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RURAL WOMEN – MY STORY

by

TRUDY WILSON

Rural Women My Story

This is my chronicle in which I am recording the last few months of interesting and unforeseen circumstances in my life.

It all began, while I was absent from New Zealand, taking our 15-year-old daughter Danielle to her new home in Switzerland for the rest of the year. She had the opportunity to stay with my sister and brother in law and the goal for her was to learn German. On arrival my sister had made arrangements with six schools for me to check out and take Danielle for interviews, as well as getting her used to her new way of life, acquaint her with a different routine of city life and its possible perils and to introduce her to the challenge of public transport.

While over there I worked on my questionnaire for my Kellogg project. I was able to use technology to my advantage in sending the compiled Questionnaire per e-mail to the three organizations I had made contact with earlier. They offered to distribute them for me.

In the meantime, the grapevine had it that my husband had a stint in hospital with an infected hand. Apparently he also had an operation on it. We were to meet on my arrival in Auckland and be tourists for a long weekend. Not much time left since Calving was upon us.

Tony's hand kept giving him trouble. He realized that he needed help in form of another pair of hands. We employed a young inexperienced man. Tony organized and delegated, while this young man and I did the work. In our partnership I was never required to milk unless there was a good reason, therefore my experience was fairly limited. I had only done it twice in the past while Tony nursed Cricket or Rugby injuries, but he was always present to give advice.

This young man was only working for us a day when Tony's hand /wrist literally blew up, and I drove him to Hamilton Waikato hospital's Accident and Emergency Department. They kept him in and operated on him a couple of days later. Next day he was discharged and I picked him up, surprised that with his history of infection they would not keep him for longer. The district nurse was meant to come for daily dressings the next day but the paperwork did not reach her until Tony rang to enquire. She did not like what she saw from the very first day, and commented that we must keep an eye on this particular spongy looking area around his wrist and palm of his right hand. Thursday I had a Rural Women NZL Provincial 3monthly meeting to chair. As I was sprinting out of the meeting to get home to milk, I was stopped by a lady, who claimed, that my husband had asked her to inform me, that he was readmitted back to Waikato Hospital. The district nurse in accordance with the GP had made the decision. Once Home I proceeded to do the chores and then went off back to the hospital to check on Tony.

At this stage I had no particular plan of where I was going, still hoping Tony would be home in next to no time. I felt it best practice to take each day as it came, and reassess things once we knew how Tony was progressing.

By then he was quite a sick man. The infection had traveled up his arm and he was in a lot of pain. He also had a high fever and was shaking like a leaf. A&E kept him and he was scheduled for another operation to clean up the infection. But the ambulance drivers and air ambulance were very busy and the emergency department was bursting at the seams, so Tony had to wait.

He was on a high dosage of antibiotics and was on a high. Once I stood there with a farm map to get some advice, but he was in no condition to give me any coherent help. Finally after two weeks I realized the inevitable, I was it. I had to take on the farming role; there was no one else.

Over night I had advanced from assistant to full blown manager in charge of too many calving cows and an inexperienced young man. I had to learn quickly. As you might appreciate everyone around me was in the calving mode and could not be approached for help. I just had to do it. After the initial panic, I decided that I had nothing to lose and everything to gain and to prove to myself that I am a true farmer in my own right, custodian of our land and animals. I just had to make it work until Tony would be home.

I had to change my mindset, from “How would Tony approach this or that situation?” to having the confidence just to do it my way, or the way I thought best, give it a go and hope for the best. Easier said than done. I found myself a few times standing in the middle of a paddock wondering how many breaks Tony would get out of this paddock and which way he would put up the electric fences.

