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In Their Own Words

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Summer on the Farm

At the age of 100, Dorothy Kau has fond memories of growing up and later raising her children on farms in Waukesha County. She took time in the spring of 2001 to relate her story to the readers of The Eagle Historical Society newsletter. Dorothy has recently donated many artifacts to the museum. Stop in and explore the museum at 217 Main Street in Eagle on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 9 AM – Noon!

My father, John J. VonRueden, and mother, Katherine Faestel VonRueden, were married for only ten years when my father passed away.

Having three children to raise alone, she stayed on the family farm along with her mother-in-law doing the very best she could with hired help and good neighbors. Of course, as we grew up, we all had to pitch in and do our share.

Much before age 16, I had to help with the chores and all the farming activities that go along with farming. It was much different from how it's done today. There weren't buttons to push when I first started out.

The milking was done by hand, so it was one pull after the udder. That chore had to be done before going off to school in the morning, but then we really got lucky and had an electric milker, which was quite a great improvement, still having to strip or making sure the milk was all out and the cow completely dry. Not like this day and age when the machine shuts off automatically when the milk supply stops coming.

There were other jobs around that we all had to help with. Many farmers had a flock of chickens, so we had a good size chicken house and a large flock of chickens. This meant helping with feeding, watering, and gathering the eggs. Trying to get the eggs out without the old hen pecking you was quite tricky and disgusting at times. Now I can see her point of view, but the pail full of eggs was the pay off.

In the summer we kept busy trying to keep the weeds under control. I especially remember one corn field that always had to be hoed by hand because there was an abundance of Canadian Thistles that were in between the stalks and couldn't be reached with the cultivator.

Besides, we had a neighbor, Joe Stute, who was Weed Commissioner, and kept good watch on our obnoxious weeds, namely Canadian Thistle and Oxide Daisies, which had to be cut or pulled so they wouldn't go to seed. (Now they grow wild along the roadsides.)

That wasn't the worst. My mother, being raised as a vegetable farmer, always believed in planting a gigantic garden, or at least I thought so when it came to hoeing, cultivating, and picking pickles. I had to lead this big workhorse on a one row cultivator guiding it through the narrow rows, being sure to keep a close eye on those huge horse's hooves so it wouldn't step on my feet when we had to turn around on the ends. We had to make sure every inch of ground was worked. Needless to say, I was pretty happy at the end of the season when the plants got too big and we no longer could get through with the horse and cultivator.

Then it would be mid-summer and the grain would be starting to ripen. We always hoped to get it cut while it was still standing good or before a storm would come and smash it down, which made it much harder to pick up with the grain binder. It also made better bundles so it would be much easier to shock, which wasn't the most fun on a hot August day. The oat bundles weren't the worst, but they sure could make you itch. They were nothing like the wheat or barley, which had the beards and were very prickly to work with.

Then came the threshing. As kids, we really enjoyed seeing that old steam engine and threshing machine pull into the yard. I don't know about the men who had to do the work, but when I think about it, they always got a great meal. The women would always try to outdo the others, and the men seemed to enjoy having the meal together. I will never forget how my husband, who had run a threshing machine in his youth, fondly remembered a special cake he was once served. He often talked of Mrs. Austring and the dark, red devil's food cake that she had served him on such an occasion. He never had one that was as good. Trying my darndest, I could come close. He would always say my cakes were good, but they still were never quite as good as hers.

In the summer, leisure hours never seemed to come. You never would have a chance to slow down. You could always find something to do from sunrise to sunset.

I did move off the farm for a year or so. I put in some time at Krestan's Grocery, but when I got married, what do you know, I was just transplanted back to the farm, ironically, about two miles as the crow flies from the farm where I grew up. It was larger with more acres and more modern advancements.

My husband, Alvin, and I purchased the farm from his father, Matt Kau, who had bought it from Sam Engel after an auction for a handshake and a dollar for a down payment. People were much more trustworthy in those days. We stayed at the same place for fifty years with many, many more changes and enlargements, enjoying it all.

But that's another story. Enough for now.

