

FARMERS' WIVES OUT OF BONDAGE

How the Farmer Feeds the Nation, and the Woman Feeds the Farmer

By ELIZABETH SEARS

A LONG about June in a big wheat year the compilers of statistics begin to figure out how many bushels of wheat will be raised, just how many loaves of bread each bushel will make and how many loaves are due per man per nation. On paper it looks right convincing. The farmer feeds the nation.

We feed the farmer—we women of the farms. We know what it costs to feed him and to get that wheat in condition for shipment ready to feed the nation. We've fed our women to the wheat crops for a good many years, now; but you don't hear much about our share in the feeding. It has been hard on the women—this feeding the farmer and the nation.

Sometimes when I'm stirring up a batch of raised biscuit for breakfast, and I sift in the soft, creamy flour and think of the price we women have had to pay for it—it sort of sets me against wheat-bread for a while, and I go back to corn-bread, although we paid a price for the corn, too—we women.

I have always loved the Alberta prairie. You couldn't hire me to leave the farm and be cooped up in town without room to breathe. In every season of the year the prairies roll away, wave after wave, giving you a limitless impression as I imagine the sea must do—just splashing right along beyond the horizon, right to the turning-point. There couldn't be anything prettier than the plowed fields of a spring evening, with the long, freshly turned furrows all seeming to converge in a point toward the sun as it drops, big and round and red, below the edge; and the men unhook from the plow and ride in sitting sideways on their lead horse, whistling contentedly as they think of their good, hot supper.

Colour appeals to me. I always stop a few minutes on the high ridge just before we drop down into the slope toward home when we come from town. You can see into three counties from there on a clear day. Just before wheat-cutting, it is a wonderful view. As far as the eye can reach, melting into the horizon, there is field after field of wheat, tawny yellow in the shadows that the clouds trail over it, and rippling in waves where the wind bends the bearded tops, just as though the wind were playing tag with the shadows. It lies in even squares, for Alberta is laid off in sections, even and exact as a checker-board. There are no wandering lanes, and you drive straight as a die, fenced in on both sides with wire fence or low-cut hedges for miles, sure that at each mile you will reach a cross-road.

THEY say it is too vast and monotonous to be of artistic value in a picture; but it stirs my emotions like great, thrilling chords of music. I often snatched a minute or two from my work, even when burdens pressed heavily, to look at the prairie pictures and to breathe deep of the freshness of the prairie air. It put a minute or two of joy into my day, that made up for the dreary drudgery before I had learned to organize both myself and my job of being a farmer's wife, and to adjust myself to my share of the business.

I dimly felt, even in those days, that there must be some way to make it easier for the woman on the farm. We kept going right round in a circle. We never could seem to meet the seasons squarely in the face because we were always dragging along a bit of the unfinished work of the season before. Heavens to Betsey! The days when I wished I could go to sleep and sleep right through the harvesting season!

If anybody on earth needs the doctrine of conservation of energy and good horse-sense preached to her, it is the farmer's wife. And the more she needs it, the harder it is to reach her with it. It is the hardest thing in the world to make her realize that it is up to her to solve her own problems and adjust her own difficulties and to use her own brains to do it.

We used to be afraid of the farm missionaries when the provincial agricultural colleges began to send them out. They came into the counties to hold Institutes. We used to scorn them with the inherent

antagonism that the farm woman has for the city woman—an antagonism that is born of the fear of being looked down upon. We learned that there is nothing the woman in the city has that we could not have. We learned that it is simply a matter of adjustment. We had to have it borne in upon us that we must be trained as much for our work on the farm as the city woman for her work in the town—that we were not naturally good housekeepers and good cooks and good mothers simply because we had been born females.

When a little frail instructor from the Provincial Agricultural College came to our

woman. One of the members was humorously relating the trials of having a frozen water-pipe mended, and Aunt Kish told of the days when she had to carry water a quarter of a mile from a creek. My aunt is a gay old lady, and all the weight of her seventy years has not smothered her resilient disposition. Her husband died after their third big wheat crop—drank himself to death celebrating it in Calgary—and she has had the first real time of her life ever since.

WHEN she came to Alberta in the early fifties, she drove a team herself from Winnipeg, with a ten-months' old baby

preparing three meals a day and washing up the dishes. Heaven only knows who the men think does the washing and ironing, sewing and preserving, gardening and chickening and baby-raising, but somebody does it.

