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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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## A GLIMPSE OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF AGRICULTURE By Carrie A. Meyer



A team of horses in the Golden Age of Agriculture with a glimpse of an automobile in the background  
Photo courtesy of Carrie A. Meyer

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article about farming in Guilford Township a century ago. It tells the story of May Lyford Davis and her husband Elmo. May kept a diary and extensive farm records that detailed the day-to-day activities on the farm. Carrie Meyer has written this very interesting article based on these records that have been passed down through her family.

Dr. Meyer is an Associate Professor of Economics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. This article is based on her most recent book, *Days on the Family Farm - From the Golden Age through the Great Depression*, which was recently published by the University of Minnesota Press. You can order it from the following web site if you cannot find it locally. [http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/M/meyer\\_days.html](http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/M/meyer_days.html) There will likely be a book signing at the Midway Village Harvest Festival in October. Dr. Meyer has published two previous books and numerous academic papers. She was a Peace Corps volunteer and is an avid gardener.

## IDEA FOR AN ARTICLE?

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

# A Glimpse of the Golden Age of Agriculture

From the diary of May Lyford Davis, 1914

By Carrie A. Meyer

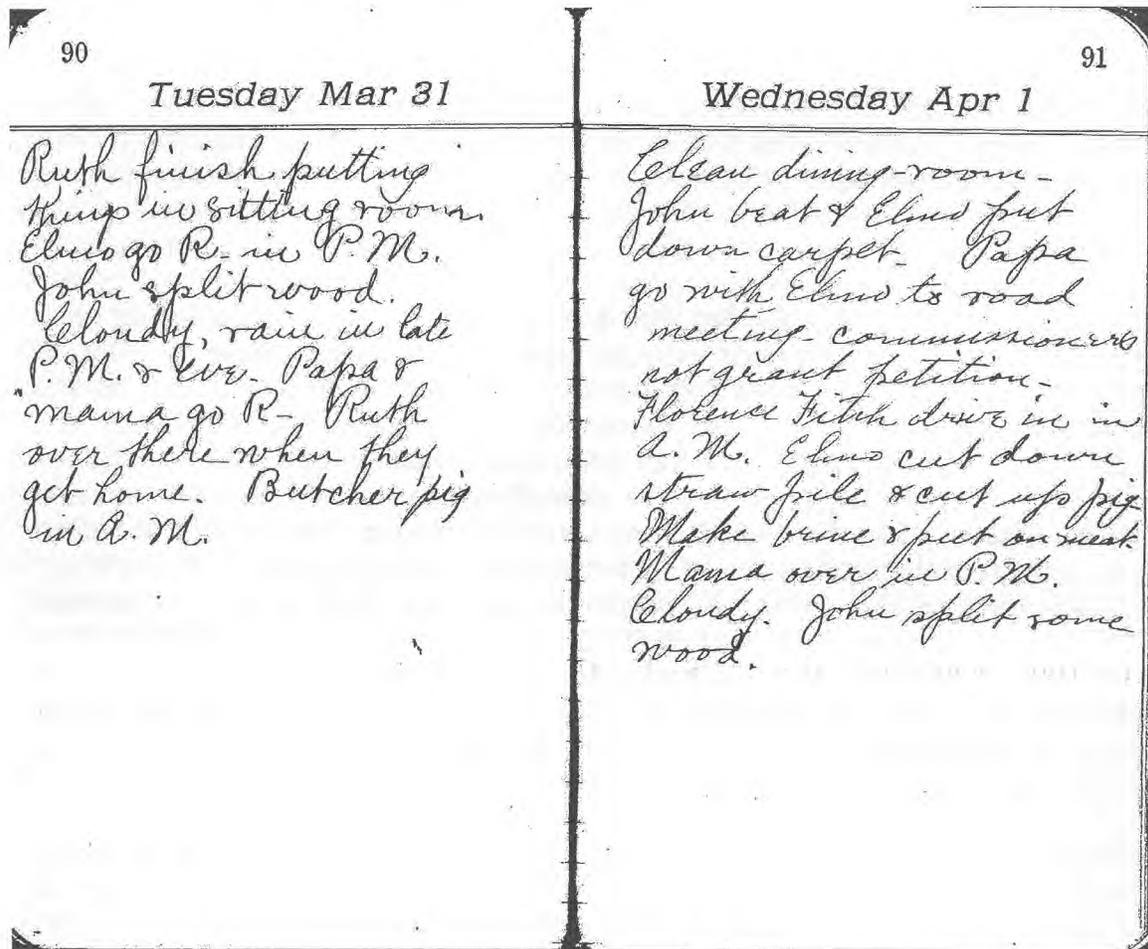
It was the Golden Age of Agriculture in the summer of 1914. May Lyford Davis and her husband Elmo Davis were both 40 years old. They lived on a farm on Bell School Road in the old Guilford Township of Winnebago County – now part of Rockford. May's parents, Joseph and Emily Lyford, lived across the road and up the lane.