First step was to plan my grazing rotation pattern on a farm map for the colostrums cows, milking herd, the calving mob and mastitis cows. Tony never used a farm map for his grazing plan, his many years of experience and detailed knowledge of the workings of the farm, which paddocks would grow the most grass and how they would respond to certain weather conditions, was all in his head. Impossible to access this information, when you know that he had to deal with a lot of unpleasant happenings at the hospital. He had to concentrate on himself. He had by then also lost touch with what was happening on the farm and home front. Our daughter Antoinette was not coping very well with our dysfunctional family life.

I would start early in the morning about 5 o'clock to get the cows in the shed and double check that everything was set up for them to find the way to the day paddock. Often I had the first row in before my helper arrived. He was my hand for drenching the cows while I changed the cups over. He had no previous knowledge of how to mix the drench, so it was also my responsibility to make sure that we had enough drench on hand at all times. Another thing I had to learn in a hurry was, what do you mix into your drench and how do you work out your quantities?

I used Lime flour, Magnesium and Molasses, later I added Rumensen and 3 weeks before mating was due to start, added a Mineral mix with high copper content.

I was not quite sure of my helper's work ethics, so I did not feel comfortable in delegating this task to him just yet. I soon came to realize that he liked short cuts, had trouble to work with a woman boss, and questioned my every move or decision. A trait he did not show while Tony was in command. I made up my mind that I would have to work with him every step of the way, because he could not be totally trusted. One incident did highlight the importance of my decision but it cost me a night's worrying.

Our usual routine was that we would do our work in the morning, milking our cows, getting calves and cows in, milk them, put them out in the paddock, get the colostrum mob in, milk them and also the mastitis cow, painted and leg banded, they needed to be milked and treated and recorded in the animal health records. To make it easier on this guy I did most of the legwork, bringing and taking the cows to and from the shed. While he would clean up and put the water through, I would carry the milk to the calves in the calf shed where I would teach them to drink and put them in small mobs, for ease of management. It took me a little while to work out how much milk I needed to do the job well. Once again I realized that Tony used to catch the milk for the calves, and I did not have to worry about that in the past. My job was just to come over to the shed and feed them. Tony would also carry the milk for me, not so this fellow, he needed to be asked every time if I wanted the help, so I soon gave up on doing that and decided that I can do anything, who needed to ask for the obvious every time? His mother would have been horrified. Anyway instead of carrying 20 litre buckets I decided to take half as much and walk a few times more. That meant my arms would not be ripped out of their sockets and I would live to see another day. It was along way to go yet until we finish calving.

Next we would load up silage onto the trailer. That was also a bit of a challenge since the bales were quite bulky and weighed about 450 kilos. Between my helper and I we fine-tuned a system, which was working well for us. My helper was usually the driver and I was on the back feeding out. We would do the turn on the farm, so that all the mobs would get a good feed. The milking herd would eat 17 to 18 kg of dry matter per cow. Often we would feed out ahead, especially for the calving mob, which needed extra attention, in the form of dusting the pastures with magnesium, which would support their systems when the stress of calving could take its toll mainly on the older girls. But did you know that there are two types of magnesium? For drenching and dusting. I believe in prevention rather than cure.

The calving mobs were break fed to restrict their intake. Once a cow had calved, she and the calf would be taken out of the mob and put into a fresh paddock. She would be very hungry. We would make sure the calf had a feed of colostrum within 6 to 12 hours. The antibodies in his or her mother's milk were very important for keeping it healthy and growing well. Besides keeping it warm and protected from wind and weather. I took the calf off its mother after about 24 hours, unless the mother was sick or had an udder or teats a calf could not get to for its feed.

Once a cow had calved and come to the cowshed I milked her and got my helper to drench her with a mixture of magnesium, lime flower and molasses. If she was one of the fat or older girls she would also get a starter plus drench.

I also put out rock salt for the girls to lick, at their discretion.

