

Agnes Riddle

Dairywoman and Legislator

Agnes Riddle is back with her cows—"Becky Sharp," "Little Em'ly," "Sairy Gamp" and the rest—on her big dairy ranch, Glen-Riddle, six miles out from Denver. But whoever may be elected President of the United States next November, Mrs. Riddle, if she lives, will be sent back to the Colorado Legislature, there to keep her keen gray eyes wide open on all measures affecting the welfare of the farmer, the farmer's wife and the farmer's children. That fact is as sure as anything can be in Colorado politics. Or, to be accurate, it is surer.

Agnes Ludwig Riddle is the "dairy legislator" who recently came into national prominence as the most picturesque figure in the latest, the Eighteenth Colorado General Assembly.

Rose at Three A.M.

During all the months that the legislature was in session Mrs. Riddle rose at three o'clock in the morning to get breakfast for the drivers of the Glen-Riddle milk route. Next the family breakfast had to be prepared, and, as soon as that was disposed of, she busied herself getting dinner ready, so that while she was in the House of Representatives, looking out for the interests of farm life in general, the Riddle farm life might also be duly provided for. Then the boys and girls must be started off to school, for though the Riddles have no children of their own, they have adopted the six orphaned children of a dead sister.

Only after these and various other household matters had been duly attended to did this legislator start out in her light road wagon for the nearest electric car line, on her way to the state capitol. She was invariably one of the first members at her desk, ready for the opening of the daily session of the House of Representatives.

Six o'clock found her back at the ranch, finishing the preparations for supper, unless there was a night session of the Legislature, when it might happen that midnight saw her walking homeward from the end of the car line, glad and buoyant under the stars and ready, after a few hours of sleep, to begin another long day's work.

A Helpful Neighbor

Of course, a routine like that demands great physical vigor. Such a dower the young Agnes Ludwig brought with her when, at the age of sixteen, she left her native Silesia to try her fortunes in America. Indeed, the first impression she makes upon an observer is that of abounding strength and vigor. The next is of mental alertness and shrewd common sense.

Soon after the young German girl came to America she took a two years' course in domestic science. Then she entered a Kansas City training school for nurses, and followed the profession of nurse with great success for several years. In fact she may be said never to have left it. For when, twenty-two years ago, she married George M. Riddle and went to live on the broad Glendale acres, it soon became known through the far-reaching, sparsely settled farming community that Mrs. Riddle "always kept her head and knew how to do things." So it happened that in cases of accident or sudden sickness a hurry message was generally sent first to Agnes Riddle and second to the doctor. It is a common saying among the low-lying ranches of the countryside that not a baby has been born there for the past twenty years without finding Agnes Riddle at hand to say "Howdy!" to it.

Organizer in Farmers' Movement

But such acts of neighborliness have left her still with plenty of energy for more public duties. For the past eight years she has been secretary and state organizer of the Colorado Grange, which, during that time, has increased the number of its "locals" from twenty-four to eighty-five with a membership of more than six thousand farmers. She is also a member of the advisory board of the State Agricultural College

and secretary of the board of education of her school district, while for a dozen years past she has been the enthusiastic superintendent of a Union Sunday School, which gathers from the country round children of all creeds—Methodists and Unitarians, Catholics and Presbyterians.

It is evident that to accomplish all this Mrs. Riddle must possess orderliness of mind, as well as physical strength and energy. That orderliness is well attested by a glance at her home office, with its big desk on which every paper lies straight, with its walls hung with charts and maps, with its various secretarial books and files, each group with a place to itself and that place primly held to. And not the least proof of her methodical nature is found in the fact that this office is placed next door to her kitchen, so that she can turn, with the fewest steps possible from her correspondence with United States Senators concerning the parcels post or from a study of the Revised Statutes of the State of Colorado, to her cook stove and the responsibilities of baking bread.

