



THE FARM WIFE

LIVING A SIMPLE LIFE ON THE FARM



JULIE A. MURPHREE



In the Beginning...

(Psalm 56:11)

I believe, with all my heart, that God gave each of us a talent. He designed all of us differently and instilled in each of us a 'specialty', if you will, to use to serve and glorify Him. Figuring it out is sometimes the hard part. I have searched for many years to discover mine and the best I could ever do was to give it a general category: Creativity. A broad heading, I know, but as far as something more specific, I was clueless. Until we bought the farm.

I may have been city born and raised, but little did I know I was given a farm girl heart at birth. Growing up in Shreveport, Louisiana, a city of 375,000, plus or minus, I did all the things young girls do: I attended large schools, went to a local college, shopped, hung out with friends and worked in the hospital and real estate industries, as well as office administration. My dreams were to move to Dallas for that dream corporate job where I could wear the latest fashions and carry a stylish briefcase.

And although I was basically happy with my life and dreams, I always felt like something was missing, as if there was a hole in my heart. Please, don't misunderstand. In many ways my heart was full to overflowing. Jesus lived there full time, and He made plenty of room for family, friends and other things. It was more like He was leaving room for His great plan, and somehow, I could feel that empty space.

Looking back, I should have known exactly what was causing that hole. I used to love to hear the stories my aunts would tell us about raising chickens in their backyard for food and eggs. I felt at home when visiting my Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Palmer on their eleven acre home. My curiosity ran rampant when I observed Uncle Palmer in his garden. And I knew I was in love when I petted Sheba or Misty Gold, his two horses. That should have been my first clue.

I guess I am just about as thick-headed as they come, because, even after all those hints, it still didn't register. Not even after my first attempt at gardening.

I was still living at home with my parents. After a visit to our neighbors' farm (Bonnie and Reuben owned both a city house and a small country farm), I decided I wanted to learn how to grow my own vegetables. There was a small sunny place behind my dad's shop that would be just perfect. At least, in my mind it was. So I asked permission to use it, and even though my dad told me it wouldn't work, he gave me the go ahead.

Now, you have to understand. Daddy wasn't a tyrant. Actually, he was a kind man who loved his children and knew what made them tick. Me? He knew that if he said, "Yeah, sure", I might have planted that garden, but probably would not have followed through. Instead he presented it as a challenge, which meant I would not only follow through to the end, but it would also assure him some fresh tomatoes for dinner.

Reuben was my mentor. In less than 20 square feet I planted tomatoes, bell peppers, beans and red potatoes. And for the most part, I was fairly successful. Daddy did get his tomatoes, and a big pot of beans. The new potatoes in those green beans, however, were store-bought.

In spite of the fact that Reuben kept telling me to "cover up those plants with dirt – No, cover 'em ALL up! Just leave a little bit of green showing on the top," I balked, and didn't follow instructions. They were so pretty! And green! So bushy and perfect! Why would I want to cover them up? So, I didn't. And ended up buying the store brand of red potatoes to add to my fresh green beans.

Well, if we are being perfectly honest here, I did get two potatoes from my efforts. They were small enough to make an ant at a picnic pass them by as scraps, but they were potatoes! By the end of the season I had fallen in love with digging in the dirt and, without actually noticing it, a small piece of that hole in my heart began closing up.

I was coming a little bit closer to figuring out what was missing in my life, but it still wasn't crystal clear. Okay. Gardening. I could feed myself, my family and others. I could use that to serve the Lord. But still, the mysterious hole was still there. What else was I missing?

Combined with the gardening, the chicken stories and my uncle's land, you would think I finally got it. I guess I am just a slow learner. It wasn't until I was in my late twenties when another piece fell into place.

Kathleen, a friend of my aunts, Dot and Emily, had come to visit. Now, that woman was a true Farm Wife. She was raised in a one room log house shared by fourteen people – eleven kids,

two parents and a grandmother. That family literally lived off the land. Their food came from their garden and livestock. They made their own lye out of ashes, and then made their own soap. With the exception of sugar, flour, salt, pepper and a spice now and then, they harvested their provisions from the land they owned.

