Achadunan Farm – May Lang

The Early Life of May Lang, Born at Dalhenna Farm 1932

The family moved to Achadunan Farm from Dalhenna in 1939. I was a very excited seven-year-old. I had three big sisters, Jean, Betty and Amelia. Jean lived in Glasgow and worked as a hairdresser. It was a big flitting having to move all the dairy animals and a lot of them had to walk the 12 miles.

When we settled down, we started Kilmorich School which was in the village of Cairndow. We had to cycle two miles each way in all weathers. We made friends with another girl, Alice Sinclair, who cycled with us. Alice (now Beattie) and I have remained friends and our friendship is still going strong.

I left school at fourteen to start working on the farm, but Alice went on to Dunoon School. My day started at 6.30 a.m. when I fed all the young stirks (1 – 2-year-old heifers), twenty-four of them tied up in the small byres. The calves had to be fed warm milk straight from the cows. When the spring came the milk cows and young stirks were put out to grass. The milk cows still had to come in to be milked twice a day.

There was no electric power in Achadunan when we arrived so all we had was Paraffin and Tilly lamps. The Tilly lamps were much brighter and were good for outside in the byre. We had a large Paraffin lamp hanging from the ceiling in the living room.

We had three Clydesdale horses – Rosey, Nancy and Danny – and they did all the hard work in the early days before tractors arrived. Dad used to give me a ride on Rosey on the way home after work. I was mad about horses after that and later I was lucky enough to get one of my own, Rajah.

As I got older, I helped in the byre with the milk cows. We now had three units for milking the cows. There were still some cows that had to be milked by hand as they didn’t like the machines. I was given the job of looking after the milking machines and it was heavy work. Twice a day the cows were milked, and it was put through a sieve then through a cooler. When it came out of the cooler the milk was cold and then poured into ten-gallon cans and loaded onto the milk van for selling to the public. It didn’t, matter what we were doing in the afternoon we had to stop and get the cows in for the milking at 4 p.m. every day. Dad delivered the milk to Cairndow Village every day. When Betty got older, she started driving and it helped Dad a lot.

After each milking was finished, all the utensils were sterilized. The sterilizer was round the corner from the byre and we had to carry everything round to it. It was in two compartments, the first had a container with water in it, underneath was a fire for boiling the water. The other compartment was where we washed all the utensils and then put them in the big metal cupboard with two large doors. When there was enough steam made from the water tank, we closed the doors to seal it and turned on the steam to sterilize everything. When the steam was used, the large doors were opened, and we had to be very careful not to get in the way or you would get burnt by the steam. This job had to be done every day.

We had another machine we called a separator and it was for making the double cream. We had to turn the handle until it was going very fast and keep it at the same speed until all the cream had been separated from the milk. Two people had to take turns in turning the handle as it was hard work.

The Ayrshire herd of cows we had were the first Tubercular tested herd in Argyllshire. Once a month a tester called in and each cow’s milk was tested and recorded. All records were entered in a book. It was usually a female that carried out the testing.

War started late in 1939. In 1941 the Government wanted the farmers to employ girls to farm the land as the men had to go to war and they were called Land Girls. We had two land girls working for us to help on the farm, Violet and Margaret Phillips. Their young sister Betty went to school with us. They all came from Glasgow.

The crops had to be planted with the potatoes being planted by hand. We filled a bucket then we dropped a potato a foot and a half apart. By the end of the day you wondered what had happened to your back! The old-fashioned way was stopped after we bought a planter and tractor.

Corn, turnip and kale were also planted. When the turnips were ready for thinning, we had four hawkers – two brothers and two sisters. Hawkers were people who came round the farms selling things they had made or did odd jobs. The four we had were good workers and came every year to thin the turnips. They wrapped canvas bags round their knees and crawled up and down the drills. The thinning was finished in no time and there were five acres to be done. They had a house in Helensburgh and they went round all the farms in the area.

