

Life

on the **Family Farm**

FAMILY STORIES FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

By Kara Storey



The human experience—triumph and sorrow, redemption and suffering—coupled with an unshakable faith in Christ, never ceases to amaze me. That's why asking questions, hearing stories, and allowing my curiosity to run wild is my favorite part of writing. As I listened to the farmers you'll meet in the next several pages, I couldn't shake the truth that their story was my story.

From the outside, it can appear that there is no future for family farming. But after talking with farmers from across the coun-

try, I'd argue that the naysayers don't know who they're betting against. These farmers are dedicated, loyal, self-sacrificing and ingenious. Not one of them would roll over just because it gets hard. It is evident they love what they do, for while they'd much rather have been in bed after a long day of fieldwork or milking, they made time for a journalist in Des Moines in order to share that love of family and farming.

As you'll discover, their stories are real and honest, sometimes heartbreaking and sometimes hopeful. Just like all of ours.

The Eggemeyer's

"There's no better life than to raise your family on the farm," Diane said, reminiscing about days spent praying the rosary with their four kids amongst rows of cotton. "It's a totally different way of living."

At 6 a.m. Billy Eggemeyer Arises, fills his cup of coffee, catches a few minutes of the news and waits for his wife, Diane, to join him a little later. Together, the couple, both 63 and from Midkiff, Texas, ask the Lord's blessing on their day by praying the Liturgy of the Hours.

By 7 a.m., Billy grabs some crackers, an orange and a jug of water, and hits the road for a 16-mile drive to his farthest piece of land where he works for the day. He returns home a little over 12 hours later.

"I don't have any trouble sleeping!" he laughs.

Billy, who grew up farming, traces his farming bloodline all the way back to his great-great grandparents who moved from Germany to Texas to farm. Then, as a sophomore at Texas Tech University, he got a call one night that his dad had been killed in a harvest accident. So he dropped out of school and took over the family farm. He was 19.

In the early 1980s he began buying land and hasn't stopped, he said. The couple own 6,000 acres—1,200 is farmed by Billy and 2,500 by two of his sons. They grow cotton, corn, wheat and milo. While no longer on the

homeplace, the Eggmeyers live only a mile and half from where Billy grew up.

"There's no better life than to raise your family on the farm," Diane said, reminiscing about days spent praying the rosary with their four kids amongst rows of cotton. "It's a totally different way of living."

That way of living includes a complete dependence on God.

"If you're a farmer you have to believe in the above," Billy said. "Everything we do is a roll of the dice. You put a seed in the ground and who makes it come up? It's not me, and it's not my wife or anything else. It's the dear Lord above."

That's why Billy enjoys the quiet of being in the tractor all day. At different points he'll grab one of the rosaries hanging in the cab to pray, or listen to the Chaplet of Divine Mercy on Catholic radio. But mainly, he just has the whole day to speak to God about what's on his heart.

"If I have a problem, I ask God how to fix it," Billy said. "He made this world and I just want to give it to my kids and the next generation better than I had it. God doesn't make land anymore."

That next generation includes

his two oldest sons, who not only farm part of his land, but have bought some of their own as well. There's still a chance the Eggmeyers' youngest son, a sophomore at Texas A&M, will join the farm one day, too.

But in some ways, having the kids decide to come home is the easiest part. Billy questions how long family farming can last with the rising costs.

"You've got to farm a thousand to two thousand acres to make ends meet with the price of equipment and everything else," he said.

But where there's a will there's a way, he added. Already he is seeing neighbors share the cost of harvesting equipment that they use on a rotating basis.

"My dream is that my sons and all the young people that are coming out here now can make it," Billy said. "I want this community to last where their kids can grow up like my kids did."

If Billy has his way, well, his farm will last for generations to come.

He said, "I've threatened my kids that if they sell this stuff I'll come back and haunt them for the rest of their lives!"

The Blom's

"They follow the Golden Rule, never asking their employees to do anything they wouldn't do themselves, and 99 percent of the time no work is done on Sundays."

Nestled in the Central Valley of California, Nick Blom Jr., of Modesto, can't imagine a better place to farm. Two hours from the mountains and two hours from the beach, plus sun almost every day of the year, makes for a very happy farmer.

"There's no place like this in the world for me to be able to farm and do what we do," he said.