Agriculture had entered a Golden Age as the century began. The falling farm prices of the late 1800s gave way to rising farm prices. The amount of farmland in the United States had doubled between 1870 and 1900, as the frontier moved westward. The expansion of farmland had increased the production of farm products and had kept their prices on the decline. But by 1900, this westward expansion was essentially complete; and immigrants were streaming into the United States and propelling the growth of urban areas. Thus, the demand for food increased. The population of Rockford increased from 31,000 to 45,400 between 1900 and 1910, a jump of almost 50 percent. Over the same period, the population of Chicago increased from 1.7 million to almost 2.2 million people. Horses were a primary mode of transportation, although trains and electric streetcars also moved many people. The demand for hay and oats (to feed the horses) contributed to farming prosperity in the Golden Age.

The following glimpse into the spring and summer of 1914 is based on May's 1914 diary and the farming records that she kept. Throughout her married life, from 1901 to 1944, May kept farm ledgers and diaries. A more complete account of the contents of her diaries and ledgers, and of the dynamic changes that occurred in the decades her diaries span, can be found in *Days on the Family Farm: From the Golden Age through the Great Depression* published in September 2007 by the University of Minnesota Press. Information from the book, and from May's other diaries and ledgers, enriches the following snapshot of farm life in 1914. So does the 1914 diary kept by May's mother, Emily Lyford. The account begins on April 1.

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By 1914 many of the local farmers have automobiles. May and Elmo have a Maxwell Touring Car that they bought in 1911. Early in the year there were several "road meetings," and a petition was circulating in Guilford Township. May notes on April 1 that both Elmo and Papa attend a road meeting where the commissioners fail to grant the petition.



A page from the diary kept by Emily Lyford in 1914.

Provided by Carrie A. Meyer

Early that morning Elmo had been helping with spring cleaning, removing and beating the carpets. Later that day he cuts up a pig that he butchered the day before; he leaves it to soak in brine. John Pratt, the hired man, spends the afternoon splitting wood.

Elmo is also looking at gasoline engines in early April - in between rebuilding a pig fence with John. Elmo goes to see the Emerson-Brantingham engines in Rockford. (The Emerson-Brantingham Implement Co. was the cornerstone of Rockford industry in 1914 - known throughout the country for its production of farm implements.) Elmo already has a small gasoline engine that he bought in 1906. He's been using it over the winter

months to power his "buzz saw" to cut wood for the furnace and to power a grinder to grind feed. But in April of 1914, Elmo is looking at bigger engines with several neighboring farmers that have been shredding corn together.

As is her custom in her diaries, May makes only a few notes about her own activities. She is much more inclined to note what Elmo and the hired man are doing and who stops by. Rheumatoid arthritis has left May unable to walk – she spends much of her time each week reading, writing letters, and keeping the farm accounts. She also attends to meals and other housekeeping chores with the help of a hired girl. This year Ruth Ostberg, who is 15 years old, has been working for May since early March.

Sunday, however, is a day of rest. May and Elmo spend time together and with family and friends. During the winter months they had been reading books on Sundays. But now, when the weather and the roads are good, they go out visiting. On Sunday, April 5, the roads are not too bad ("dusty a little in places, but low places muddy"); May and Elmo take Ruth home for the day and then make various stops to see relatives.

While May and Elmo have no children of their own, their house is often full of children. May's brother Starr Lyford and his wife Maggie have six children. On April 9, Maggie comes to visit with the four youngest children – Walter, Russell, Franklin, and Emily. May's mother also spends the afternoon with them; and when school is out, the two older children, Annetta and Joe stop by on their way home from school. The next day, Good Friday, May and Mama fix Easter eggs for Starr's children. Then Ruth makes hot cross buns on Saturday.

For about ten days after Easter, the men are out working in the fields, sowing oats and barley. Starr's children and other school children stop in on their way to and from school. Little pigs are born, and May keeps track of their numbers in her diary. As the weather warms up, more friends and relatives stop by and May gets out with Elmo more frequently to go visiting. When the men finish in the oat fields, John begins spreading manure on the fields to be planted to corn, while Elmo catches up on a number of odd jobs and errands. He plows up the potato patch and hauls corn into Rockford; he takes grist to Cherry Valley to have it ground. He plants some trees and grapevines, and does a little fixing on the automobile.

