

Memoirs of a farmer's wife

In the late 1970s, career options for women were limited. Having grown up in an era where most of our mothers were "stay at home moms", many young girls were not particularly career orientated, but went off to university where they knew they would make life-long friends and probably meet their future husbands. Our chosen course was mostly a BA degree, which became known on campus as B.A. Mansoek (seeking a husband).

I passed THAT with flying colours and in the June holidays of my final year, was taken to see if I liked what would become my future home: the family farm of my Karoo farmer, husband to be. I recall it being the most romantic holiday on this lovely, remote farm where the sunsets were indescribably beautiful.

It was, of course, hunting season and as a town girl, I was exposed for the first time to the harsh reality of a pile of dead springbok being tossed onto a bakkie. Traces of the blood dripping from the back would remain for some time, to bear witness to that deed. I was horrified by the beauty of those dead, innocent animals, whose eyelashes were nearly 3cm long! Had my future husband ever noticed that?

Having never lived on a farm, I was used to the normal comings and goings of town life. People popped in for tea regularly and the supermarket was open 7 days a week. I started my life as a farmer's wife, filled with excitement and anticipation. I realized that a daily visit to the supermarket was out of the question and quickly learnt to plan appropriately, but the loneliness of not only hours, but days on my own while my husband

was out farming, took longer to overcome. I remember hearing a car on the dirt road and thinking, "I don't really care who you are, please just stop in here for tea!"

There are farmers' wives who enjoy dosing, innoculating and actively farming side-by-side with their husbands. These are probably girls who grew up on farms. And then there are wives who are probably more like me. I never wanted to be involved in the farming and saw my role rather as that of a homemaker and mother.

The loneliness I initially felt was soon filled with a million things which could be done and I threw myself into creating an oasis to which my husband could return after spending a long day in the (often very dry) veld. A luscious green lawn and colourful garden were the rewarding fruits of my labour. My sewing machine also provided many hours of creative enjoyment and no curtain or cushion in my home was ever purchased ready made. The thought of employing a painter also never entered my head and if a room needed redecorating, the kitchen table served as a means of reaching the ceiling with my roller; and D.I.Y. wife was born!

There were many adaptations to be made by a wife from town who had grown up with all the "mod cons" available to man. A farm without electricity was probably the greatest challenge. How would I ever survive without a hair drier before going to town in the morning?

I did, and gas hot brushes, paraffin and gas heaters, gas hot water, an Aga stove and Lister engine became the norm for me. My city

friends found it awfully quaint and admired my determination to survive! I must add that their children had never seen the stars that light up a Karoo sky at night. These are always obliterated by city smog. A telephone line shared by seven families was another obstacle that was not easy to overcome. The possibility that no call is private is a disquieting thought, but I learnt to adapt to that too. The frustration when an urgent call needed to be made and the line remained busy, I also eventually accepted. I did welcome the advent of the cell phone though!

Raising children on a Karoo farm was both challenging and wonderful. Small children seem to have the capacity to be perfectly healthy one minute, and desperately ill the next. Living where no doctor or medicines are readily available is daunting, but in most ways, farm life was paradise for our children. The water furrows became canals for racing stick-boats, the overhanging trees a hide-away where a child could escape into a world of his own, and the shed the home of fairies and goblins in a child's mind. Canned-fruit bottles were containers for catching "hoss-groppers" and hanslammetjies were nurtured and raised.

However, nothing can quite prepare a mother for the harsh reality of sending a 6 year old away to boarding school. At that time the fact that "we all survived", was no comfort. The Christmas holiday before boarding school became a crash course in survival for "mom's baby". He had to learn to fasten buttons, tie shoelaces, make a bed, and to wear one pair of grey shorts for two days, but a clean shirt every day. (I eventually bought five of everything!) Then came the final preparations - the psychological ones. "It will just be 4 sleeps at school and then 3 sleeps at home." The reply was heart breaking. "Please, Mommy, can't it be 3 at school and 4 at home?" and then the inevitable, "Why must I go to school?" A long talk about the importance of being able to read, write and do sums followed, and was duly accepted. Little prepared me for the small voice, 18 months later, when my child was well into Grade 2, saying excitedly, "Mom, I think I can stay at home now. I can read, write and do sums, so that's that!"

On a farm, the labourers' wives should be gainfully employed, and Griet and Sanna presented themselves at the back door shortly after I had arrived. They were to become my employees and, in a way, my companions for some time to come. It would take much educating and training before the ways of the new "town missus" were learnt, but we settled into a good relationship.

