

The Country Family

By Duval Reads

Today we're going to take an imaginary trip back in time, about three hundred years ago, to an early American farm. If you lived in the country long ago, you and your family did most of the work

necessary for survival right at home. In the country, houses were far apart from one another, so you couldn't rely on neighbors or stores to get everything you needed—you had to make most things at home. Everything you needed—food to eat, water to drink or use for cooking and cleaning, lighting to help you see after dark, heat when it turned cold, and clothing—required a lot of work by the family. Even young children had to help out, because there was so much work to do!

There was no electricity for lamps or lights, and there were no flashlights! The only way to see anything after it got dark was to light candles that you made at home. There were no electric ovens or stoves, so you had to build a fire to heat your home and cook your meals. There were no sinks or faucets with running water inside the house, so you had to fetch any water you needed for drinking, cooking, or cleaning from the nearby creek or the well outside. There were no malls with clothing stores, so you had to make your own clothes. There were no supermarkets, so you had to grow your own vegetables, milk your own cows, and make your own cheese. Imagine doing all that work—every day!

At the start of a typical day in the country, the first thing a woman did was fetch wood to start the fire in the hearth, or fireplace. The hearth was the most important place in the home. Most of the chores to be done required fire, and especially in the winter, everyone needed to stay close to the hearth because it provided the only heat in the house.

After building the fire, a country woman would most likely start her day by baking bread. Sometimes she would make her own flour by grinding corn kernels or wheat into a fine powder. Then she would mix this flour and water with yeast, and let it rise for several hours. The dough would then be put into an iron pot with a tight lid and hung over the hearth to bake, or cook.

One task that had to be done twice a day, no matter what, was milking the cows. This task took a long time and was usually left for children to do.

Once the milk was collected, the milk that was not drunk was either made into cheese or butter. Making cheese involved a slow process of boiling and cooling the milk to produce curds or clumps of soured milk that look sort of like cottage cheese. These curds were pressed into forms to make the cheese.

To make butter, milk was left to sit until the fatty cream floated to the top. Then the cream was poured into a tall, wooden container called a churn. A child usually had to pump the handle of

the butter churn, called the dasher, up and down for a long time until the fat in the cream separated into butter. The leftover liquid, called buttermilk, was used for cooking or drinking.

People in the country ate mostly vegetables and grains. They only ate meat if the men or nearby neighbors had butchered one of their animals. Because there were no refrigerators, the meat had to be preserved so it would not spoil. This was done by hanging it in strips above the fire or in a separate shed like this one called a smokehouse. The smoke from the fire dried out the meat, which prevented spoiling. Other foods were preserved by covering them in salt, canning them, or storing them in a cool, dark cellar.

After all those chores were done, it was time for the sewing. In colonial times, women had to make their own thread and cloth before they could sew anything! Men and boys picked cotton from the fields or sheared the sheep, and women cleaned and dyed this cotton or wool. Then women made the cotton or wool into thread or yarn. After that, they would weave the yarn into cloth to be used for clothing. Girls were taught to sew and weave usually before the age of ten, so they could help make their own clothes. Because it was so much work to make clothes and so expensive to buy new clothes in town, much of the sewing work was patching or fixing old clothes that had become worn out and had holes or tears.

Because children were expected to help out with every one of these chores, they did not have a lot of time to play. The few toys they had, they usually made themselves. Sometimes girls made dolls like these out of parts of a corn plant, and sometimes boys carved small toys out of wood. Most boys worked the farm alongside their fathers, taking over the family farm when they became older. If the family lived near a large town, some boys only lived at home until they were eleven or twelve years old. Then they were expected to learn a trade. Each boy would become an apprentice for several years, working with a master tradesperson in town to learn his job. The country family in colonial times worked hard every day. Sometimes a trip into town was a welcome relief or break from their daily tasks. In town, the family was able to trade or buy things they needed so they could save the time and effort it took to make them. In the next read-aloud, you will hear about what happened when a farmer took a trip into town.