

Aunt May's Golden Age

This resilient farm wife wrote a captivating account of life at the height of the nation's agricultural prosperity.

The Golden Age of Agriculture was just beginning when May Lyford married Elmo Davis.

Elmo was my grandfather's older cousin. As children, my siblings and I walked down Bell School Road, past Spring Creek Road, and over Keith Creek to Bell School. The school occupied a corner of the land my father farmed. Before that, it had been Elmo and May's farm. Although they died before my parents were married, Elmo and May's memory was alive in the barns we played in as kids.

I had the honor of writing the story of May and Elmo's life on the farm. My book, Days on the Family Farm: From the Golden Age Through the Great Depression, is based on diaries May kept from 1896 until her death during WWII. From the get-go, I was completely enchanted by her story.

May and Elmo grew up on farms across the road from each other in the old Guilford Township of Winnebago County, Illinois (it's now Rockford Township).

The happy couple tied the knot on January 1, 1901, at the start of the Golden Age of Agriculture.

This era stretched from 1901 until WWI began in 1914. During this time, the United States was the largest and most innovative industrial entity in the entire world.

With U.S. industry attracting European immigrants, urban areas grew rapidly, and so did the demand for food.
Food prices moved higher and farm income increased. In Elmo and May's neighborhood, this meant the men worked together with large machines, threshing grain, baling hay and filling the silos on their thriving farms.

May's Triumph

You would never guess from her diaries that May was disabled.

Early in her marriage, May lost her ability to walk due to rheumatoid arthritis. But she and Elmo had a full and hap-

By Carrie Meyer



py life together. When they went out together, Elmo carried May to and from the buggy and, later, to and from the automobile. (They bought a Maxwell touring car in 1911.)

What really surprised me was that May rarely referred to her disability. In fact, she hardly mentioned herself in her diary, and she rarely expressed emotion, either.

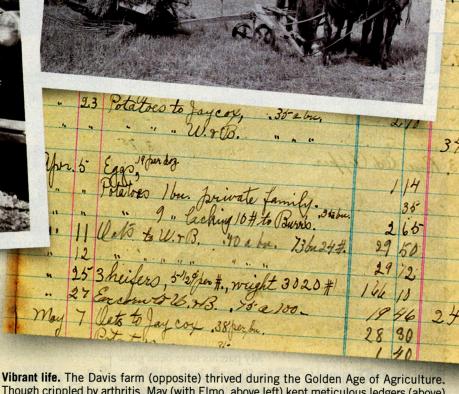
It was apparent to me, though, that May was an important partner on the farm. My family said she had a commanding presence, despite being barely 5 feet tall and weighing only 90-some pounds.

Although she couldn't walk, May used her hands effectively. In addition to keeping meticulous farm accounts, she sewed, quilted, and canned fruits and vegetables.

Dinner for 20

May refused to get into a wheelchair. Instead, she maneuvered around the kitchen with a short-legged wooden armchair. With the strength in her arms, the force of her body weight and some pressure on her feet, May would pitch the chair from side to side and forward across the floor.

On rare occasions, she drove the horses for Elmo in the fields.



Though crippled by arthritis, May (with Elmo, above left) kept meticulous ledgers (above) and diaries. Top: June Breckenridge, Elmo's grand-niece, drove horses on the Davis farm.

Fixing dinner was challenging, but May was comfortable directing the efforts of others. With help from Elmo, her mother and a hired girl, May was able to feed large crews of hungry men. The threshing crews were the largest, with 20 or so workers to feed.

In one entry, May wrote that she was expecting to feed a threshing crew at noon, but the men finished at 10:30 a.m. and moved on to the next farm. May wrote, "Annie Rutz come soon after 6:30 a.m. and we cook meat and make pies and cakes, go to mama's for chairs, and then they go to Faulkner's for dinner. Elmo took Annie and meat, bread and potatoes in auto over there."

For 43 years, May kept diaries and careful ledgers of farm income and expenses. As I pieced her story together, I couldn't help admiring her diligence and the authority she wielded on the farm.

Yes, the farming industry felt hardship with the onslaught of war, and the Golden Age eventually did come to an end. But a strong couple like May and Elmo Davis could survive even this with quiet dignity and determination.

Elmo's Last Words

The last entry in May's diary, written by Elmo, sums up their relationship best:

February 25, 1944: "Dear, sweet little May passed on and left me alone, and so life will never be quite the same, as we were kids, chums, schoolmates, lovers (husband and wife) with never a quarrel. What hurt one, hurt the other. The end, Elmo Davis."

If you'd like to purchase Carrie's book, log on to www.farmandranchliving.com and click on "Links."