Female farmers few but fervent

By DICK WRIGHT
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A man once told Cindy Moore that when he learned she was a farmer, he thought he was going to meet a woman with grease under her fingernails and her hair tied back in a ponytail.

Well, Moore said, sometimes she does put her hair in a ponytail, and she joked she wears nail polish to cover up the grease.

On some days the caller might also have found her in rubber boots cleaning out a drainage ditch.

That's part of farm work. When she's not in the field, though, she is as well turned out as any other woman.

But a farmer she is—the genuine article.

Moore drives the big green John Deere, she hooks up the equipment to it, she takes her chances with the price of cotton and grain.

And she is something of a rarity, being a woman and a farmer.

Moore knows only two other women who are farmers. One is her sister, Jeanie Caldwell. The other is Holley Burford.

Burford runs a dairy farm with her father at Gloster, in DeSoto Parish. "I've always felt I live in the best of both worlds here. It is a small community. Most dairy farmers in this area are relatives," Burford said.

Neither Moore nor Burford claims any feminist sentiment. They are not out to make a point about what women can do. Both said they farm because that is what they want to do.

"My dad's motto always has been there is no male or female here at the barn. You do the work," Burford said. "When I leave the farm, he wants me to act like a lady."

"It's more than just a job. It's a way of life," Burford said.

Moore quit a bank job in 1984 and talked her father, Doug Moore, into letting her take over some of his farmland.

"I was raised on a family farm," she said. "I like being outside and being my own boss."

Burford said she has never encountered different treatment from dairy farmers because she is a woman.

Moore said she was accepted from the beginning by men in farming, but she had to fight all the way to Washington to get the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service to recognize her status. The ASCS is the agency that oversees federal farm programs.

The local ASCS office accepted her status as a bona fide farmer, but higher offices did not accept her independent status, she said.

"They just didn't think a woman could farm," Moore said. "They didn't say that but that was the gist of it."

Both she and her sister won recognition as farmers. But after spending $10,000, including hiring a lawyer and going to Washington for a hearing, Moore said, the family decided to avoid further hassle by forming a partnership to include herself and Jeanie and their parents Doug and Liz Moore.

"I drive a tractor. I work on equipment and I do everything anybody else does," Moore said. "We are all equal partners in this business."

"We don't ask anybody to do anything we wouldn't do on this farm," she said.

Other farmers, all men, never questioned her or her sister, Moore said. "Both of us have been totally accepted by our neighbors," Moore said. "I grew up with all these people. We all farmed."

When Moore became a farmer, she joined farm organizations and soon started winning recognition.

She can be a fervent spokeswoman for agriculture.
Burford, now 26, said she knew by the age of 5 she wanted to be a dairy farmer. "I must point out my parents never discouraged me from doing this," she said.

Her father did insist, however, she try another occupation before she made up her mind after she got an agri-business degree at LSD. "Do something else, make sure it's what you really want to do," he told her.

Burford headed west and worked at a feedlot and later in animal health. "I came to realize one day it really was the people I love. It is more than just a job. It's a way of life," Burford said.

She is active in the Farm Bureau and feels at home with other dairy farmers. "I am very thankful for it that I feel I get treated as an equal," Burford said. "As long as you do your work, and you're pulling your load, I guess there is no reason to be discriminated against," she said.

To be a dairywoman, Burford sleeps in two shifts. She rises at midnight and heads for the barn to start the milking. She sleeps part of the afternoon and goes to bed early in the evening. She and her father and a part-time worker handle the milking.

"My heart is here. I'll say this. If you call me when I'm 60 years old, I hope that I am farming," she said. "The women I admire most are the ones who work, have children, have a successful marriage and can balance all that," Burford said. "That to me seems like more of a struggle than my working five weeks straight without a day off. They have to care for the whole family."

When Moore left the bank and became a full-time farmer, she said she hired her own labor and bought her own equipment.

Her father started her on 500 acres of his best land. Moore made the most of it. She broke the Ouachita Parish cotton yield record that year.

Today, the Moore partnership farms about 1,000 acres, the majority in cotton. They employ two men part-time.

"We used to farm 5,000 acres," she said. "We cut down on our operation to where we could handle it ourselves."

"I like it better smaller, where I am out in the field every day," she said.

As both advocate and defender of agriculture, Moore wants the public to understand the costs and risk farmers have. She wants the public to know the cost of farming has risen but the prices they get have not kept up. She wants the public to know that when someone pays $40 to $50 for a pair of jeans, the cotton farmer gets less than $2 of the price. And there are the rules and regulations a farmer must know.

"There are so many rules and so much paperwork," Moore said. "It is really difficult for farmers these days, and people don't realize that."

"Farming is a good way to live but..." she said.

Don't misunderstand her. Moore said she has no plans to quit farming. "I guess I will be here as long as I can," she said.

Moore is president of the Ouachita Parish Farm Bureau and an officer of the state bureau's Women's Committee. Plaques on the wall of her office attest to her achievements - Farm Bureau Woman of the Year, Monroe Jaycees' Outstanding Young Farmer, the Northeast Agri-Business Council and Monroe Chamber of Commerce's outstanding young farm producer.

Both Moore and Burford took advantage the LSU Agricultural Center's leadership program for young men and women in farming. Moore has graduated. Burford is in it now.

People work 10 to 12 hours a day for weeks with no days off because they love the farm and love the land, Moore said.

"I enjoy it. That's my life," she said.