

Greener Acres

By Lynn C. Bilton

“*You bought a farm?!*” I heard this remark frequently in the days following my decision. It’s not a common choice for a thirty-year-old single female.

When I stopped at the roadside on my first drive-by of the property, however, I remember exclaiming out loud, “This is it!” The old, red-brick farmhouse and large, red barn reminded me of the dairy farm where my brothers and I were raised. I had found my new home.

For seven years, my husband and I had run a florist shop and greenhouse operation in Southern Ontario. We rebuilt each of the original greenhouses and updated the entire undertaking which had been established many years prior by his parents.

With 10,000 square feet under glass, a market garden and a busy roadside stand, in addition to the florist shop and wire-service, there was always planning to be done. Part-time staff included several adults plus a flock of students. It was a daily beehive of activity. The surroundings of warmth, colour, plants and cut flowers in a tropical setting offered a welcoming work environment.

That perfect picture came to a halt when my husband died unexpectedly in June 1987, three months shy of our tenth wedding anniversary. My life as I had known it came to a jarring halt.

I was already teetering on the edge. Not only had my husband died, but his parents and my eldest brother’s wife had also passed away in recent years. It was a time of prolonged grieving.

I closed the flower shop and went to stay with friends who lived in a tranquil country setting. Being offered this refuge by the kindest of folks helped to mend my broken spirit. Sometime during my stay at this rural retreat, I realized I needed to start fresh.

The farm would be my new beginning.

My parents and family helped me move into my new home on a cold February day. My dad and I walked the property and started our plans to get my new operation up and running.

My purchase was long before the days of home-inspections. On the second morning I woke and discovered the waterlines in the house were frozen. I called the previous owners and asked for advice. They arranged for another neighbour to stop by with a portable welder. My water source was a cistern under the barn. My neighbour attached a clamp to the waterline in the barn and

another clamp to the waterline in the house and they “zapped” the line to unfreeze it. The previous owner had omitted telling me I should keep a tap dripping to avoid freeze-ups. Sometime later, I discovered that the “zapping” process was illegal and could have started a fire. Digging a proper well moved to the top of my list. My new learning curve had begun.

Less than one month after I took possession, my father died. My planning partner was gone. It was a devastating blow, but I corralled my inner strength, determined to move forward and honour the plans my dad and I had discussed.

One issue that needed to be addressed promptly was the ancient electrical setup. If I plugged in the kettle and toaster at the same time, the main breaker would flip. This required a walk to the hydro pole partway down the laneway where the switch was located. The arrangement was *not* convenient.

I quickly found a full-time job. Good thing too, as I had hired a gentleman to begin my much-needed renovations. He called me at work one day and asked, “Are you sitting down?” I knew the news couldn’t be good. The septic tank was the original installed decades ago. It was made of bricks with a wooden top. The wood had rotted and caved in, which caused the contents to back up into my basement. By the time I arrived home from work, the contractor had called a plumber with a backhoe who was in the process of digging out the original system and preparing for a new septic tank. Neither of us were happy campers that day.

A few months later, I arrived home from work to discover eleven jack-posts supporting the dining room ceiling. When the back portion of the house was added, the builder had cut-through the wall but never incorporated a support-beam. In other words, the second story had no means of reinforcement. Friends began asking me if I had ever watched the movie *The Money Pit*.

Fencing was another priority as my plan was to raise beef cattle. With the help of one brother, I purchased a large quantity of century-old split-rails to achieve that “rustic” look. Another brother knew a gentleman with a transport trailer to deliver them. I hired a team of students to build the fence via a “piece-work” agreement that required my watchful eyes. One day I arrived home from work and spotted a spindly post planted at a fence corner. I stopped my truck to chat with the lads. “No, that won’t work. You see, a corner post acts as an anchor-post. You should choose one of the biggest posts.”

I wanted to raise not only beef cattle, but all my own food and be somewhat self-sufficient. I purchased chickens to raise for meat in addition to laying hens and pigs and I maintained a large vegetable garden. At times I boarded a few of my neighbour’s overflow of Clydesdales.

Since I didn't own any implements, I hired neighbours to complete any tractor work. This included cutting and baling hay. Once the day was set to bale hay, phone calls went out to my city friends to help bring in the harvest. The project became an annual party because I offered a BBQ supper to celebrate the end of our workday.

Obstacle after hurdle sprang up in my path, yet I lived and blossomed on my farm for seventeen years. Nothing deterred my dream. I thrived on the trials and learned from them. My losses during this time were more than just detours - they were the building blocks to a stronger me. My tears of grieving gave way to joy from my sense of accomplishment.

I learned that life rarely follows the path you envision. There will always be diversions. It's how you tackle the snags that make the difference. The encouragement from my family and friends gave me strength and I am forever grateful. They were beside me during my grieving *and* my healing process.

My farm was a lot of work in a physical sense but it served as the therapy I required to heal. One day I knew I was ready to move on to a new opportunity.

The day I left my farm for the last time, I walked down the laneway to gather the mail from my mailbox. The timing coincided with my mail-lady's daily delivery. She had heard I was moving and wished me well, smiling as she drove off. I smiled too. I left with a feeling of fulfillment and peace, proud of my achievements and ready to accept my next challenge in life.