All the animals looked after, it was time for breakfast, usually by then I was very hungry and could manage a cooked breakfast. Then we would set up fences for the next day and paddocks for the night for our milking cows. My helper would now go home and not come back until 3pm in time for milking again. I would feed moozlee/meal and silage to the calves, check the drenching system, and make sure all the feeding utensils had been cleaned. Once every 10 days I sprayed the calf shed out with a nap sack containing Virkon S diluted into 5-lt of water. Renewed the sawdust in the shed if needed, and checked the calving mob.

First thing was always checking the calving mob. The actual moving was done later, after milking. I had been watching a heifer for a couple of days, who seemed to sit down quite often and made not much sign to jump up when given the opportunity to move to a new break. She was definitely limping. We took her down to the cowshed and put her through the bail. She needed a foot trim. For the first time I had to use the hoof clamps and be brave enough to cut a fair bit of toenail away, spray the affected area with foot rot areofoot a purple disinfectant. I like to use homoeopathy when ever possible and in this case used heparsulphur spray, over the following ten days. The result was astonishing.

We also used a homeopathic spray on early detection of mastitis.

We were lucky; we had only a couple of cows go down with milk fever. We had a few signs of grass staggers and I am able to put a needle into the vein or under the skin without flinching too much. Believe me it was certainly not the case two months ago. I nearly panicked when realizing that we had to put a needle in to the vein because the cow was far to well fed and very sick. We had to act or lose her. That was one of the times I went to find help from our manager on the second farm. A very busy man, but he was very good and dropped everything to teach me how to do the deed. In fact he did one bottle and then I had to do the second. Must have been beginners luck, because I found the vein at once.

More often then not I would skip lunch and drive to Hamilton instead, to visit Tony and try to cheer him up for an hour or so, before racing back home in time for milking. I would be back in the house about 6:30 pm depending on any problems needing attention, could be anything, like a water leak for example, or a calving cow.

By then I was bone tired, my only thoughts were bath, food and bed. Antoinette knew to take messages for me after 7:30pm because I would be asleep. I had no life. The physical aspect of the job was really taking its toll. I lost a lot of weight. To realize that I had physical limitations did not come as a surprise but it did cost me a lot of time, since I had to find other ways to do things. I had 200-litre drums of colostrum milk I kept for feeding the calves. Tony always used a 20-lt bucket to haul the milk out and then carry the buckets to the calf shed. Well, I did not possess the needed height in stature or the brut strength to do it so easily. Therefore I used a 5lt bucket to scoop the milk out of the drum and pour it into the 20-lt buckets ready to take to the shed. Again Tony used to just pick up the drum towards the last few litres and empty it into the buckets. I had to use another 20-lt bucket and my own weight as leverage, for the same outcome.

Another challenge were the 25 kg bag of calf meal/muesli or pellets I needed to haul on the four wheel bike or small trailer to move them with the feeders and feed the calves I had weaned of the milk. I just managed to lift a bag up on the bike but used scissors and drip-fed a 20-lt bucket to carry the meal to the feeders instead of having to lift the heavy bags. I soon discovered that I started to get stronger.

The second day of Tony's hospital stay, my helper and I experienced a mighty hiccup. We had only a few rows left to milk, when I decided I might as well make a start on the calves. I started to take bucket after bucket to the calf shed to get myself organized. As I walked back to get the last buckets I saw out the corner of my eyes half a row of cows race out the shed. I took a curious look to check if my helper was all right, when I saw him flat on his back and the drenching gun by his side. It looked as if he had been knocked over by a running cow. I shut the gate, by that time he was up and walking like he was all right. How are you feeling? A bit winded but just fine was his answer. Do you want me to help you finish up? No way, he was fine, he insisted. Sure? Sure. O.K.

I decided to stick around and busied myself filling up his washing up buckets with water. He seemed to be fine. One more glance and off I went to finish my chores at the calving shed. Walking over with the empty buckets and checking how far he had managed to get in the shed I realized that the cow nr 7, we had leg banded, painted and put on the test bucket, was no where to be seen and the bucket empty. What had happened?