I loved talking with her and hearing her stories of her youth. As an adult, she was a nurse in the Navy, but returned to the family farm when she was discharged. She continued to work as a nurse in civilian life, even lived in Shreveport for a while, but never forgot where she came from, and travelled back and forth from city to farm frequently. Eventually, she retired and moved back to the family farm.

She taught me many things, but one of my most favorite lessons was learning to make the best apple jelly I've ever tasted. That lesson started something like this:

"Where'd you get all those apples?" Kathleen asked.

"Ah, Dot and Emily brought them to me from their trip to Maine."

"What are you doing with them?"

"I thought I would make some apple butter and some spiced apple rings," I said, as I scooped up a pile of peelings to toss in the trash.

"You're not gonna throw those away, are you?"

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Well, yes, ma'am. What else am I gonna do with them?"

"Well, for starters, you Never. Ever. Waste. Anything."

And the next thing I know, I was learning how to make apple jelly with apple peels. I could feel the wings of my heart begin to flutter. I have never been so proud of a batch of home-canned jelly in my life. That mystery hole in my heart had just gotten smaller.

Little by little, through various avenues, the farm life began to make inroads into my heart, my life and my soul. Still, I lived in the city, and operated by city standards. And knew there were still a few missing pieces to my heart.

In my early thirties, I married a package deal – a wonderful man with two children. In the time it takes to say 'I do', I became a wife and mother with a whole new set of rules, regulations, trials, tests and joys. I was at least blessed with two great stepchildren, and although I didn't have the normal problems a stepparent dealt with, they were still children with the normal set of childhood and teenage angsts. Everything that didn't involve balancing a husband, children, a home and work got stuffed in a box and stored in my mental attic.

My husband, Randy, was born in the southern end of what we in Louisiana call CenLa – or the central portion of Louisiana - in a small town called Cottonport, not too far down the road from Marksville, where his mother's family lived. It was also in close proximity to Hessmer, which is where his paternal grandparents lived. The area was in Avoyelles Parish which at one time was primarily farming.

I honestly believe this is where Randy got his first taste of wanting to live off the land. Although his maternal grandfather owned a gas station, they still lived a frugal life, growing and preserving as much of their food as possible. Trips to Marksville during his childhood just reinforced his love of the outdoors, and helped to improve his hunting and fishing skills. On one or two occasions, these visits also served to teach him how to run fast and jump high, with an angry bull behind him, helping to increase that speed.

Throughout the years, when Randy and I weren't too tired from dealing with life, we would dream a little about buying some property. When we would drive through Texas, in the process of dropping off or picking up the children from visits with their mother, we would gaze longingly out the window at different properties.

"How big would you say that one is?"

"What do you think about maybe having cows someday?"

"Uh, if they have horns like that one, I don't think!"

"Ooh! Look at that green pasture! See how it just rolls like a lush carpet!"

"That one! That one! I want that one!"

Then we would get back home and fall back into the rut and routine called life, our dreams once again being relegated to that dusty attic.

Several years later, our daughter, Sarah, had graduated and moved to live with her mother. Our son, James was only a little over a year away from graduation. I had been thinking about our future as empty-nesters, and while waiting in line at the grocery store, I picked up a copy of the local Real Estate guide just to pass the time.

In it was featured a 72-acre piece of property north of Shreveport, complete with two houses and two barns. It piqued my interest and set those heart wings to fluttering. It looked luscious enough in that one square inch picture that I knew I had to go see it for myself. I showed it to Randy that evening, and was excited that he seemed to be interested as well. We made an appointment with the real estate agent for that weekend.

In reality, it was gorgeous. At least, the land part was. And although the houses and barns needed a lot of work (in one case, complete demolition), there was just something about it that called to us both.

Suddenly, while walking across the back pasture, it happened. That mystery hole in my heart began to close and those wings stretched out to their fullest, in preparation for flight. Finally, I knew. I knew what I was supposed to be when I grew up. At least partially; but without a doubt I could see I was headed in the right direction.

