

# Farm Girls

Denise McCravey



**S**CATTERED LIKE wildflowers across the Gorge are women living the country life. Their days are full: planting a garden, raising animals, spinning wool, canning food. The way of life affects the lives of friends and family, and it leads all of them on new paths. Muddy boots by the door, rough hands always in need of soothing balm, and never-ending chores are part and parcel of the life they choose.

They cook meals for family and friends, filling the table with fresh vegetables from their gardens, meat raised on their farms, freshly baked bread, and fruit from their trees, drizzled with honey from their bees or cheese made that morning. Serving their bounty is what they do as a part of life. Their joy, digging in their soil to plant potatoes, is transferred to the delicious fall soup served with bread, made from wheat they milled and butter they churned. They do modestly what others couldn't imagine doing at all.

These women are practical. Some innate part of their being knows how to bind a wound on man or animal. They know how to help animals give birth. They know how to store onions for the winter. They know how to appreciate both the sun and the rain.

Helping others seems to be second nature. It may be mending a fence or a pair of jeans; they just step forward and help. A farm girl doesn't miss a step in a rainstorm as she brings a newborn goat into the house to warm up. She wraps it in a towel and fills a bathtub with warm water; the tub can always be scrubbed and the towel washed.

Farm girls use what they have. A large tree that fell in a winter storm might be cut for firewood. A portion of the trunk can be used for a stool or tabletop, or its branches can be woven between the wires for an artistic garden fence. If the tree were a Ponderosa Pine, they could gather the needles to make baskets, weaving beside a winter fire. When an early winter freeze is expected, they gather the last of the garden's tomatoes, onions, carrots, and other crops to can for winter soup: there is no reason to waste good food. When she cannot find the perfect tool, wire, thread, or pot, she makes do with what she has.

Fashion is unimportant to farm girls. Yet, seeing one striding purposefully to the barn—feed bucket in gloved hand in jeans,

boots, Carhart jacket, and a hat—you glimpse the natural fashion statement. Store-bought battered and faded jeans seem imitation by comparison. Farm girls walk with confidence, wearing a look of experience, of life lived well on a farm. It is a style that the fashion industry is unable to reproduce because these girls are authentic, one of a kind.

Capable hands have peeled mountains of apples and potatoes over the years, doctored sick cattle, gathered eggs, turned compost, and sewn aprons. Still, the hands remain strong yet gentle, worn yet beautiful.

Farm girls find that a pickup truck, with its strong hitch and a trailer, is the right rig whether it's hauling hay, carrying 50-pound bags of grain to the barn, or transporting a sick animal to the vet. They learn to drive tractors and backhoes because it is necessary. A two-seat compact sports car might be nice but just can't get the job done.

Farm girls are the first to admit that farm life is easier when men help with the work. Smart. While they're independent, they know the value of working together. It may make sense for the woman to can the tomatoes while the man cleans out the irrigation ditch; but if the ditch has to be cleaned and the man is not around, then the farm girl grabs the shovel and goes without hesitation.

Some farm girls are born on a farm that has been in the family for generations. Many others were born and raised in large cities, yet a yearning to grow food, raise animals, and live on the land tugged at their hearts.

They may live on a couple of acres in a small cottage, tucked under huge oak trees; or they may be in large country homes on hundreds of acres. A farm girl's heart holds something hard to define, but you see the signs—their joy digging the deep, rich soil while planting and harvesting; their love of the barn's lush, pungent smell; their need to be surrounded with animals, large and small. They seem thankful while walking the frost-crusted path to the barn to pick up a newborn animal. Sometimes those feelings of longing lie lodged in the heart, waiting for her to find her paradise in the country. Some live their country life everyday.

---

*Fashion is unimportant to farm girls. Yet, seeing one striding purposefully to the barn—feed bucket in gloved hand in jeans, boots, Carhart jacket, and a hat—you glimpse the natural fashion statement.*

---





**Elena Smith stands by the rock column** that holds the sprinkler to water the garden built by her husband Kevin.



**Where most people would put a swinging gate** to go from house to pasture, the Smiths used the top of a tree trunk turned upside down to create an opening large enough for a person yet too small for a cow. Ever resourceful, they used a tree broken by the snow.

## Farm Girl Elena Smith

For years people knew Elena Smith as the soft-spoken Hood River librarian with a North Carolina voice and a gentle smile. She fit this role so well that few knew she led a second life as farm girl extraordinaire. Remember the Johnny Cash song called “I’ve Been Everywhere”? In the song, he sings the names of every city one can think of in a fast string: “Been to Reno, Chicago, Fargo, Minnesota, Buffalo, Toronto, Winslow, Sarasota...”

Trying to list all of the things Elena does on the Snowden, Washington farm, shared with husband Kevin, is similar. Elena milks a cow, makes fresh cheese, churns butter, feeds the hens, gathers eggs, grinds wheat, makes fresh bread, grows a garden, freezes and cans, grows hot peppers...you get the idea.

Kevin and Elena Smith began their farm life near Port Angeles, Washington. They learned to raise colored sheep and then to spin and weave the fleece. In 1975 they found 60 acres in Snowden, where they could raise sheep, milk goats, and grow hay. For about 12 years, they operated a home-based woolens business and sold their earflap hats and woven blankets at the Portland Saturday Market.