Then in early May the men begin planting corn; they also plant potatoes and garden vegetables. Elmo and John finish planting corn on May 20. Before the end of the month there are radishes and onions from the garden and May and Ruth are canning "pieplant" (rhubarb).



The Lyford boys with cart and pony in 1914  
Provided by Carrie A. Meyer

The month of May is marked by sadness, however. May's Uncle Dudley Lyford is ailing early in the month; then he has an operation for appendicitis on May 14. But the operation doesn't save his life; he dies on the evening of May 20 at the age of 78. May and Elmo attend the funeral in Roscoe a few days later.

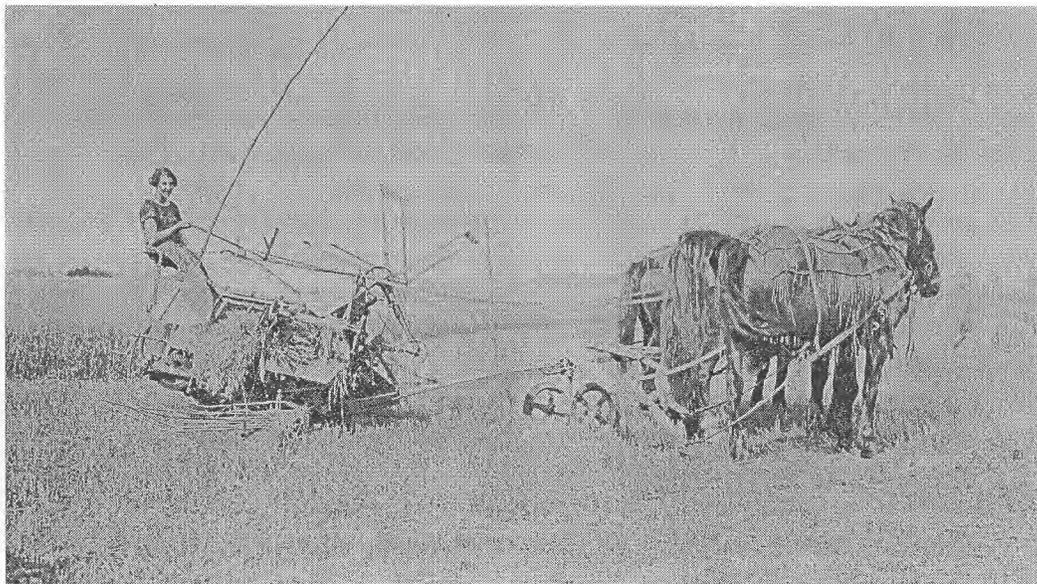
After the corn is planted and in between cultivating, Elmo and the farmers he shreds corn with – including Frank Reid, Mat Ralston, Charles Kleckner, Mitchel Breckenridge, and George Brown – turn their attention to the gasoline engine they plan to buy. They meet at Frank Reid's on May 28 and Elmo goes into Chicago several days later. Within another few days, an engine agent stops by. Then the men meet again at Mat Ralston's. Finally in mid-June, May notes that Elmo goes to Henderson's with the other men to buy a gas engine. (Elmo's share of the engine comes to \$200.) In addition to a gasoline engine, the men also buy a threshing machine this summer; and, in October, together they build a shed to house the machinery on the Breckenridge farm.

Just the day before the purchase of the gasoline engine, May's brother Starr had stopped by in the morning with his new automobile. He was out for a driving lesson with the auto agent; and his two oldest boys, Joey and Walter, were with him. Later in the day, Starr had stopped in again, this time with

four children, but without the auto agent. Over the summer, May mentions Starr coming by frequently with the children in the auto; and before June is out, Elmo has at least one ride around the block with Starr and the boys. The Rob Watson family also has a new automobile before the end of June. May and Elmo ride out to Winnebago in it with them one Sunday. And John Pratt, the hired man, has been riding a motorcycle to work since the end of May. (John stays with May and Elmo through the week, but is off on Sundays.)

Meanwhile, May's parents have strawberries that have been bearing heavily. Starr's children and Ruth have been up to their place to pick; and May and Ruth have been canning strawberries. By the time the strawberries stop bearing, the elder Lyfords have cherries ready and May goes up to help Mama pit cherries on June 24. But this year the cherries are "very wormy" and don't amount to much.

