

The Life of a Farming Mother

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On a day in 1935 the blazing sun beat down on her dark hair while she tediously picked cotton by hand. The ground beneath her feet was burning hot in need of relief she used her feet to dig through to the cooler dirt finding instant comfort. She was thirsty but knew that if she went to the house for water the walk back to the field would leave her as thirsty as she had been before. Her name is Kathleen VanHorn and this was just an average day in her life.

Born in 1920, into a farming family Kathleen soon became accustomed to hard work as a way of life. As a child she worked the fields with her parents, two sisters, and a brother. In addition to farm work she learned household chores like cooking and

cleaning from her mother. She and her siblings did not attend school as often as children do today, as Kathleen stated “We went to school about three months out of the year”. The rest of the year they were needed to help work the fields and take care of livestock. Kathleen’s family had a cow for milk, and chickens for eggs or sometimes for meat to eat. Her family raised hogs, and killed them for food during the cold winter months. Until the time was right for the hogs to be killed her family survived mostly on coffee and biscuits. She tells about the food they ate saying, “There was not a lot to eat then it was tight, but we made it through alright”. As farmers her family worked constantly, mostly just to survive, there was little money left over for luxury items. The children received only one pair of shoes each year so they could attend school in the winter months. The lack of finances also meant they did without the luxury of transportation everywhere they went, they had to walk to get there. It was truly a different world than we live in today even the common age for marriage was different. People got married and started families, a lot younger than most people do now.



In 1937 at only seventeen years old she married Gilbert Snell whom she would stay married to until his death in 1994. After the wedding she left her family's farm to start a life with her husband on a farm of their own. As time went by they raised not only corn, cotton, and beans they also began raising children. Kathleen's first child was born when she was eighteen, after that she had a baby almost every two years until she ended up with ten children total. Though she had ten children only three of them were born in a hospital. It was common in those days for women to have children at home with the help of a Granny woman, commonly known today as a midwife. The midwife was usually an older woman who had children of her own and lived near by. When the expecting woman went in labor someone, usually the woman's husband would go pick up the midwife and bring her to the house. Having a baby at home is nothing like the birthing

process today, they had no pain medication all births were completely natural.

It was not until her eighth pregnancy that hospital deliveries had become more popular, and she decided to have her eighth child at the hospital. Kathleen's daughter Faye can remember the birth of her younger sister well "Mom went into labor, me and my oldest sister Louise had to run down the street to find a neighbor to take her to the hospital. We were afraid and excited all at the same time." Kathleen's water broke before she got to the hospital, and the baby was born only five or ten minutes after she arrived. The doctors did not even have time to prepare her for delivery. The baby was a girl named Shirley, but was later given a nick name that has stuck with her throughout her life. Louise the oldest sister began calling Shirley pickles, because their family was growing pickles close to the time she was born. The name was eventually shortened to pic which she still answers to today. Kathleen had many children because she saw each one as a blessing from God.



Being a religious woman, and deeply devoted to her beliefs she followed the strict guidelines of the church. She did not believe in preventing pregnancy as a member of the Church of God; she believed that God would give her as many children as he wanted her to have. She has practiced this religion all of her life and still follows its strict regulations today some of which include: women do not cut their hair, their hair is worn in a bun on top of the head, women must wear dresses or skirts, they do not believe in birth control. Out of the ten children Kathleen Snell had there were four boys and six girls, and they all helped and did their part on the farm just as Kathleen had done as a child. Some differences in her life after being married was the fact that there was a little more money then. They certainly had more to eat than she did as a child and were even able to buy a mule and cart which was used for traveling short distances. Though her situation had greatly improved the work was still hard and money was always “tight”. “Times were hard for everyone back then”, Kathleen recalls.

It was expensive to feed and clothe ten children even though they raised most of their food and wore many hand-me-down clothes. To help earn more money Kathleen even found time to do seasonal farm work outside the home. She worked for other near by farmers. She chopped peanuts and worked in tobacco. It was important then to have a strong family structure, because when their parents were working hard to support a large family, the older children had to look out for the younger ones. The family’s hard work did not go unrewarded. Though the majority of their time was spent working when Sunday rolled around it was time for some fun.

Kathleen and Gilbert spent Sunday’s with their children it was then that what they lacked in finances was made up for with plenty of quality time and love. They not only

worked as a family but they played as a family too. The most common games for them to play were baseball, and sometimes hide and seek both things they could do in their own back yard. Sunday was also a day for treats such as home made ice cream and cakes made from scratch, to make ice cream they had to take turns cranking the hand crank on the ice cream maker. It was a time full of peace and relaxation, in preparation for the hard work that would be done in the following week. Even though they did not have money to spare, eventually the family found a way to afford some of the new luxuries of that time period.

