

healthy living

Visits with the Amish

Sustainable farming, living are hallmarks of the plain life

By Linda Egenes

Golden sunlight stretches wide over the Iowa hayfields in early September. At the Yoder farm near Bloomfield, a girl waves a hearty hello.

This is Regina, age 15. Besides household chores, she and her older sister Annie milk their family's cows and drive a team of horses in the fields.

The girls laugh merrily when they talk. "Some people think we are twins, especially when we dress the same," says Annie with a laugh. Today they wear identical raspberry-colored dresses, white aprons, and royal blue scarves tied under their chins.

Both say they'd rather spend their day in the fields than inside the house. "I think it's great fun to work out," says Regina.

"I feel more free outside," agrees Annie in her mild way. "Farm-work doesn't have to be done so fine and neat as needlework."

Their day starts at 6 a.m., when their father wakes up the eight children who still live at home. Before breakfast, the girls feed the cows while their father and 22-year-old brother, Dan, feed the horses. All four help with the milking, then Dan goes off to work as a carpenter.

The 12 black-and-white spotted Holsteins all look identical to me, but the girls befriended Jody, Joline, Vera, Abby, Shirley, Tina, Sheila, Fannie, and Pam when they were calves and call each one by name. Honey Lou and Sunny Sue, two fawn-colored Jerseys munching on hay in the corner, complete their herd.

Do the cows ever kick?

"Some people's cows do kick, but ours don't," says Regina. "If they start to kick, we give them a little slap and they learn they can't do that." Hobbles — clamps that gently draw the cow's hind legs together just above the knee — keep the cows quiet during milking.

Sometimes the girls do get stepped on, which is not too serious. "It hurts for about five minutes, and that's all there is to it," says Regina.

Inside the barn I meet two colts, Dawn and Beauty. Regina pats Beauty on the lips, who bares her teeth in a jack-o'-lantern smile. "I like to tease her," says Regina mischievously. "She bit me the other day, just to be playful. Boy, did that hurt."

An immense black stallion stands in the stall across from the colts. "He's gentle," Regina reassures me as she strokes his forehead between soft black eyes.

"He helps us clean the barn in winter by pulling the manure spreader while we pile it up."

Suddenly three wide-eyed children appear. Robert, David and Grace, aged seven, 10 and 12, just drove home from their one-room school in an open pony cart. They show me how to hitch it up. Like a well-trained team, Robert and David pull the cart out of the shed while Grace slips the bridle on Midnight, their pony, and backs her in between the cart's shafts. In one minute, thanks to teamwork, it's ready to go.

Annie takes me for a ride. The wind blows in our faces. Annie likes riding in a cart better than a buggy, she says, "because it's more open, more free." We pass the grassy pasture where the Yoders' cows and horses graze peacefully. With just a slight tug, Midnight turns around.

Back on the farm, I notice the family's three black, covered buggies stored in an open shed. Annie and Regina have driven their family's covered buggies to town or to visit friends "since we were big enough to read up and put the bridle on the horse," says Annie.

The family owns two Standard Bred geldings to pull the buggies and nine big-boned Percheron mares to plow the fields. Both girls love to mow the hay fields with a team of two mares. "If you like horses, you like to do things with them," says Annie.

"Driving a workhorse is even more fun than driving a gelding, because they're more powerful," says Regina. "When you drive a team, you just feel content. Except you have to watch to make sure you're at the row you should be and the mower doesn't get jammed up."

The geldings and massive draft horses are easy to handle and calm, the girls tell me. "We do have one pony that is kind of skittish," says Regina. "So only Dad or Dan (her older brother) rides him."

Soon it's 5 p.m. and time for Regina to round up the horses and cows from the pasture. Barefoot, she rides Midnight without a saddle, because "Dad says it's more fun to ride bareback."

The sun slips low on the horizon by the time the cows are in their stalls. In a graceful motion, Annie swings the hobble chain under a cow named Sheila and fastens it just above the knees, drawing them together.

"Usually, you milk cows on the right side," Annie says. But since Sheila is a two-bucket cow, the girls place their stools on opposite sides of Sheila, clutch shiny metal pails between their legs, and pull the cow's teats with both hands in brisk rhythm. Frothy milk splashes into the buckets.

"Want to try?" Annie asks. I do, but when I squeeze the cow's udder, there's barely a trickle. Annie laughs and makes milk squirt like a faucet.

They like to sing while milking. A plaintive hymn floats in the air, voices clear and sweet, perfectly on key. "There are no shadows without the sunshine. There are no showers when all is fair. And roses blooming in thorny places with sweetest fragrance perfume the air."

Excerpted from "Visits with the Amish: Impressions of the Plain Life," which recently has been re-released by the University of Iowa Press. The book is available online and in local bookstores. The author will speak at 7 p.m. May 18 at the Fairfield (Iowa) Public Library, 104 W. Adams. To schedule a talk, contact Linda Egenes at laegenes@gmail.com.