That's exactly what Nick Blom Sr., thought when he arrived in America in 1963 from Holland with only \$22 in his pocket. He was convinced he'd become a farmer in California. Lured by the land's beauty and the promise of a job working for his uncle's dairy farm, there he met and married his wife, Els, also a Dutch immigrant. Together they raised four children. In 1969 Nick Sr., finally had a chance at his own land and bought 45 acres of grapes. Six years later he bought a larger parcel two miles down the road and moved his family there.

Today, the farm encompasses 1,200 acres of farmland and another 300 acres of wetland pre-

serve. While Nick Sr. passed away in October 2018, his legacy lives on through his family, particularly his sons Nick Jr. and Pete, who grow almonds, peaches, grapes, walnuts and alfalfa.

Nick Jr. credits his father for teaching him how to run the farm, from learning how to drive a tractor at the age of five, to the responsibility as a 13-year-old to tell a group of peach pickers to go home after they argued for more money. More importantly, he let his sons fail at things he had already tried himself.

"He would say 'Well, go ahead and try it and see if it works,'" recalled Nick Jr. "He knew long ago that the best way to keep the ranch going was to let us learn how to do it."

KEEPING IT GOING

Nick Jr. had always wanted to farm, but after high school, he first went and earned an agricultural degree to become a teacher. Then in 1996, while he was getting his master's degree, his dad mentioned that a neighbor was

selling 55 acres and that Nick Jr. and Pete should buy it.

"And I told him, 'Well, the bank account doesn't say I can do that,'" Nick Jr. said.

So Nick Sr. loaned them the money and thus began the adventure of Nick Jr. and Pete farming together. The brothers divide up the duties, with Pete spending more time in the field and Nick Jr. taking care of the business side of things. Their dual roles lead to more flexibility for each of them to take vacations or attend children's ball games, Nick Jr. said.

But when harvest time comes, it's all hands on deck.

"There's nothing more exciting than seeing a full bin of peaches or the harvester picking up almonds," said Nick Jr. "Yes, it's risky. Farmers are the biggest gamblers there are because we're susceptible to so many things."

FAITH AND FAMILY

Even with that risk, Nick Jr.'s mother, Els, believes there's nothing else as wonderful as running a family farm and the family



togetherness it creates. Besides, greater risk only means they must rely that much more on God. She remembers the struggle during those first few years of farming, always praying for a good crop, and attending Mass on weekends.

"Nick [Sr.] and I always prayed the rosary every night, accepting whatever God had in store for us," she said. "During Easter Nick would put a palm branch in each corner of the field and we would pray with the kids hoping for a good crop."

Their Catholic faith also spills over to how they incorporate their employees into their family. One of the incentives for working at Blom Ranch is living in one of a handful of homes on the property nearly rent free. They follow the Golden Rule, never asking their employees to do anything they wouldn't do themselves, and 99 percent of the time no work is done on Sundays, said Nick Jr. The Bloms have even been invited to the weddings and quinceaneras of employees' children.

"We consider them a gift to us,

too," said Els. "It's a team effort all the way around."

Nick Jr. said his personal faith has also been enhanced by being out in creation. He specifically thinks of early mornings, sulphuring rows of grapes.

"You turn the corner and all of a sudden you see the sun peeking out over the top of the Sierra Mountains, and boy, that hits you real quick and makes you think, 'Man there's got to be some creator making that,'" he said. "It's so beautiful and powerful."

FUTURE FARMING

Nick Jr. estimates that in his area, the days of family farms less than 100 acres are gone. With all of the California regulations and high-priced living, a family farm needs to be around 200 to 250 acres to succeed as the sole income, he said. But he's liking the future prospects of his own farm. Already Pete's 24-year-old son has had some involvement in the operation and Nick Jr.'s 16-year-old son has wanted to be a farmer since he was five.

"We told him he must get a college degree because he has to prove to us that he can educate himself," he said. "Plus, if something were to happen with the ranch, he would then have an education to fall back on."

Els would love it if her grandkids took over the farm someday. She finds satisfaction having the family close by. Nick Jr. and his family live next door to her and Pete is just down the street. A daughter also lives on the farm with her family and there's already a spot waiting for their final daughter's family who currently lives 40 minutes away.

"We always gave the kids the opportunity to go to school, which they did, but they came back on their own," she said. "I never forced them back, but they evidently liked what they saw."

Just like Nick Sr. liked what he saw when he came to that land over 50 years ago.