



Sun Times photo by Doug Camp

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Judy Geddes cutting hay on the family farm near Bervie

# Farm wife a businesswoman too

By EILEEN MORROW

For The Canadian Press

KINCARDINE — "Bring boots,"

was her only advice.

That and a map so accurate I drove straight to the 100-hectare sheep-breeding farm without missing a beat.

I was to spend the next 24 hours there, chasing around after shepherdess Judy Geddes, learning first hand what a farm woman does.

The boots, it turned out, were the only defence against whatever it was we kept sloshing and slipping through. And the map? Well Geddes trucks the 375-kilometre round trip to the Toronto stockyards almost every Monday, so she knows in detail the way down from Kincardine.

As I arrive, Geddes is washing dishes, concocting a casserole, punching down bread dough and doing the laundry — all at the same time.

It's her lunch hour.

Later she'll go out to the barn and get down to the real work.

By two o'clock, she's busy with what — about 800 of them — trying to separate the sheep from the lambs, and they're not co-operating.

On the grand tour of the farm, Geddes introduces the other residents: assorted goats, veal calves, pigs, horses, chickens, rabbits, peacocks, the obligatory barn cats and Sheba the dog, a shepherd, of course.

She isn't kidding when she calls

it an Old MacDonald's farm. But she's certainly not an Old MacDonald's farmwife.

She outlines how a breeding farm works, and the homey vision of Geddes 'dishing' out lunch to husband Bill, and a visiting neighbor is already starting to fade.

Forget the rubbers and overalls. And forget the healthy round face. This is business and Geddes is a businesswoman.

In less than 10 years, farm women have moved from the obscurity of cozy country kitchens to the limelight of magazine covers and TV talk-show circuits. They want recognition for the farm work they do and they want respect for their intelligence, professional expertise and feelings.

"In our particular operation, we're aiming for a ewe that will lamb with no problems," she said. "We look for ewes with lambs that gain well, ones with multiple births and ones that lamb three times every two years or twice a year."

How does she know which is which?

"Easy," says Geddes. "I keep the records."

"In the production line, it's your poorer ewes that give you problems. They don't put lambs on the market as quickly and they don't make as big and strong prospective breeding stock. So you keep records because records make you money."

When the lambs are born, Geddes

tags their ears and enters their number in her little black book.

As the lamb grows, its life story unfolds in records: birth, weight gain, breeding patterns and death.

Like most farm wives, Geddes also keeps all the financial records, handling hundreds of thousands of dollars in stock and property.

Geddes does her bookkeeping after dinner and the evening chores. This afternoon will be spent helping her husband sort, vaccinate and cut tails off the latest crop of about 200 lambs.

As evening beckons, it's hard to remember when Geddes possibly managed to prepare a dinner of roast lamb, scalloped potatoes, homegrown corn, freshly baked buns, goat's milk and homemade cupcakes.

At dinner, the family including father Bill, John, 19, Donald, 17, and Mary Alice, 14, share the highlights of the day and watch television.

After dinner, there's no relaxing for Geddes.

"Normally, I'd do my evening chores and bookkeeping now, but tonight I'm going to a meeting instead."

Half an hour later, Geddes traded her farm threads for a navy-blue pantsuit and simple white blouse.

Tidy and perfumed, she's just in time to greet the car pool of women for an hour's drive each way.

The conversation on the way focuses on local gossip. On the way back, it turns to imports and tariffs, public education tactics and the role of farm women's groups in political change.

Back home, it's after midnight and Bill still isn't in from the barns.

The next morning at 7 a.m., Geddes apologizes for sleeping in. Goats must be milked, weak lambs bottle fed, newborns recorded and banking done.

In between, Geddes vaccinates and tags sheep and throws around 22-kilogram bales of hay.

She estimates she spends eight or nine hours a day, sometimes more, on farm work doing almost every job in the operation except shearing and some of the heavy crop work.

While she knows some women wouldn't be caught dead in the barns, most farm women work hard on family operations, she said. And she doesn't think city people realize just how much.

"I don't think they have any idea of what work is involved. I don't think it ever occurs to them the amount of debt and the amount of work we put in to put a product on the market."

In a lot of cases, high interest rates make the debt intolerable, said Geddes. For she and her husband, future plans that once seemed a certainty now are completely up in the air.