I remember we had a neighbour once who expected the stork at harvest-time. You'd have thought she had interrupted the work of the universe, the way her husband fussed because she could not be up and around at wheat harvest. He fussed about it a little too much, for one day she hitched up the horse, took the children over to her mother's, borrowed car-fare from her father, and went to Calgary on the afternoon train and into a maternity hospital. Nobody ever knew what started such a crazy idea in her head. No farmer's wife from our region had ever been known to go to a hospital; but there she went and there she stayed for four weeks after the baby came. She told me herself that she had never had such a delightful rest in her life as those four weeks. Most women do not look back on such an event as a vacation. Of course she had a row about it when she got back. Her husband threatened to refuse to pay the bill—that seems to be the first eruption in husbands. He had had to hire a harvesting crew who brought their own cook with them, and he had missed his wife's cooking. But after it was all over and talked out and he had sort of simmered down, he had a new respect for her. She brought home a good nurse from Calgary, who remained with her as housekeeper for four years, and her husband never cheeped about it. He rather held up his head with pride at being able to brag how he sent his wife to a good hospital where she had fine care, and how he kept a good girl for her all the time. His wife let him think it was all his own plan; but she had outlined matters to him pretty plainly when she came back.

"WHEN you had appendicitis," she pointed out to him, "you went to the hospital and had the best of surgeons and the best of nurses for four weeks. When my first two babies were born, we had only a neighbour's wife for doctor and nurse, and you grumbled at having to pay her five dollars a week for two weeks' time."

Men are reasonable enough once you get an idea beaten into their heads. It's mostly our fault, I'll admit. We don't know how to handle our husbands. It's like everything else—if you let a case of thoughtless husband run on too long, it takes a sure hand and a major operation to remedy matters.

Like my aunt and my mother, I had never had any special consideration and never expected any. All the other farmers' wives I knew were like me—thin, overworked, and with several children. The asylums and the cemeteries were always full of us; but there seemed to be plenty to fill the vacancies. It used to seem to me that women were the cheapest things in the world. A good team of horses cost at least three hundred dollars, and they had their meals taken in to them and rested on Sunday.

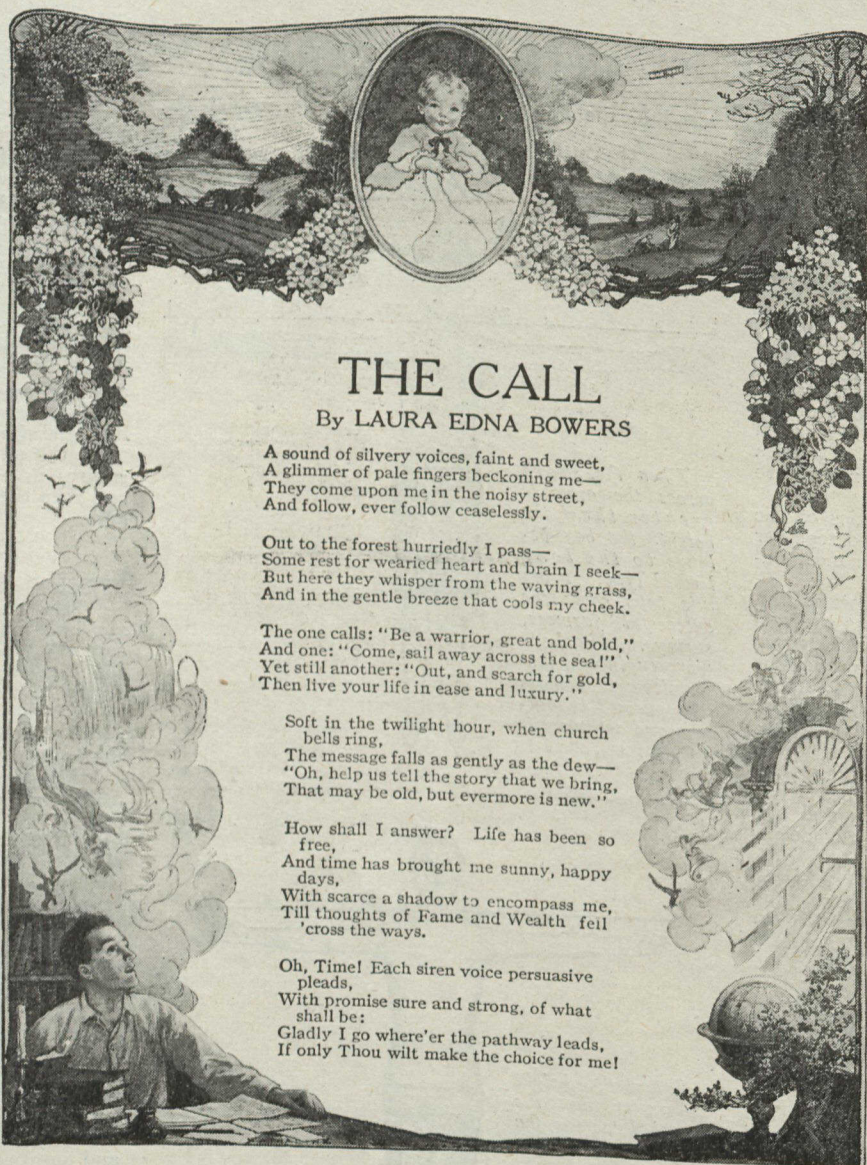
About all a woman cost in real money was the expense of the license and the preacher and undertaker's bill. She cooked and served the meals and seldom had time to eat her own properly.