Ten reasons to love your sheep

- *Sheep don't get suspicious if you have to work late*
- *A sheep won't use your razor to shave its legs, or your pocketknife to open a paint can*
- *A sheep won't give your favorite hunting shirt to Goodwill*
- *Sheep grow their own fur coats*
- *Sheep don't hate football season*
- *You can sell a sheep when you're tired of it*
- *A sheep doesn't care if you ever meet its parents*
- *Sheep could care less about chocolate or what it does to their thighs*
- *A sheep won't drink your beer*
- *Sheep won't tell you to mow the lawn - they mow it for you*

I have often wished that I had kept a diary of my interaction with the labourers and domestic staff on the farm. I will never forget the weekend my daughter brought 12 friends home for her birthday and Sanna duly arrived in the kitchen on Saturday morning. I soon realised she was suffering from the after-effects of a great party which had been held at the staff houses the night before, but I let her be. An hour later I discovered all the still dirty dishes neatly put away in the kitchen cupboards!

Sunday evenings usually brought some member of staff to the back door with a request for something to be purchased when I took the children to school on Monday. On this particular Sunday, Amos had a simple request, "Missus, I need porridge." I replied that there was mealie meal in the store and asked if he would prefer something different. His reply was, "No, Missus, ox-blood porridge to porridge my shoes!" The next request had me somewhat baffled. Jan needed me to buy "stops" urgently. After the porridge incident, I wracked my brains for a "translation". It took a while to discover that it was reflectors for his bicycle which were urgently needed, so that a car "stops" at night when it sees Jan on a bicycle.

Griet would become far more than just my domestic worker. As the years went by, she became my daily companion and friend. My brief foray into baking bread (for which I didn't seem to have much aptitude) received the following response from Griet. "If Missus throws that bread at someone, they will be dead!" Griet duly took over the bread-baking duties and we were greeted in the morning by the smell of delicious, light, freshly baked bread. Unfortunately,

Griet and I were destined to part ways. On a farm, the domestic workers' jobs are largely dependent upon the value of their husbands as farm labourers and Griet's husband had been, in my husband's words, "a passenger" for too long. His final misdemeanour was to disappear for two weeks after a visit to town, and he lost his job. Griet had to move on too. I was never able to replace her in either my home or my heart.

Before I married my merino sheep farmer, a sheep was a sheep. They all looked the same and I honestly didn't even know the difference between a ewe and a ram. I did discover that "to follow like sheep" was certainly a true saying as whenever I returned from a trip to town, I knew that if the first sheep decided to cross the road, I would have to wait for the whole flock! I soon learnt that no two sheep even look alike and that some are more pleated than others, some have finer wool, some are bigger and more correctly built and that the importance of breeding with the right stud ram and ewes is vital to achieving your ideals. A visit to ram breeders or sales and the excitement of purchasing or selling a ram was something to be celebrated with a bottle of champagne on the stoep overlooking the land we own.

On a Merino sheep farm, shearing time is the culmination of a year's hard work and the excitement in a shearing shed is an almost tangible feeling. Once I had overcome the distinctive "sheep smell" of my husband's clothing, I too could enjoy this time of reaping the fruits of one's labour. I soon learnt to appreciate the microns of our wool, the importance of classing and sorting correctly and I came to understand the effect

that good years or droughts would have on the amount and strength of our wool.

The wool price was an important topic of conversation and many hours of discussion and debate about whether we should sell now or hold our wool back for a while, ensued. I realised early that being an outstandingly good farmer was no guarantee that big money would be made. The Karoo droughts can be long and fearful and a farmer's wife has huge responsibilities to not only keep the purse strings tight in lean years, but also to be an emotional rock for her husband.

Shearing time is also a time of great excitement for a Merino farmer's children. Friday afternoon returns from school were followed by a charge to the shed to play in the wool bins. Many memories of leaping off a wall into four metres of beautiful, soft wool are cherished by our children. I too will never forget the feel of their soft limbs coated with lanolin after hours of romping in their dad's wool.

My children did survive boarding school and I learnt to bottle jam, bake rusks in my Aga and turn the beautiful springbok with the long eyelashes into biltong and venison pie. I started to not only enjoy, but also cherish the solitude of the farm. The sunsets remain indescribably beautiful and we have raised, I think, relatively well balanced children who value the memories of stick-boats in the furrows, fairies in the shed and the freedom of a paradise they would never have experienced had they grown up in the city. They are studying at the same university where my husband and I met. I wonder where their lives will take them?