Over the years, they remodeled and changed the original farmhouse by building fences, erecting barns and sheds, and planting pasture. Woodley and Nate, their children, grew up – running around the hills of the farm, down to the pond, and back to the barn.

Their sheep and goat flocks grew to 60 animals. Milking twice daily became a habit, and selling baby lambs and goats was part of farm life.

“I loved the quiet nature of the Saanen goats. All of us would go to the barn and milk together. It was fun for the family,” Elena recalls, remembering wistfully their farm life when the children were young.

They decided eventually that it was time to sell the herd of goats and buy just one cow from a Trout Lake dairy farmer. Elena wanted to make butter and felt there was nothing better than a Jersey cow, a breed whose milk provides two inches or more of cream at the top of a jar. However, life on a farm can supply moments of frustration and disappointment. For several years the cow was a wonderful addition to the farm, giving large amounts of milk for butter and cheese; but then a rattlesnake bit her, and she never recovered.

Their current large-boned milk cow is half Angus and half Holstein. When a cow is “fresh” it means she has had a calf and is giving milk—four to six gallons a day. Elena makes cheese from the milk—two gallons per batch. Her process for making cheese entails heating the milk, adding the culture, cutting the curd, pouring off the whey, pouring the curds in molds, draining more whey, and coating the cheese in wax or—cheesecloth. She then allows them to age in a cool room for six or more months. Butter, she said, is easier to make and can be wrapped well and frozen.

Time is precious on a farm. Kevin and Elena enjoy milking together, sitting on either side of the cow, with two teats each to milk, while talking about what they did that day or what else must be done. Farm life means making every moment count.

No farm would be complete without animals and more animals. At the Smith farm, chickens share a fenced space in a small fruit orchard near the house. In the last few years, they have raised six or so Angus calves to sell as prime grass-fed beef.

They are raised on grass pasture for 18 months. There is demand for grass-fed beef, and the same folks come to buy from the Smiths year after year.

Artistic expression on a farm often arises from practical need. Watering their 53-foot circular vegetable garden is both beautiful and practical: atop a six-foot tall rock column is a sprinkler. As the fine spray waters the planting beds, it's as if a rain cloud were hovering just above the plants. In winter, the tall rock-column sculpture stands in the circle's center surrounded by arched planting beds that are filled with dark, rich soil.

Gardening is important to Elena; she grows 60 (yes, 60) hot pepper plants each year. She dries and then grinds the peppers into coarse flakes and fine powders. She mixes peppers together to provide intricate flavors, while others are stored in jars labeled by variety. Food from the garden is canned, dried, or frozen for use during the rest of the year.

The orchard has about ten varieties of apples, carefully selected for juice and hard cider. Fall is the time for pressing apples into juice, which they freeze in half-gallon glass jars—100 jars annually. The rest of the apples are used to make hard cider, which they bottle to enjoy with friends and family. Prune plums from their trees are eaten fresh or dried in their large dehydrator.

Every other year, Elena grows a specialty corn to dry and grind for cornmeal. Sometimes the corn is a typical yellow or white corn. Last year, she grew one with a heavenly aroma and dark blue tinges, which made the meal have a deep purple-blue hue. The clearly handcrafted Wolfgang German grinder is a smooth wood box 6" x 6" x 13". Elena grinds flour for bread and corn for either grits or meal. Making bread is a pleasure, she said, with the right grain and equipment.

Elena has not yet completed her Farm Girl song, and her list of things to learn and do continues to grow. How does she learn to do all of these things? She reads books—or asks someone who knows.

Farm girls are willing to learn. If they find a use for what they learned then it is a matter of incorporating those skills into daily life so they can add verses to their own songs.



## Growing Peppers

Elena Smith

I started out growing peppers with my Daddy when I was a little girl. We'd plant a few chilis out in our backyard in Atlanta, and use ripe chilis later to make hot pepper sauce. So hot peppers have been part of my life almost since I can remember.

Nowadays, I start my peppers from seed in April indoors; I usually plant about seven varieties. Our family grows sweet and hot peppers, but our special favorites are chilis and paprikas. Some we especially like are Hungarian Boldog, Aci Sivri, Bolivian Rainbow, Aji Amarillo, Bulgarian Carrot and Habanero, but we like to try at least one new one every summer.

I transplant them out into the garden in the first part of June. Then it's just a wait-and-see until they begin ripening in August and we have our first taste tests. I dry most of the peppers we grow in baskets or in ristras, and then grind them in the food processor. I like the flavor that dried chili adds to foods—it's hot, but not burning like fresh peppers can be. I think of the flavor of dried chili as 'warming.' It is easy to use a lot without overwhelming a dish, and it's fun to prepare blends of them, too.

Paprikas are one of the very best dried peppers and the difference between home-grown and store bought is pretty marked—the aroma of good paprika is rich and complex. It is especially good in stews; it acts a catalyst for other foods bringing out their flavors, opens them up, and gives the stew a full-bodied flavor.

