

Transformed & Transplanted

by Rita Friesen

It happened again the other day. I was referred to as “the lady who moved the barns and is living the simple life.” I prefer to think of it as life connected to the basics of food, shelter, and family. However, there is no denying that our place is curiously different with our collection of horse-drawn implements along the drive to two barns and two windmills marking the property.

While living for 12 years in southern Indiana, my then-physician husband and I interacted with Amish acquaintances and discovered the writings of Wendell Berry, Mary Pipher, and Joel Salatin. We began exploring the possibility of a career change by attending sustainable agriculture conferences and a permaculture design class.

Four years ago, we decided to establish a farm with a market garden and to implement various sustainable, renewable resources.



We wanted a location near relatives and a Mennonite community. Finding most available farmsteads separated from land, we settled

Friesen Family Farm with horse-drawn hay rake and hay loader in the foreground and windmills in the background. The barn has been converted into their home.

Photo by Rita Friesen

for ground with promise—80 slightly rolling acres, near a state highway, with a willow grove and hardwood supply, far enough from town to allow animals. Last June (2007), we moved and set about establishing buildings, fences, and new patterns for living.

Rather than a mid-life crisis, this felt like the next step for our family. We have long been concerned about fossil fuel use patterns (ask our children about tirades on “wasted” trips to town!) and individual responsibility in community needs. We are saddened at the decrease in general knowledge regarding production and delivery of food, water, and electricity. I internalized many ideas about

reducing, reusing, and recycling from my Depression-era parents long before those three “R’s” were taught in school. However, current reading and my desire to honor God’s good creation have built a foundation under my patterned behaviors and have given me the nerve to join my husband in this leap of faith.

Changes and challenges, some almost overwhelming, have become common occurrences.

My husband intently researched solar and wind power. His construction skills, learned over the years and currently aided by relatives and friends, have allowed us to build a utility building to house deep-cell batteries powered by solar panels and a wind generator.

We have noted that seasonal sun patterns offset local wind patterns. We have made conscious choices to limit electrical use, living more by the sun. Until the temperatures dropped into the 40’s in October, we camped “in” on the 14’x36’ tin-roofed porch while establishing water and power lines and putting floors in the barn portion of the house.

Winter has included homeschooling our youngest, a teenage son, finishing out rooms on the house-barn’s loft level, observing weather patterns, and caring for our animal menagerie.

A 100-year-old Dempster windmill pumps our water into an elevated tank—giving us gravity flow. This has created the need for ingenious PVC plumbing fixtures because conventional faucets are built to restrict flow in a pressured system.

Purchasing a super-insulated direct current refrigerator caused me particular angst. I fretted about giving up my 22 cubic ft. refrigerator/freezer. How could I possibly exchange my often full, 20-year-old kitchen “partner” ... for an 8 cubic ft., chest-type refrigerator without a freezer?



Merlin Friesen and son, Isaiah, put the roof on a utility building as the family begins their eco-friendly farm adventure. This building will house the batteries and controllers for power generation; it will also house the tank for their gravity water system.

Photo by Rita Friesen

The information on the website proved almost worthless to me. Exterior measurements and a picture showing one fully loaded with neat commercially-processed food boxes didn't help me visualize how the baskets would hold fresh food and leftover containers. However, after using only a cooler half-filled with ice for two-and-a-half months, the refrigerator looked HUGE and has only been full occasionally when we have hosted visitors.

What is God teaching me through this transition? Primarily, I'm humbled as members join our Community Supported Agriculture adventure. These are people who have known us less than a year, but are willing to pay in advance for a season's worth of produce. As a result, this will be the largest and most diverse garden we've ever planted, including herbs and multiple varieties of many vegetables.

God has stretched our "community" across the country as various friends write and call to express their interest, encouragement and even challenges. I have been especially thankful for several of my husband's friends. I believe that God has often prompted these men to call just when he needs more than I am able to give in support or knowledge.

Trust and patience are ongoing lessons as we plant long-term crops of strawberries, brambles, nuts and fruits. Having lost our lovely first barn to a tornado's side winds only 7 weeks after we'd moved it 10 miles, I'm still jittery every time strong winds rattle the roof. Meanwhile, I remind myself that Jesus knows all about 45mph winds on the Nebraska prairie and how many years are needed for newly transplanted seedlings to grow into a thick, established windbreak. Humility, thankfulness, patience, and trust—stretched and molded by a loving God. 🍷



Isaiah Friesen with his Australorp chicks (above)

Merlin Friesen disking with Jerry and Jane, the farm's work horse team (below)

Photos by Rita Friesen