Next big job was the cutting of the corn. The corn was cut by a machine called a binder. As it cut the corn it tied it into bundles and dropped them to one side where they were picked up by the helpers – me included. We had a large corn drier, which had a tin roof with lots of wires along each side where the sheaves were put to dry when the weather was very wet.

I helped to build the sheaves into stooks, it takes six sheaves to build one stook. Then, when the corn was dry enough, the sheaves were taken into the stack yard and built into stacks ready for going through the trashing mill in the winter time. Stacks were made of sheaves laid in a large circle with the grain pointing to the centre, then you kept going round and round until it reached about ten feet high. It came to a point so that the rain ran off it. Some of the sheaves were woven together round the top and held in place with ropes. The rats and mice loved it inside the stacks.

The corn that came from the sheaves was crushed and fed to the cows and the straw was used for bedding.

When the hay was cut, you had to wait until it was dry enough to build it into hay-ricks to dry, before taking them into the hay shed. Ricks are piles of hay tied down. The next big job was lifting the potatoes. Every October the school had a weeks holiday and it was at that time the school children helped us lift the potatoes. We had a machine which dug up the potatoes then the children lifted them and put them in bags. The tractor took them to one of the lofts. There they were spread out to dry and turned every so often. When they were dry they were sold to the public.

We always had to help mum with the cleaning of the house. We had to scrub the six wooden chairs in the kitchen every week and scrub the stone floor. We had to get down on our hands and knees to wax and polish any linoleum floors. Come spring we had the spring cleaning that included lifting all the moveable carpets and taking them outside, putting them on the clothes line and beating them with beaters made of bamboo until all the dust was gone. The beating loosened the dirt so that we could then brush it off. Also the woodwork had to be cleaned and the curtains had to be taken down and washed. We were glad when the electricity was available in Achadunan, then we could enjoy all the labour-saving gadgets like vacuum cleaners. No more crawling about on our knees!

Mum had 200 hens in the orchard that she looked after, and she sold the eggs they produced in Inveraray. Where the hens were kept is now a sheep shed for lambing. Mum also made butter in a churn once a week. We took turns in turning the handle until the butter was separated from the butter milk, then mum made the butter into pats. During the war we were meant to be banned from making butter but that didn’t stop mum! We had eggs, butter and milk – all we needed. I know most people had everything rationed but we were lucky.

One night during the war, when I was about 9 years old two Landmines were dropped in the estate. There were two huge explosions, what a fright we all got!

Amelia got married when she was 21 and left the farm to live in Glasgow. Her husband Colin was a Policeman. Amelia missed the farm but not the hard work! Shortly after Amelia left, a young man came to work for us as a ploughman. He turned out to be my future husband James Wilson.

In the mid 50’s Dad had an accident with the bull he was handling. The bull swung his head round and struck him in the ribs, breaking two of them. He was in his 70’s by then and wasn’t very well after that. The doctor said he would be better in bed from where he ran the farm. Betty was his right hand, keeping him informed of all the daily happenings. Even though Dad was in bed, he still managed to keep his books. In January 29th, 1957 we lost Dad, it was a great shock to us all. It also meant that there was a lot of work ahead for us.

The family decided that we would have to give up the farm as it was going to be too much for us. It was decided there was to be a sale of everything the following October. This meant that all the machinery had to be painted and the milk cows had to be washed and clipped ready for selling. The day of the sale was terrible, to see all the animals being sold and getting loaded onto lorries. Most of them had been pets to us. Rajah was not sold though, Betty said she would look after him as Mum and her were going to be staying on at the house.

After the sale in 1958, I married James, who had managed to secure a job with the Hydro Electric Board and we moved to a house in the village.

Now that there were no milk cows Betty bought cartoned milk from a retailer and carried on selling milk as usual, in Inveraray and Cairndow, this went on until 2002. Betty had to give it up because of ill health then we lost her in September 16th, 2002. The milk was delivered to Inveraray by Lang’s from 1925-2002, 77 years. I think this is quite a record.