I raced into the milking shed and saw that the milk line was out of the vat and cows still in the shed. What is going on? Asking my helper the question he seemed to be not quite with it. He did not know. Why is the line out of the vat? He had put the cups on cow nr 7 while feeling a bit light headed and then realized what he did and had managed to get the vat line out, but was it in time, he did not know. This cow was treated for mastitis and her milk meant to be withheld. Antibiotics carry a high penalty and could also lead to prosecution if your farm can be identified as having polluted a tanker full of milk, or even a silo at the factory. At its severest, one could lose the farm, just to pay off the dept.

There was no point in blowing his head off. But I could not understand that he did not ask for help while feeling off colour after his fall. Why? He thought he was fine, until he started to walk up and down the pit. Why not call me? Pride?

Well what was I to do. It was a few minutes to five at night; I decided to rush over to the telephone and get some advice from the contact centre based now in Auckland. The telephone operator first of all did not know where Te Awamutu was, we have a dairy company here, did you know? Explaining the situation she put me through to two different people none of them able to help. Third person was in Taupo and was putting me on to a person closer to me in Kihikihi. Two hours later I was put in touch with our local Quality control officer, I knew well because he used to be the coach for our girls gymnastics a few years ago, as well as being our yearly shed inspector. Finally explaining to him for the umpteenth time that I was in charge of decision-making and needed help in ascertaining if we have a problem and how to find out. He was in Taumarunui on the way from a similar problem and meant he could not help me because the medication we used was undetectable in a 10 minute test, it would take about 12 or so hours to detect any problem. He would make some phone calls with his supervisor and the transport office, so that our milk pickup could be delayed. The cow was very nearly clean I told him, but how minimal is the risk? It was my decision if I wanted to tip the milk down the drain and start over again, or if I took the risk and the possible penalty. A sleepless night. I had too much milk in the vat to tip it out so I took the risk and sent a little prayer off. We put some more milk in the vat the next morning and I hoped my gamble would pay off. Hoped that I did not send good milk after bad.

The milk got picked up the next day with out having heard anything from the Auckland office. I had to assume that the tanker driver knew more than I did. Finally I got the all clear, just as I was heading off to milk again. What a relief.

We had 23 heifers to break in, a task asking for patience and calm. An important task, knowing that they would be scared and nervous not knowing really what to expect means, that the best way to go about it, was trying to put a heifer between two experienced cows.

Nr 39 was a bit of a challenge, mostly she would stamp her feet, I knew that, and was not worried. This particular evening we had a storm, rain and wind. A positively miserable milking, with thunder and lightning. Our little heifer must have been really frightened she lashed out at me and kicked me just above my right eye. Great I thought here go my glasses. Blood was running down my face. Not until after milking I realized that it was only a cut along my nose, from my glasses. Great I will have a black eye. My cheeky husband remarked that this would save on eye shadow. Lucky for you being in hospital otherwise the neighborhood might have started a rumour, not in your favour. The few times I had to be seen in a social setting, was when I had to chair a meeting. People's reactions were quite funny. Mostly they were ignoring it, until I quite openly said Ah! Did you see my black eye, I did not have to fight for it, a heifer gave it to me. They relaxed visibly.

It was time for another important job, if I wanted some grass I needed to organize and put into action our spring fertilizer plan. I rang the transport company and the fertilizer spreader to coordinate the day and time. Before I could have them on the property I wanted to make sure we had our effluent pond emptied. Also a job Tony usually did. Well I used my man power to get the lines put out and the pump going, then it was not too bad to move the contraption of the nozzle every so often with my little farm bike, so I thought. I got thoroughly drenched a couple of times, I am sure I must have been the cleanest and the nicest scented Lady in a ten kilometre radius, since I enjoyed two baths in a short time.