It was not until the 1950s that they were given the opportunity to enjoy many of life's modern luxuries of that time period. In 1952 Kathleen and Gilbert Snell bought a house and eight acres of land for five hundred dollars, after that day life continued to improve for the Snell family. Kathleen's oldest daughter Louise got married and moved out, giving her the opportunity to give something back to the family she loved dearly. Louise used her income tax check from her job working at Belks to provide her family with their first electric lights. Kathleen recalls this day with joy, "We were all so excited we had never seen anything like that before, and we were proud to have those lights." Kathleen's daughter, Faye, can also remember that day clearly, "I was about eight years old at the time we were excited about the electric lights but did not yet have enough bulbs for all of the light fixtures. I remember I had some pennies that day and I wanted to hide them some where my sisters and brothers wouldn't find them. Never having had electric lights I didn't know any better than to take my pennies and throw them into an empty light fixture causing sparks to fly and a blown fuse." Electricity was the first step toward an easier life style for their family.



In 1957 Kathleen was able to get her first refrigerator, which was a big change from using her out dated ice box to keep food cool. Before the refrigerator there was only an icebox that held a large block of ice for keeping items cool. It was much less efficient than the electric refrigerator they bought that year. Only two years later in 1959 Kathleen and her husband bought their first washing machine. This was a great relief and convenience for Kathleen, who had been washing clothes on a wash board as long as she could remember. “I washed clothes on a wash board and put them in a pot of water to boil then I ran them through a ringer, and hung them up to dry.” Washing clothes on a wash board was hard work especially when washing for a large family, the new washing machine helped to greatly reduce the amount of time that Kathleen spent washing her family’s clothes. Though the 1950s held many good times for Kathleen and her family those were not the only good years.

In 1961 Kathleen watched television in her own house for the first time, it was only a small black and white television, but it caused excitement for the entire family.

Kathleen can remember that day well, “The first programs I ever watched on television were soap operas, and I have been hooked on them ever since”. Some of the popular soap operas of that time were “Search for Tomorrow”, “Guiding Light”, and “Edge of Night”. Kathleen’s husband on the other hand found enjoyment in watching many different westerns on television, and the children were there to watch whatever their parents were watching. These were good times for the whole family Kathleen recalls, “The ability to own all of these luxuries made us all proud, we all felt rich then.”

Television was only entertainment compared to the joy and necessity of having an automobile. It was not long after getting electricity that Kathleen’s son Paul bought the first family car, it was a 1938 Chevrolet that he paid fifty dollars for. Having a car made life a lot easier for Kathleen as well as the rest of the family. They could travel to stores to buy food and other supplies, more often than they were able to before they were also able to travel farther from home than had ever been possible before. Though the car was very exciting for the whole family Kathleen was afraid to drive it. It was not until 1972 when she was in her late forties that she worked up the nerve to get her driver’s license. Despite her new found independence Kathleen continued her life as a wife and mother with great joy.



Over the years Kathleen and Gilbert's ten children all grew up, got married and had their own children except for their oldest son Buddy, who never married. They spent the rest of their time together, enjoying watching their grandchildren and great grandchildren grow, until Gilbert's death in 1994. When her husband of fifty-seven years died from a massive heart attack, Kathleen was lonely and heart broken. The family who had always been very close pulled together to comfort one another in a time of great loss, and as they always had before, they managed to make it through another hard time. Though she still misses her husband greatly even today, Kathleen has found strength and comfort in her large family. A family that has grown in numbers over the years until she can proudly state, "I have twenty-one grandchildren, nineteen great-grandchildren, and even one great great-grandchild" all of which she loves greatly.

In December of 2000 Kathleen's family was once again struck by tragedy, when her youngest child Connie died after a long battle with cancer. Her death greatly affected Kathleen as well as the rest of the family. After all of her years of struggling to make it through the hardest of times, the worse thing Kathleen would ever have to face was

losing her own child. Being a devoted mother the pain she felt was overwhelming, but with the help of her family she once again found a way to survive.

It is now 2007 Kathleen who will be eighty-seven years old in July still spends the majority of her time caring for her family, especially her oldest son Paul Snell, who is called Buddy by most people. Buddy was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at only nineteen years old, since then the muscles in his body have slowly become weaker. After he lost the ability to walk he found other ways of getting around, he did mechanic work to a golf cart and used it as a mode of transportation around their property. In the past ten years his health has declined greatly he has been in and out of hospitals with pneumonia, and finally ended up in the Belhaven hospital on a respirator. His mother has been there for him every step of the way offering all of the support she can possibly give. She visits him each day making the forty minute trip from Roper to Belhaven with one of her daughter-in-laws, Nancy. Kathleen spends everyday with her son even at eighty-six her most important job in life is to be an excellent mother.

My great-grandmother Kathleen Snell has dedicated her life to loving God and taking care of her family. Her perseverance and enduring love have taught generations of her family the importance of hard work, taking care of each other, and most importantly love. Being the mother of ten children, and doing farm work that involved hard physical labor, was no easy task. Through good times and extremely hard times, she like many mothers was the glue that held her family together. I am sure that her children as well as the generations that have followed them have a deep appreciation for who she is, and what she has stood for through the years. She is the true definition of America's farming mother.