On June 26, Bertha Breckenridge and her daughter June come by for a visit. Bertha Purdy Breckenridge is Elmo's niece, although she is only a few years younger than he is. In February of 1900, Bertha had married Ely Breckenridge and within a few years they moved out to Tacoma, Washington. May and Elmo had married less than a year later. May's diary from 1900 records many evenings that the two young couples spent together. Among other things, Ely had a barn raising that Elmo and the other men in the neighborhood attended. Then Ely hosted a dance in the new barn a few weeks later. Now Bertha and her daughter have come back on the train from Tacoma to spend several weeks with Purdy and Breckenridge relatives in the Guilford area. In September, Bertha will have a successful operation to remove a tumor.



June Breckenridge with horses and grain binder in 1914  
Provided by Carrie A. Meyer

May and Elmo celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in 1914 at a "Granger picnic in Robinson's woods." May's parents go with them, undoubtedly in May and Elmo's automobile. Later in the evening, May and Elmo go into Rockford to see the fireworks. The next day is a "warm, but pleasant" Sunday. May and Elmo are out all afternoon visiting relatives; Elmo's Aunt Phrone (Sophronia Post -- who lives in Cherry Valley) accompanies them. Starr's family is also taking opportunities to get out in their new automobile. The circuit Chautauqua has come to Cherry Valley to stay for about a week. Starr's family attends at least twice while the Chautauqua is in town.

Since the end of June, Elmo and John have been working in the hayfields, cutting and tedding (or turning) the hay, and then stacking it onto wagons and loading it into the barn with the help of horses and a big hay fork. Elmo looks for an extra man to help with the hay. The men work on hay through mid-July and then begin cutting barley and oats to set up in shocks and wait for threshing, with some more work in the hayfields wedged in between.

July also brings another death in the family. Elmo's Aunt Mary Davis dies in mid-July at the age of 80. She had been married to his Uncle Thad, who had come with the Davis family as a boy of 10 years to settle in Guilford Township back in 1839. Uncle Thad and Aunt Mary had lived on the original Davis claim -- over by the Davis Cemetery on the Boone County line. Elmo attends the funeral with his cousin Florence Fitch and her husband Ed.

By mid-July Mama has blackberries just starting to come on; and she still has a few raspberries. When Starr and his family come up to pick blackberries on July 20, they get 1 ½ crates. A week later, Nettie, Starr's sister-in-law, picks blackberries with the children. They get more than a crate again.

July 22 is a warm and windy day. In the afternoon Elmo and other men from the neighborhood go to a fire at the Robert Brown farm. The fire burns the barn, most of the out-buildings and four horses. May notes, "Cause not known." Earlier in the day, Elmo and John had been cutting and setting up oats; the men finish cutting oats on July 27.

The next day Elmo takes a buggy and 2 horses "to help get threshing machine". Elmo is gone all day -- from 7AM to 8PM. When the men return, they leave the new threshing machine at the Mitchel Breckenridge farm. The next day the men have the machine up and running in time to thresh barley for about an hour, and then return to thresh the next day. On July 31 the men thresh at Elmo and May's; May has 19 threshers to dinner. (Other than the fact that Mrs. Spearing helped with the work, May provides no further details on the dinner.)

Each day for about 2 weeks, the men move around the neighborhood with the thresher and gasoline engine. They thresh at Frank Reid's, Gustafsons', Kleckners', and Faulkners'. May has dinner for threshers again on August 5.

The gasoline engine starts to "bother" on August 6, when the men are threshing at George Brown's. The next day, Elmo and Irving Brown go into Rockford to see about a solution; they get back to threshing that afternoon. The men finish threshing on August 12 and put the machinery away the next day. In the intervening days they have also threshed grain at Mat Ralston's, at Tafts', at A. Dorn's, and at Pelleys'.

After the threshing is all done, George Brown hosts a social on his lawn on August 18. Mama makes a cake for Elmo and May to take to the "sociable". Starr and Maggie and their three oldest children are among the guests who also attend the social, which lasts late into the evening.

In late August, May and Ruth are canning tomatoes and peaches; and the mailman (Mr. Nichols) is beginning to use an automobile for his mail route. Elmo dresses the first spring chicken for dinner on August 25 and digs a few potatoes that day for dinner as well. Elmo is doing a number of odd jobs these days, while John spreads manure over the fields for next year's crop -- day after day. Elmo goes into Chicago to get repairs for the cream separator. He cuts weeds along the road. He "draws corn to Bengston's for A. Breckenridge"; and he patches the hog house roof, and shingles the corncrib and the hog house.

Mat Ralston is building a silo, and Elmo helps him draw cement and gravel. Elmo had built a silo the year before. Later in mid-September, Elmo, Mat and the other farmers, that together bought the gasoline engine and the thresher, will start filling silos together.