A Famous Cook, Too

Concerning that bread I can speak with perfect confidence. And while her fellow members of the eighteenth Colorado General Assembly praise her "squareness," telling how she never traded and never lied, I praise her cake-making. Now, to make really good cake in Colorado is a rare accomplishment, a fact for which the altitude is said to be responsible. Perhaps there are fewer thoroughly reliable cake makers in the Rocky Mountain region than there are dependable, truthful, non-trading legislators. As for her raspberry jam, in recalling it I am impelled to revise an ancient saying: "I care not who makes the laws if Agnes Riddle makes my raspberry jam."

It was on a bland spring afternoon that I took tea at Glen-Riddle, and there, over the tea cups and the bread and jam—such bread and such jam—I asked my hostess if she would be a member of the next Legislature.

"Oh, yes," she answered briefly. "There are a good many things the farmers of Colorado need—and their wives more especially. I'm not going to quit till we get them."

"I heard a rumor the other day," I said as I passed my cup for more tea, "that some of the Republican bosses and bosslets say you've got to be 'hitched' more securely than you were in the last Legislature."

Bosses Can't Control Her

It should be explained here that, though Mrs. Riddle was elected to the House of Representatives as a Republican, she supported several Democratic measures which met with her approval and no member of the Republican "machine" ever had the temerity to give her orders as to how she should vote.

Mrs. Riddle laughed. She is a merry soul. Large-boned, with strong, blunt features and a ruddy face which shows more familiarity with the farmyard than with complexion creams, she has a merry twinkle in her deep-set gray eyes and something that may be classed as a twinkle, also, about the soft chestnut hair, still untouched with gray, that ripples slightly, with a peculiar quality of aliveness, round her broad forehead.

"Yes," she said, "one of the men who thinks he runs things down this way came to see me the other day. 'We want to nominate you for the House again this year,' says he."

"Do you?" says I.

"Sure!" says he. "But now, Mrs. Riddle, you were new to the game before and made a few mistakes. So this time we want you to promise—"

"I promise nothing," says I. "Folks will just have to take me as I am, and I'll vote as I think right when the time comes."

"Then he clears his throat. Clears

it three times, and says,—so soft butter wouldn't melt in his mouth: 'In that case, Mrs. Riddle, greatly as we must regret it, we will have to nominate a man we can depend on.'

"All right!" says I. "Go ahead and nominate him. And I'll run independent and beat your man a mile."

"You might just as well have made it two miles," I observed, helping myself to another piece of cake.

Farmers Forget Party

There would, indeed, seem to be no doubt of the result in such a case. Mrs. Riddle was chosen to represent the three rural counties of Adams, Arapahoe, and Elbert, in the latest Legislature, and, though she ran on the Republican ticket, hard-shelled Democratic farmers forgot their party prejudices so far as her candidacy was concerned.

This big-hearted, sincere woman with her frank ways and her plain words, with her deep insight into farm problems, her untiring zeal, her simple honesty and devotion, accomplished more in her single term as a legislator than any two former representatives ever before in the same length of time.

"One of the reasons why I'm going to the next Legislature," she said, "is that we've got to get an appropriation for demonstration farms all through the eastern part of the state. And at each of these demonstration farms we'll have an appropriation for a trained nurse. Very few of the women on the ranches have any practical knowledge of sanitation or hygiene. They do their best, poor souls, but that best means a sorry state of affairs when there is a case of typhoid fever on the ranch, for instance. Often the whole family falls sick, one after the other, when, if the mother had only known how to take a little care, the first case might have been prevented. But, when once we get a good trained nurse who knows how to teach, stationed at each of these demonstration farms it will make a great difference. Within a year we can practically stamp out typhoid fever. And that is the greatest curse of these lonely ranches, excepting loneliness, of course."

Remedy for Loneliness

"You think loneliness more deadly than the fever?" I asked, with some surprise.