Sunday on the farm is the day your friends drop in and bring the children. There is no rest for the farm woman on Sunday.

We lived unthinkingly. We wondered why the hens would not lay when eggs were high, but we could not study out the relation between a scarcity of eggs and a high price; neither could we figure out a ration that would make them lay the year around. We knew the corn crop had begun to fail, but we never thought of feeding that poor, starved soil from which we had taken year after year and never given back. We had the same rush of spring work, the same debts at the store, and perhaps a baby every eighteen months. In between, we went through the yearly agony of watching for the rain clouds in the dry season.

Rain was the arbiter of our fate during those early days. We used to get in the crops in anxiety, and then watch those

(Continued on page 23)



THE CALL

By LAURA EDNA BOWERS

A sound of silvery voices, faint and sweet,
A glimmer of pale fingers beckoning me—
They come upon me in the noisy street,
And follow, ever follow ceaselessly.

Out to the forest hurriedly I pass—
Some rest for wearied heart and brain I seek—
But here they whisper from the waving grass,
And in the gentle breeze that cools my cheek.

The one calls: "Be a warrior, great and bold,"
And one: "Come, sail away across the sea!"
Yet still another: "Out, and search for gold,
Then live your life in ease and luxury."

Soft in the twilight hour, when church
bells ring,
The message falls as gently as the dew—
"Oh, help us tell the story that we bring,
That may be old, but evermore is new."

How shall I answer? Life has been so
free,
And time has brought me sunny, happy
days,
With scarce a shadow to encompass me,
Till thoughts of Fame and Wealth fell
'cross the ways.

Oh, Time! Each siren voice persuasive
pleads,
With promise sure and strong, of what
shall be:
Gladly I go where'er the pathway leads,
If only Thou wilt make the choice for me!

town and was able to tell me the reason why my bread had been souring all summer and how to prevent it, and I got it through my head that she knew what she was talking about, I woke up to a lot that I had missed.

Our problems of trying to do the work of three with nothing to do with has filled many a sanatorium. The hospitals are crowded with us. And how full the cemeteries were of us in the old days—the price we paid for the big crops and the prosperity of the country! And Alberta is not the only province that is full of the unwritten records of the women who paid for the crops with their lives. They are still paying for the wheat.

MY mother died because she was too tired to try to make an effort to live any longer. Looking back on it now, I cannot remember ever seeing her sit with folded hands. They said little of their hard lives, these brave women who helped to build up the prairies. They accepted it uncomplainingly. When our Country Club met at our house last week, my aunt was there as a guest. We have thirty members in our club. Ten of them drove their own automobiles. All but two live in modern houses with heat and water. We buy the latest thing in foot-gear, which is the one sure sign of progress in a farm

on the seat beside her. She and her husband took up a claim forty miles from a settlement. Wandering Indians were their only neighbours, and terrified her daily by their company. When they had been there less than a year her husband returned to Winnipeg and remained three months. She was left alone to look after the crops, shuck the corn, and take care of the place. While he was gone her third baby was born. Her only help was an Indian squaw, who had chanced in to beg a loaf of bread and remained to help the young mother in her extremity.

"We didn't think anything of it," said my aunt. "We were too busy while it was happening to think about it. We went through a lot those days; but, land of Goshen! we are making up for it now, with our furnaces, and our gasoline engines for the churns and washing machines, and our automobiles."

It has always seemed strange to me—the economic dependence of women. A man who is confronted by extra work never tries to do three men's work. He goes out and hires two extra men. A woman simply shifts the burden on her shoulders to make room for another one, and lets it go at that. She snips a little off the night-time in the morning and a little off at night and burns the daylight at both ends. She gets the credit of