We decided to see what the chances were of buying some land. A call to Jon, a friend of ours who works at the Louisiana Land Bank, told us what we needed to know. We could borrow the money. And Jon, ever so helpful, added that if this place didn't work out, he knew of a place in

Red River Parish that would be right up our alley - 60 acres and an old house, just like he knew I had always dreamed of. Perfect for us, he said.

I blew off the suggestion, because I just knew this place was THE PLACE. I put my blinders on and wouldn't even consider anything other than THE PLACE. And right there was where those blinders foolishly allowed me to block out even God, because it was right there that I stepped into a 'God' classroom.

Not only does God have my life already mapped out for me, He also knows that I don't like to listen to Him sometimes. I want my way, and I want it right this second. It's a good thing He keeps a strong hand wrapped around my shirt collar, knowing exactly when and how hard He needs to yank to pull me right back in line.

Which is what He did with that 72-acre piece of property. An appraisal of the property put it at over \$40,000 lower than the asking price. The work required to make the house livable would have been almost another ten grand, if not more, plus what it would cost to redo all the work that had been done, but had not done safely or to code. And the owner wasn't willing to budge a penny.

My heart deflated. I kicked the dirt and pouted for an hour or two. And I prayed. At first, those were prayers of lamentation. I wanted – no, if I'm being totally honest here – I demanded to know why He was being so mean to me. To dangle something so beautiful in front of my face and then yank it back again just was not fair. And I didn't want to hear, *"Just trust Me."*

After a while, I calmed down. I apologized (profusely) to God for my attitude and agreed to put the whole idea of land and our future in His hands. And leave it there this time.

I sat quietly for a moment in order to compose myself before I went back in the house. And in the quiet came the thought about the property in Red River Parish. I eased it out of the mental trash heap, dusted it off a bit and examined it. Was that thought actually a whisper from God? Is that what God had in mind? Probably not. It was more than likely just wishful thinking. I just wasn't that lucky. But maybe it was worth a try.

I came back in and asked Randy about it. The look in his eyes wasn't encouraging in the least, and instead of speaking right away, he just got up and found a map of Louisiana, then spread it out on the table.

"Here. We're here in Caddo Parish. Now, follow my finger south, no keep going. Down here. Here's Red River Parish. You are looking at no less than an hour's drive, possibly more, depending on where exactly in Red River Parish this place is. Julie, baby, that means an hour's drive to work in the morning, and an hour's drive home. Five days a week. For both of us."

Stubborn soul that I am, I do not give up easily. I had been bitten deeply by the land bug, and kept thinking about that place. A nudge from God? I wasn't sure, since I didn't have a great history of listening and trusting the way I should. But still, I couldn't to let go just yet. So I tried again, putting on my sweet face and hoping it would work at least one more time.

“Okay. But can we at least call Jon and see if we can go look? Maybe it is too far, but we aren’t even sure what we are looking for. It could be just an educational trip for us. See what we like, what we don’t like and keep our eyes out for that perfect place.”

The sweet face didn’t work so well. Trust me. My husband isn’t a push over. Nor does he give in easily, especially to whining and cajoling, which is how he sees what I did. Me? I see what I said as a reasonable action - words spoken calmly and rationally. And after an hour, when calm and rational wasn’t working, then I succumbed to the cajoling. But never whining. Never. Not me. Finally, he gave in and called Jon.

On Saturday, Randy, James and I loaded up and headed south. Out of Shreveport and away from houses crammed close enough together you could reach out your bathroom window and shake the hand of your neighbor taking a shower in the next house. Away from traffic and road rage-filled Kamikaze drivers. Down a road that cut through hay fields; picturesque pastures filled with hornless cows and horses. Over bridges. Past an old barn. Between even more hay fields. More horses. More cows. And still, we drove. I was beginning to think I should have packed a picnic lunch, or at least brought a copy of Spanish for Dummies to study.

Finally, a little over an hour later and one wrong turn, we were all a bit discouraged. I was ready to admit I was wrong to push Randy so hard on this one. The common conversational thread had boiled down from mild excitement and curiosity to just a few dejected words.

“This is too far. Think about the drive to work every day.”

“Nope. This is just too far.”

“Uh, are we there yet?” (Cliché, I know, but appropriate.)