The fertilizer man arrived and armed with my farm map I directed him to the appropriate paddocks. Of course wouldn't you know it; it was raining cats and dogs. Good for me, because I had two trucks and drivers available, since driving to Raglan was out of the question for those two guys because of the severity of the weather condition out there. Half the farm done, Peter my fertilizer man, finished the last load and was booked in for the next lot in a bout 10 days time.

The second time around it was a beautiful day and I was not needed to tell him where to go. I had showed him last time. In any case he was quite familiar with our farm. All of a sudden he arrived at my doorstep looking all pale and sort of uncoordinated and nervous. He told me that he ran into a fence and broke a stay and all five wires of the fence. He felt that he might have had a little turn. Knowing his previous health problems I was extremely worried about the man, and insisted he come in for a cup of coffee with heaps of sugar, I believe his glucose levels had dropped to a dangerous level and he needed to be propped up. He was in a real state but could not be persuaded to come in and sit down. So the least I could do was to give him some chocolate to nibble on. He should not have been driving, but I knew the signs, he was running on adrenalin and wanted to finish this job before going home. I followed him up to our second farm and informed the manager quietly of the happening without putting the man in an embarrassing situation. It was obvious that he was in a kind of a shock; he could not remember a situation mentioned by Terry, our manager, which happened a year ago in one of the paddocks, where he had to be winched out. Anyway he proceeded with his job I felt uneasy and rang him later to see if he had arrived home safely. He visited Tony a couple of weeks later at the hospital and ended up in my husbands bed with the same signs. After the nurses stabilized him on the ward, Tony wheeled him to A&E for a check up, they kept him for observation and suspected heart attack. Tony stayed with Peter until 1am when his wife was allowed to come and take him home.

Farming means never a dull moment. Today I had planned to go to the Dexcel women's discussion group, but the weather is fine, just right to inject the calves with a 5 in 1.

I also had to ring the local identity for dehorning our calves. I like this experience to be stress and pain free for our calves. Steve our Vet agreed to teach us the technique for injecting the calves with a painkiller. It had to be administered about 5 minutes before the

actual dehorning was to take place. Well, the calves still talk to me today, and do not run the other way when they see me walk in to the paddock. Must have been a success. The same day I had a lunch visitor who invited himself the previous day while bumping into me at the hospital after seeing Tony.

He is Tony's cousin and a week away from becoming a priest. I rang him to let him know that neither of us could attend his ordination in Tauranga, scheduled over two days, for obvious reasons. Talking to Tony afterwards he told me that Philip's 40 birthday day was that day. Well, this casual lunch took a new twist. I decided to cook us a nice dinner/lunch with birthday cake, candles, streamers and balloons. This particular day I had to be really organized, it was a bit of a squeeze but I managed to do it all.

Every day I moved the calves; but on this day I did not like the look of one of my favorites. Nr 6 was a beautiful strong calf, always there to greet me. She had no energy, did not want to walk or move and was not hungry. Very odd. I decided to keep her separate and took her back to the calf shed to keep an eye on her. Her tummy seemed very hard. Constipation? I tried a mixture of Epsom salt, molasses and water. Took her off milk for a day and then tried her on milk again. She went down hill fast. I needed the Vet. He gave her a lot of fluid and antibiotics and was also puzzled. The diagnosis was not good. My intuition had told me a while ago that I was going to lose her. But I did not want to let that happen without a fight. It goes against every principal to see animals suffer and die, especially when they seemed so fit and well and were only 6 weeks old. I usually have no sick calves not even scours. I spend a lot of time to keep them that way. So it was a bit of a set back.

Tony's been in hospital for 42 days now, and no end in sight. Just had another operation and skin graft.

Time to get rid of 3 empty heifers. I need the grass for the producing animals. I rang an agent to sell them in the paddock. I am happy, got good money for them.

Tony's sister Shona from Wellington is flying in to Hamilton this morning, visiting for three days. She has to take a shuttle since I will not be able to get there. Make sure the house is more or less tidy and the bathroom and toilets clean. Have had not much time for housework. Easy dinner has to be fish and chips.

