

Interview with Lyle Vogt, Farmer and Octegenarian

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Lyle Vogt, my father, was an organic farmer before organic was a word to be considered. He was my guest on Beyond the Measuring Cup on June 28, 2007.

Lyle was born on a farm in Fowlerville, Michigan in 1920. He worked on his parents farm as a child and teen. Organic was not even a concept because pesticides and herbicides had not been invented. Crops were rotated and manure was spread to enhance the production.

We had an interesting interview about the changes that happened through the years. When Dad graduated from High School he went away to learn to "candle" eggs. He would pick each egg up and look at it with a light behind it to see if there were any things in it that would make it undesirable to eat. He worked at a couple of different places in Michigan before his parents asked him to come back to the farm in 1939 to help. By then, Simon Vogt, my grandfather had actually bought a small tractor. Before that time all the work on the 80 acre farm was done with a team of horses. In order to plow a field with a one bottom plow they would use a team of 3 horses. I will remember Judy, the last of the work horses, who lived on my grandparents farm when I was a small child.

Simon had about 12 milk cows and he sold cream from those cows to a company in Detroit. The cream would be collected and when they had accumulated 5 gallons it would be taken to the train station and put on othe train for Detroit where butter was made from the cream at the Blue Valley Creamery. There was no refrigeration of the cream over those few days, so the butter had a different taste than butter that is made now. Actually, if you are able to obtain butter that is made from sour cream, it has a wonderful full flavor. The skim milk was fed to the pigs and the calves on the farm.

In about 1928 electricity was brought through that part of the country. Dad remembers Keorsene lamps and gasoline lamps before that time. Each home that was on the line had to have lights installed in their home so that Detroit Edison would know that they would actually use the electricity. Each home paid what would now be considered a small fee to be hooked up to the electric lights.

When my father came back to the farm Michigan State University, which is the agricultural college in Michigan started sending out information through the extension service telling about new ways of increasing the yield on farms. DDT was one of the wonderful new chemicals that was suggested to the farmers. At the time it was introduced everyone was told that it was so safe you could drink it. I have city friends who describe running behind the trucks that sprayed the whole community...loving to run in the fog from the truck. Much later we learned that DDT was dangerous long term and it is now banned from use in the U.S. The people who created the DDT were not telling farmers this out of maliciousness, but rather out of ignorance. They didn't really know the long term effects at that time.

Dad made a point that the new practices that were instituted greatly increased the production of food in the U. S. and a field that would have ordinarily produced 40 buschels per acre of wheat as an outstanding crop now can produce 100 buschels per acre regularly

We talked about the fact that a farmer is a jack of all trades. He must be a good business man, a carpenter, horticulturist, an expert in animal husbandry, a plumber, a mechanic, and many other roles. One of the things that Dad talked about was what a good place a farm was to raise a family. He was often the one that would be there to pick me up from school. We always knew what our father did and could find him to talk or do things with.

Later, in the 1950's and 1960's Dad remodeled the barn and added in more cow. When he was at his peak there were about 60 animals total and he was milking 40. It takes two years for a cow to grow from a calf to be mature enough to have a calf and start producing milk. It is a long term investment. On the farm he also grew wheat and corn as crops to sell, as well as occasionally pigs and I remember one time growing ducks to eat.

In the mid 1950's the milk companies insisted that farmer's change from selling milk in cans that were refrigerated, to selling milk "in bulk" and we installed a 1500gal refrigerated tank in the milk house which was attached to the barn. The huge tanker truck would pull up to our milk house a couple of times a week and attach a hose to our milk tank and carry off our milk to the Grade A (drinking milk) dairy in another city. Strict testing was done, with counts done on the bacteria levels and antibiotic residues. If either was found in the milk, the farmer would be "shut off" until the problem was remedied. Dad took great pride in the fact that he was never "shut off" and that her was frequently cited for the cleanliness of his barn and milk house.

Another thing that happened in the 50's was the creating of a cooperative that allowed the farmers to share bulls and have their cows impregnated by some of the best bulls in the country. Dad was part of the group that first set that up. This system still is in effect. In order to have milk the cows have to be pregnant. Bulls are difficult creatures and are undependable. The bulls were kept at Michigan State Universtiy in their barns where the semen was collected and frozen and actually drop shipped by plane to the inseminators that served sections of the state. By regular farmers having

access to the best bulls they were able to increase milk production dramatically. It was a vast improvement over the system of borrowing your neighbors bull for a day.

We are coming back to the family farm in many places in the country. It was wonderful to talk to someone who lived all the way through the time when everyone was a small farmer with maybe 100 acres through the time of the mega farms, and back to a time when people are once again making a good living on small family farms. Thanks Dad for being willing to talk with me. Listen to this interview by going to: <http://radiosandysprings.com/Tastebuds/charli.html>