"I certainly do," answered Mrs. Riddle, with feeling. "That is where the Grange comes in. And that is one reason why I'm doing all I can to push it along." Why are there so many farmers' wives in insane asylums! It isn't the hard work, I can tell you. It's the terrible, flat loneliness.

"And it isn't because the boys and girls want to take things easy that they leave the farms and crowd into the cities, scrambling after each other's jobs and living on starvation wages. It's because they don't find stumps and cows sociable. They want company and good times, and they've a right to want them. Now that Grange House I was showing you—"

"Yes," I said, recalling that on my arrival at Glendale my hostess had pointed out, near the ranch, an attractive small club house, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Riddle to their farmer neighbors.

"Well," she continued, "the folks from all the country round come to that Grange House and we have nice ice cream sociables, and moving pictures, and sometimes lectures and debates. Of course we hold the Grange meetings there, too, and now and then we have a dance. The folks meet each other and quite a number of courtings have started there. Last winter we had a class in parliamentary law, with folks of all ages from sixteen to sixty, and I could just see it brightening them up."

Here spoke the parliamentarian, for Mrs. Riddle has presided over the Colorado House of Representatives on several occasions of heated debate, with never an appeal from the chair. Then Agnes Riddle went on to tell how the

number of these farm club houses is increasing and how each new one that goes up helps to make country life more attractive.

Secret of Her Success

What is the secret of Mrs. Riddle's success?

That question was, in a way, implied in a query I put to her at Glen-Riddle, a question of direct, practical import in a state which for eighteen years has been looked upon as an equal suffrage experiment station, where the woman voter, and the woman politician, and the woman office holder might most easily be studied, for good or ill. Naturally, Mrs. Riddle believes in woman suffrage.

"Before ever I came to America," she explained, "I read those words of Lincoln: 'A government of the people, for the people, and by the people,' and they have been in my mind ever since. Now I'm one of the people just as much as my husband is, or any other man—and that settles the voting question for me."

For a moment this answer seemed surprising, for Mrs. Riddle appears singularly free from sex-consciousness. No one would ever think of her "womaning," a term occasionally used in Colorado to describe the antics—frequently confused with tactics—of two types of women politicians who, fortunately, are rare.

There is the one type which, while protesting vehemently that woman has a divine right to be a man, contends no less violently, and most inconsistently, for the political recognition of women as women and not merely as capable individuals. The other type is represented by those who employ the sex lure to win office, a dangerous procedure in a state where half the voters are women; as certain election returns have shown in the past. These types, as has been said, have very few representatives in Colorado, and these are chiefly recent importations from other states. Mrs. Riddle would certainly never be classed among their number.

Woman's Place in Politics

Yet there was her statement that her success was not sexless, that she had accomplished certain things in the House of Representatives not alone as a legislator and an individual, but as a woman. The remark certainly takes issue with the words of those suffrage agitators who protest that "there is no sex in intellect and achievement."

"It's this way," continued the mistress of Glen-Riddle, with that directness of thought and simplicity of expression which make upon all who meet her the impress of a nature like the prairie lands, broad and level and free.

"You see, men in the Legislature naturally bunch together in parties, or factions, or cliques. I guess it's just their nature to do that, being men. So a man there gets only what his clique gets, and his clique gets only what they trade and deal for. But, being a woman, I wasn't expected to bunch, and so everything I wanted the men could judge on its own merits."

"You used that word 'mothered' when you asked about my measures. I guess it's just the right word. Lots of folks came to me with one bill and another that they wanted me to introduce for them; and some of the bills were all right, too. But I wouldn't touch one of them unless in some way it touched my own people and I knew all about its practical working. Then—why, then I felt just as if that bill was my own child, and the men knew that I knew it was good, so they turned to and helped me."

Never, surely, was the plea for the feminine, the mothering element in our political life, more aptly put than in that statement by this plain, hard-working ranch woman whose words to me as we parted were concerned, not with legislation, but with minute directions for the making of her delectable raspberry jam.—By Helen Ring Robinson, in Good Housekeeping.

