

ANNETTE KOHLHAGEN FLECK – the Woman Behind the Program



Annette Kohlhagen Fleck
Circa 1942

Many farm and ranch women in the United States are hearing about an educational program called Annie's Project. The mission of Annie's Project is to empower farm women to be better business partners through networks and by managing and organizing critical information. Annie's Project is based on the life of a farm woman who grew up in a small town in northern Illinois. Her goal was to marry a farmer and in 1947 she did. Annie spent her lifetime learning how to be an involved business partner with her farm husband. Together they did great things, but it wasn't easy.

Challenges Annie faced included three generations living under one roof, low profitability, changing farm enterprises, and raising a family. Annie faced pressure from her brother, multiple sisters-in-law, and her mother-in-law. New regulations for selling processed food directly to the consumer forced many changes. Low profitability did not leave a lot of money to raise a family of four children, even though the family worked hard. Annie had to make many painful sacrifices that tested her conviction to be married to a farmer. There were days of tears, anger and sorrow. There were days of laughter, contentment, and accomplishment.

Through it all, Annie kept records. She kept the farm business running, she kept the family running, and she kept her marriage. Annie knew deadlines, reporting requirements, and tax issues. She did the little management jobs that supported big management decisions.

When big decisions had to be made, Annie was there with her records. To increase cash flow, Annie sent her husband to work off-farm while she milked cows and kept an egg route in Chicago. Eventually, her records guided them to discontinue an egg-laying enterprise, a seasonal turkey enterprise, and a dairy enterprise. Other farmers with larger equipment and more resources could better run the farm. That prompted Annie and her husband to become the landowners renting to other farmers. She paid expenses, and marketed corn and soybeans.

When others looked upon decisions Annie had helped to make, their opinions were not always kind, and that was very hard on Annie. But she stuck with her decisions. She corrected mistakes, and learned from experience. As a former teacher Annie had never-ending patience and ability to weather bad times. Annie was married to her farmer for 50 years. She died in 1997, a wealthy woman, and doing things her way.