But on Sept 2 there is hay to bale. Mr. Cole had come with the "baler engine" and Charles Kleckner had brought the baler the evening before. May has "9 men for dinner & supper" on September 2. The men bale the loose hay that has been stored in the barn. After supper "Elmo has to take baler to Wheeler's Crossing." The next day he hauls a load of baled hay into Rockford.

The Ringling Brothers Circus comes to Rockford on September 4. Elmo and John both go in to spend the day. They see the parade through town as well as the show itself. Starr and his family also take their automobile into Rockford to go to the circus. May and Ruth stay home and make 6 quarts of catsup.

On Sunday September 6, Starr and his children come over in the evening to show off their new pony. (May and Elmo had spent the day with Purdy relatives.) Walter, who is 7, rides the pony over from the farm and the others

all come in the auto. This fall the pony will take the children to school in a cart. School begins the next day.

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The peaceful prosperity apparent in 1914 did not last. Although there was no indication of it in May's diary, by September of 1914, war had already broken out in Europe. The Austrian heir-apparent and his wife were killed in Sarajevo on June 28; and Austria declared war a month later. By early August, German troops marched into Belgium. In May of 1915, the Germans sank the Lusitania, and the United States responded, not yet with declarations of war, but with stepped up assistance to the British and the French.

The next few years brought dramatic changes as U.S. agriculture and industry responded to the demands of the war-time economy. After the war, farm prices and land values collapsed, and while the farm economy sank in the 1920s, the automobile economy roared. Despite the poor farm economy, however, trucks and tractors began to appear on many northern Illinois farms in the 1920s, so did radios and Chevrolets.

May records all these changes in her diaries and farm ledgers. Through her notes, one can see the Golden Age children of the Guilford community turn into adults by the late 1920s. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, amid bank failures and drought, these children were having children of their own. Many farmers went broke during the Great Depression – farm prices hit rock bottom and crops failed with drought and poor weather. But most farmers survived the Depression; in the latter half of the 1930s, when the drought had moved further west, Guilford farmers bought new rubber-tired tractors and combines, and they began planting increasing amounts of soybeans and hybrid corn. In the midst of World War II, as agriculture moves into overdrive again, May's diaries and ledgers end.

Province Coll. 1914.

Jan.	3.	28 bales hay to W. & B., 2400 #, @ 80 a ton,	19 20	
"	5.	Oats to Shumway, 4110 #, @ 48 a bu.,	70 56	
"	7.	Loose hay to Carney, 2260 #, @ 14 a ton,	15 88	
"	"	Cement sacks,	2 50	
"	14.	Loose hay to Trigg, 2550 #, @ 14 a ton,	17 87	
"	17.	For taking Humbley's party to house,	50	
"	22.	35 B. hay to W. & B., @ 14 a ton, 3270	22 47	
"	26.	36 B. " " Trigg, @ 15 a " 3230		
"	31.	35 B. " " " " " 3200		
			98 70	
Feb.	3.	36 B. " " " " " 3280		247 95
"	4.	38 B. " " " " " 3480		
"	7.	Car corn to W. & B., 75 a 100,	14 97	
"	11.	" " " " " " " "	15 67	
"	14.	" " " " " " " 2130 #	15 97	
"	16.	30 B. hay to W. & B., 2780 # @ 14	19 46	
"	17.	23 B. " to Sam. Melachrois, @ 14, 2090 #	14 63	1913 v
"	18.	31 " " W. & B., @ 14 a ton, 2710 #	19 59	Hay up 5/21.
"	23.	Oats to W. & B., 36 a bu.	23 17	322.57
"	23	Calf skin	1 50	
Mar.	4.	Oats to Shumway 1896 bu., 22 #, 47 #	65 66	125 80
"	16.	Cow-hides,	6 69	
"	18.	Oats to Shumway, (110 bu.) 47 a bu.	51 87	
"	19.	36 B. hay to W. & B., 3270 # @ 14 a ton,	22 96	
"	27.	Oats to Trigg, 37 a bu.,	24 39	
				170 07
Apr.	2.	Oats to Leonard Store, 37 a bu.,	6 98	
"	4.	12 Hogs to C. Popham 30.00 #	249 67	
"	24.	Car corn to Kight, 85 a 100,	16 91	
"	27.	Oats to Ward, 38 a bu., 370 #,	18 30	
				283 81
May	12.	W. & B. 57 #		

A page from May's ledger showing the farm accounts  
 Provided by Carrie A. Meyer

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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