There is a Dexcel Waikato Perfect Pastures Roadshow at our neighbors and I want to get there. I am picking our manager up on the way. It was exactly what I needed. A range of people spoke about the guts of grass, spring Pasture Management, Theory and Practice of feeding cows well and planning for pregnancy. It was very interesting and I came home all enthused. All the questions I had were answered.

Needed to ring Danielle in Switzerland her emails sounded a bit of homesickness. She just needed to hear my voice I think, she is just fine. Worried about Dad though.

Overheard Antoinette telling her friends on the phone that her family has gone to the pack. No Dad home for a long time and a mother who she never sees, and a sister she cannot talk to because she is not here. A bit of a shock, I just did not realize how it had affected her. I thought she knew what I tried to do. To keep things running for all of us as good as I possibly could. I now made a big effort to race over from the milking shed every morning for a few minutes to make sure she was up and made sure to wish her a happy day, with a kiss and a hug. I just was so wrapped up in my own farm world that I seem to have neglected her to my horror. I was not even aware of it. I had to reassess things.

Came from the hospital, the cows are just next to the shed I can see them, it looks as if one cow is calving, better go and check before milking. We have got a problem. I think the calf is dead, it is half in half out and I cannot move it back in to turn it around. His feet came out the wrong way. He is stuck. My helper arrived. I asked him to walk the exhausted cow to the cowshed, while I go for help. I need more manpower. Terry is my man. No hesitation, yes I had the calving rope at the cowshed. Terry and my helper worked hard to get the calf turned and out. At least we saved the cow. We drenched her and gave her a starter plus and I fed her some silage. She is fine.

Experiencing big problems with our heifers, they seem to come in with clinical mastitis. Why? What can I do? According to the vet we are not the only ones with this problem, they are not sure why. He sold me an injection type medicine for them. Masticillin, it treats all four quarters. It needs only one treatment but requires 11 milk withholdings. The suggestion has been made to try and run the heifers with the milking herd and teat spray them twice as we do with the herd. It worked. No more problems.

Have considered selling our two most offending mastitis cows. Takes too much time in the shed and is it worth the cost?

This morning we moved the calving mob. It is the last break and we moved them into a new paddock. One cow makes no move to get up and follow the others to the new grass. Not a good sign. She has not calved, could it be milk fever? Well nothing to lose so best to give her a bottle under the skin. No luck, after giving her a second bottle she is still not up. We aim the bike at her and make a lot of noise. Give her silage and water. It looks like we might need the hip lifters. I do not like them as they are horrible hurtful contraptions. The only possibility under these circumstances. She is trying but seem not to have any strength in her back legs. I will ring the vet. Of course it is a Sunday. Hate to disturb their weekends. Anyway it is a cold wind blowing we got some sacking and a warm old rug to try to keep her warm. The Vet examined her and felt that the calf is at least another week away. Pumps her full of medicine but once again I feel it does not look good.

Of course it always happens to good cows. I finally had to admit defeat. Liked it or not. We move her to the tanker track and I have to make the dreaded phone call to AC pet food. I asked them if they would let me know what the matter was with her. I never got to know. The left hand did not know what the right hand had promised.

Another day, another play.

I have my helper spreading on Urea on the paddocks where the cows have been, a few days ago. I have learnt that to grow grass you must have leaf present before spreading anything. I call him speedy, he would put Mika Hakkanan or Mr Schuhmacher to shame. One bag ca 40 kg, per paddock is all we put on.

Terry asked us to help him weighing our 52 heifers that we have out grazing. At the same time I made an appointment to visit our bull man to have a look and choose our bulls, for delivery at a later date. Both of those farms were not far from each other. We had a typical spring day, anything from rain, showers to wind and sunshine. While we weighed our heifers we also deloused them, B12 and dewormed them.

We were very happy they looked really good and put on an average 60 to 80 kilos, over the winter months. It was an intensive, tiring but happy day.

