



Farm Tours for City Folk? *You Bet!!*



By M. Vandervelde

Northwest Iowa is breaking out with something new—free farm tours for city-bred tourists.

How many times have you driven through an area and wished you could visit some of the farms, just to see what goes on behind the scenes? Emmetsburg, Iowa, is one of the towns doing something about that. Road signs on approaching highways announce, "FREE FARM TOURS — SEE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE." Smaller signs in service stations and motels invite urban tourists to taste farm hospitality.

The usual first response is, "What is the gimmick?" and "How long must we wait for the next tour?"

The answer, "No gimmick and wait just long enough for us to contact a guide-host to go along and answer questions."

But there it is in a nutshell. However, that is not to say that a lot of work hasn't gone into the tours. Also, a lot of continued supervision. In the first place, farms were selected that would demonstrate varied types of agriculture—then their operators were consulted. Would the farmer and his family be willing to be interrupted during planting, combining, choring, canning, doing breakfast dishes? The answer was a resounding, "Bring the visitors. We'd like to meet them."

A brochure was then made to give a brief description of each farm and its specialties—beef cattle, dairying, poultry, what-have-you. Even 4-H projects of farm boys and girls were listed, and in some cases pet animals. From this brochure visitors select the farms they would like to visit; on the average, two units.

After the farms were selected, a crew of guide-hosts was lined up. These volunteers are retired farmers. It was thought that they could answer all—well, nearly all—questions put to them. They were furnished with certain pertinent statistics to be passed on to visitors as needed. Lists of these guides, with phone numbers, were left at key spots, including the Chamber of Commerce office. If one guide is not immediately available, another is.

What have been the farm-tour results?

Most visitors have been from urban centers in the East. Many have never before visited a farm.

The men want to see and hear about the scientific angles of farming — hybridization, balanced rations, mechanized equipment. And they want to know how the farm program is working at the grass-roots end. Most visitors are well informed about federal farm legislation. One tourist took home sample leaves of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and *cockleburs*.

Ladies have been interested in modern farm kitchens and rare antique collections. They seem a little surprised that pigs are provided with air conditioning in the form of large electric-fan out-takes. And, even more amazed to see those same pigs leave their air-conditioned quarters in favor of easing down (with a sigh of contentment) into a nice, oozy mud puddle.

As for the city children—of course they all want to see or be a cowboy. Trouble is, in this age of mechanization, not many farms can furnish a horse. But there are always lots of farm babies of interest: calves, colts, kittens, chicks, piglets.

Most visitors have the impression, when they come, that the farmer is being kept on government dole. And many of them, when they leave, have adjusted that opinion in varying degrees.

What effect have the farm tours had on local participants? Let's quote one farmer.

"This farm-meeting-city project is a two-way deal," he said. "There is a mutual exchange that is good for both of us."

Surprising reaction has been evident in the retired-farmer guide-hosts. One expressed it this way, "I get as much fun and information visiting the farms as the folks I take. You've no idea how farming methods are continually changing!"

What of the future? These farm tours (now available at a dozen or so spots in northwest Iowa) are spreading. As for Emmetsburg, it will have additional guide-hosts next year, and another set of farms. Other rural families should benefit from this exchange with the city.