store in Imlay City after his tour in Korea was over.

When calves were born during the share cropping time, if it was a heifer (female young cow) it would be kept and raised until it was old enough to be bred and then provide milk (typically around one year old). If it was a male calf, at some point one would have been kept to become a bull to be used in breeding, while the other male calves were typically sold at an auction and usually to become veal meat. This was also shared. The cows/calves that were born during this period were shared with the owner when the sharecropper moved. This was typically done like choosing sides for a ball game, they took turns selecting one.

A typical farm had enough acreage for not only pasture for the cows, but also enough additional acreage to grow crops. Some of these crops were necessary to feed the livestock, like hay, some corn and some oats, but some of the acreage was also used to grow money crops like beans and wheat which were also shared. So, in addition to milking the cows it was necessary to farm the crops. It began with preparing the fields for planting the crops in the spring. There was various farm machinery used for this, like plows, discs, drags and others. To use these required a team of horses or a tractor. Special machinery was also necessary to plant the crops. When it came to harvesting the crops special machinery was also necessary. Hay was grown to feed the cows and other livestock in the winter months. Typically, the hay had to be mowed and allowed to dry and then this loose hay was loaded with some equipment onto a wagon drawn by a horse or tractor. This was hauled to the barn where other equipment was used to raise the hay from the wagon to the upper portion of the barn. This hay would be used in the

winter months to feed the cows and any other livestock, the horses and the bull. In some of the years on the Norman Road farm, some of the brothers and brother-in-laws would come from the city to help in this work. Over time baling machines were available and hired to bail the hay and they were sometimes paid with a portion of the bailed hay. With the bailed hay the process became less labor intensive and easier to store and use.

Certain other crops such as corn (most of the corn was turned into silage and was stored in the silos) and oats were primarily used to feed the cows, but also some of it was also sold. But there were others, like wheat and beans that were cash crops and the income from these were also shared with the owner. When the wheat and oats were harvested it typically included help from some of the neighboring farmers and they took turns helping each other. Typically, these crops had been cut and bundled in the fields with special machinery. They were then collected in wagons and brought to the threshing machines, which were set up by the barn. These machines were large and expensive and had to be rented. They were sometimes paid with a portion of the crop they were threshing. The threshing machine separated the grain from the stalks and the stalks were blown into a large straw pile and this pile was later used to provide bedding for the cows in the winter months when they were kept in their stanchions. In later years machines were invented that harvested these grains in the field.

During the summer and fall months the cows were let loose after milking to go to their pasture to eat and sleep. Early each morning someone, typically with the help of a dog like our dog Bob, would go gather the cows in the pasture and bring them to the barn where they would go into their stanchions to be locked in for milking. I must talk here a little bit about our dog Bob. A farm dog like Bob played an important role in rounding up the cows and taking them to the barn. He would help gather the stragglers and he had a great method of moving them. There was always barking, of course, but for the more recalcitrant cows he would go behind them and nip at their hind legs and then duck so that when they kicked it would go over his head. It was also claimed by some family members that he would sometime go out in the morning and gather the cows by himself.

In the winter months the cows would stay in their stanchions and sleep there for most of the day. During part of the day, they would be let out to drink from a water tank and stay outside while their manure in the barn would be collected in a wheel barrow and dumped in a manure pile outside. In addition, the old bedding would be removed and fresh bedding added while the cows were out. Come Spring time that manure pile would be put in a manure spreader and that manure would be spread on the fields for fertilizer. With regard to the water tank for the livestock, you could tell what the priorities were when you realize that, in many farms, digging a well and installing a water pump for the water for the tank for the cows to drink, was more important than having running water in the house.

As mentioned earlier a wonderful man named Jim Cargill was instrumental in getting Dad and Mom and our family started in dairy farming on shares. Unfortunately, he died of cancer shortly after getting dad started, so they had to move on. However, there was another very helpful farm family that Dad mentioned, and it was Charlie Thomas and his wife Myrtle. They were the ones that provided a surprise and wonderful Christmas celebration, which is also covered in my [M to M Narrative](#). In addition, Myrtle Thomas also helped mom a great deal in many ways, but also helped her learn what little English she knew. In general, apparently share farming and the neighboring farmers was a very helpful and not a negative experience. However, there was one big exception and that was the Paul Ziegenhardt farm near Marlette. There's too much material there to cover here, but for anyone that's interested, it's also in my [M to M Narrative](#) and, if you want more, it's in my audio interview with Dad in his own words, all of which is available on Lenny's Family Website - [The Fraga Family](#).

There's one final farm story. When we moved to the Norman Road farm, we ended up with two wonderful friends and neighbors. They were Clarence and Mary White who lived about a mile down the road. He was a lifetime farmer and she was a Mexican lady that was doing housework for him and two bachelor neighbors down the road when they met and then married. Not only did mother have a wonderful companion but they became wonderful friends. And Clarence was a very stalwart friend for Dad. The White's were one of the first people in our area to own a TV and they would invite us to visit them in the evening after milking and supper to watch TV. At the top of the list was wrestling for Dad and Clarence and then "I Love Lucy" and other sitcoms. I wish I would have gotten more information on this very memorable couple. They had an adopted daughter, but I know nothing about her.