In fact I really like this farming. If only it would not mean housework and cooking and paying bills/bookwork and traveling to and from Hamilton hospital, all very time consuming.

It is my helper's Birthday. I decided to make a special occasion of it and baked him a cake and presented him with a couple of gifts, sure to warm a golfer's heart.

Another farm discussion day is planned this time with the mixed farming group. It is at Kevin Woodings farm. Discussion on Nitrogen, the fact and the fallacy. What constitutes best practice for both, the environment and the bank balance, Mating, the myth and magic behind the most talked subject, cropping/supplements, getting the system right. Guess what? I was the only woman. But I encountered no problem. I felt included and a part of the little group exercise we were asked to do. But then I knew most of the men if not by name by sight, as they are Farmers in our district. We went for a drive and were asked to identify the grass cover in the paddock the cows were in, the cows had been in last night and the paddock the cows were going in that night. Then a plate meter was used to confirm the actual cover. Interesting. I felt it does not really matter what you call the cover as long as you are consistent, over all.

Nearly finished calving 5 to go. Very slow now. Have some scouring and have bought bobbybinder for our bobby calves. Have found blood in faeces in the calves I still feed milk to. Never seen it before. Rang the Vet, they want a sample. The Vet responded that we have a case of coccidiosis. This is a contagious parasite, which grows in the lining of the gut causing severe damage. We administer scourban morning and night, take the calf off milk for 24 hrs giving her water only and then introduce her to a good feed of colostrum.

Another situation mastered.

When you think you have it all under control, and feel to confident, be sure something will come your way to test you.

My helper was in the shed putting on the cups today while I am bringing the cows in from the very back of the farm, it is a bit of a hike. We are taking it easy and do not rush them.

Arriving at the shed, I proceeded to give my helper a hand milking. There is milk rushing past us, a little sprint to the shed revealed that my helper had forgotten to screw down the vat, I guess it could have been worse. All went well, until we arrived to the last row, this cow was very jittery and unsettled stamping her feet. I felt the need to have a look at her, her eyes were enlarged and she looked positively wobbly. We were heading for trouble. My guess was grass staggers. Tried to warn my helper to let her out of the herringbone for treatment while diving in the storage room for the desired bottle and needle. As I rounded the corner she was already down. Needle in and bottle up hoping for the best. My helper kept milking the rest around her. I could not believe my eyes; there she was sliding into the pit backside first. Great. Just what we did not need. We kept quietly working to finish milking hoping she would get up and duck under the railing and walk out. Wishful thinking. Finished with the washing down and cleaning the cow finally decided that she had enough entertainment for a day and got up, a bit groggy still. But she could not step up; the pit was too deep for her. We tried to prize off the end rails with a crowbar but my helper with help from me had no luck to move anything. We needed Terry's help. Finally she walked free, not the worse for wear, while I got on the phone to a welder!

The cows are milking very well. Time to open up the round. I am doing 1.9ms/cow, heading for 2 milk solids.

I injected the herd with B12, after a blood test revealed that this might be the only component needed to get the cows into good mating form. We milk 96 cows. They look healthy, their coats shiny, and they are a pleasure to milk.

Time for stock take. Reassessing the situation. Where to now? Take time out to plan and think.

Tony and I needed to talk. I know that I felt guilty not having had time to work for my Kellogg project and now really felt the pressure and stress, knowing how little time was left to accomplish it. I needed to finish the course, needed to finish what I started and committed myself to. It felt important to me. I do not like unfinished business.

Tony must have realized my predicament and realistically I just could not keep on going. Tony's hand would need many more months of hand therapy to get his 80% movement back.

I really did not want the commitment. Mating was around the corner. Tony used to do his own A.B. I would have to employ a technician, how do I choose the right bulls? Really I just did not have the experience. I could find the bulling cows, Tony and I always compared numbers to double check, but it meant another 6 weeks of highly charged commitment. And there was a herd test on the horizon. I had to find someone to help me. I usually helped Tony and then turned around and helped Terry as well. It was decision time.