I bit the bullet and told Randy that he had been right; an extremely difficult thing for me to admit. This was, in reality, too far to drive every day. And being the polite Southern girl I was brought up to be, I began practicing my speech for the homeowner.

“Oh, this is just so lovely! Beautiful, absolutely beautiful! But I am so sorry. This is just too far for us to drive every day. We are so sorry for wasting your time. Thank you. We’ll be heading back now. Have to get home before it’s time to go back to work tomorrow. Bye, now!”

Yeah. That sounded good.

Finally, we pulled up at the closed gate. We stopped. Stared. Looked around. And then all three pairs of eyes met in the confinement of the vehicle. With quiet, subdued voices, it was unanimously spoken.

“Oh, no. This is it. This is really and truly our new farm.”

Many years later, I sit writing this book, looking back on everything it has taken to get to this point, and looking ahead at what has yet to be done. I am taking stock of what I've learned and what I have yet to discover.

One thing I knew, without a doubt, that day sitting at the gate, was that I may not have been wearing rose-colored glasses, but they were definitely tinted pink. I didn't know how to farm, I had never been around cows, much less know that a 'hornless cow' is actually referred to as 'polled', never raised a chicken. I bought my eggs, vegetables and hamburger at the local grocery store which was conveniently located a mile down the street from my city house. I could raise vegetables there, but just barely.

I knew that it would take a lot of hard work. Many back breaking hours. A lot of lessons learned by the sweat of my brow. And neck. And back. A lot of hot baths filled with Epsom salts to soak away those screamingly pain-filled muscles. And I didn't care. Not one whit. If God had ever placed anything on my heart, He certainly did that day. Complete with a huge banner strung across my heart and soul that shouted, "Welcome Home!" Personally, I think He should have added, "*Just remember. You asked Me for it!*"

This book is titled the way it is for a good reason. One of the things I have learned is that to have a farm, you have to be willing to be married to it. It is not a part time job, regardless of whether or not you have a full time job off the farm. Which is something that is highly recommended, unless your last name is Gates, and you have easy access to all those millions.

A farm has its good days and bad ones, just like a marriage does. There are times you want to spin around and celebrate the goodness of it all, and there are times you want to scream and rant and rave about the injustice of Nature, or lack of money, or just the futility of it all. There are also those times where you sink to your knees in the pasture and cry enough tears to water the hay for the next six months. No matter what, money is always a major issue on a farm. Kind of like any marriage to a human.

A farm is also not for the faint of heart. If you don't like dirt under your fingernails, don't farm. If you are terrified of snakes, don't farm. If you have the traditionally perfect peaches and cream complexion of an old world Southern Belle, and want to keep it, turn tail and run back to your shaded veranda and ask the housekeeper to bring you a fan and a glass of ice-cold sweet tea. If you have a standing appointment for a mani- and pedi-, trust me. The farm life is just not for you.

I won't even go into a less than perfectly cleaned house, septic systems that double as a baby calf swimming pool, cow and chicken manure trailed across your freshly mopped floor, or baby bulls in the kitchen (at least, not at this point in the book). Just trust me. If you are some wilting violet, perfectly adorned person that shudders at the very thought of anything less than spotless or remotely strenuous, my advice to you is to stay in the city.

And no offense intended, I am probably not going to invite you to Paradise Plantation, either. Yes, I have a fresh pitcher of sweet tea in the fridge, but there is also a strong likelihood you will be put to work on the farm to earn that frosty glass of Southern nectar.

This is a book on not only how I got to be the Farm Wife, but what it takes to get there and stay there. The ups. The downs. The joys. The heartbreak. And most of all, a book of encouragement for other like-minded folks, and to weed out those who just see the rosy dream of farm life from those who have the courage, determination and tenacity of pigweed to make it work for them.

And as you read, maybe this book will serve its purpose for you as well. Your God-given specialty may not be as a Farm Wife, but it may encourage you to seek out what talent you have been blessed with and see that, through a lot of determination, you too can use your gift or gifts for the service and glory of God.

After all, if it wasn't for my faith and willingness to listen to Him, even when He whispers, I wouldn't be here in the first place.