Tony it seems had been thinking along these lines for weeks. He agreed that the only option left to us was selling the cows in an in milk sale. We had heard that the prison farm nearby was always looking for cows. So I felt this might be the right approach. I rang and explained that I would like to offer our herd for sale. Well, they were very interested, as I came home from the hospital at milking time and raced inside to change, the phone rang to let me know that they were on their way to check out our herd. Fine. No problem. I headed for the cows and half way to the shed they met up with me. They loved what they saw and it seemed the deal was proceeding nicely. Hopefully we could agree on the sale price. Would I have the nerves and coolness and diplomacy needed for the negotiations?

Well, I sold the cows, for the price we wanted, YES, the whole herd was sold as one lot. The deal was signed, transport organized and less than a week later, I put the cows on the trucks. It took me 4 hours. Antoinette had to say goodbye to her couple of calf club calves, which had grown to beautiful heifers. It was an emotional moment for her. The only thing to do was cleaning up the yards.

As far as I had been told the herd made such an impression that they decided to keep them together as one herd. Antoinette is welcomed to visit her friends whenever she wants.

I have still our 46 calves to move everyday. And recently took on all of Terry's lot as well. So all he has to concentrate on is feeding the cows fully and milking them.

I have just done our first lot of silage. Eight paddocks. I employed an experienced driver. An ex farmer, he had sold his own farm just last year and had many years of experience, not only with driving a tractor but also with knowledge of handling machinery.

Up to this day I helped Terry out with my paddocks of real beautiful grass while his top block of 40 acres with clover, recovers from 5 days of continuous frosts. It was my responsibility to prepare the races, gates and paddocks for his herd of 154 cows to get to. And to help him out I also walked them one hour back to his shed for milking. I also helped with his herd testing and I am so happy to say that he is milking very well, doing over 2 milk solids a cow. So all is well.

Well my body did feel otherwise, and just reminded me that you cannot take anything for granted. My health packed up and after some blood tests and ultrasound, I know to be given a reprieve until I return from the Kellogg course. Monday November 25, I will be going into hospital for major surgery.

I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to grow in many ways. I have surprised not only my husband but also myself, I have an ability I did not know I possessed. I have found a new confidence, which brings with it a tremendous freedom.

I admit the first 3 weeks were the hardest. Where my brain was working overtime. And I felt challenged at every turn. Am I doing the right thing? Once you are starting to believe in yourself things fall into place. I have earned a lot of respect from many people, (though they did not tell me in person) I assume, because I have no previous agricultural background. I also was lucky to live in a supportive and caring district. Once it was known that I was doing the farm work on my own, with Tony in Hospital, the women stood together and organized a two-week roster for meal and baking drop in. Just the time I needed to find my feet and head to carry on.

The good thing is I never had the notion to feel sorry for myself, because self-pity is debilitating and totally counterproductive. Health professionals like Vets or Fertilizer Reps have never given me the impression of inferiority, or talked down to me. I have found them helpful. I have undoubtedly learned a lot and all in all enjoyed the experience. I think the positive attitude was making the difference.

Labour Weekend. Tony is now back home after two and a half month in "Prison", as he calls it. His hand is still mending, slow to heal, a bit of a mystery to the surgeons. He is on 7 different medications, and feels the effect of them, light-headedness, tiredness, forgetfulness and irritability are the major signs. He and his hand still have a long way to go. He is very happy to be back on home ground and enjoys now moving the calves. We know there are some big decisions we still have to face but at present we take every day as it comes. Tony is a bit like a homing pigeon, trying to find his bearings and the taste of home. The challenge is to get used to each other again. In a way we have both been self-centered in what we had to concentrate on. I guess it is a trait of survival. I think we will be fine.