

From Kildalton to the wheat plains of Kansas

A report from Jane Smith, Ag student

I AM 19-years-old from a tillage farm in Clough Jordan, Co. Tipperary. My family is involved in farming over 1,000 acres of tillage (barley, wheat, oats and sugar beet). I am the eldest of five girls - Caroline, Claire, Linda and Lorraine. I enjoy working with my father Jimmy on our home farm, especially when it comes to operating the machinery (Class Lexion 450, New Holland TM165, F115, M135) and I also enjoy growing and managing the crops. These were the influences which prompted my choice of course when I left school and led me to where I am today - a United States farming on a grand scale in the experienced.

I have been studying at Kildalton College, Piltown, Co. Kilkenny since September 1999. Firstly, I completed the general Certificate in Agriculture and then I took a place on the Diploma in Machinery and Arable Crops. This course trains young farmers in the operation, maintenance, costing and management of farm and tillage machinery. We also attend Waterford Institute of Technology one day a week for training on welding, electrical systems, electronics and hydraulics.

Gender imbalance

I am one of 14 students at Kildalton College studying the Diploma in Machinery and Arable Crops. Being the only female student on this course has not made any differences. It is the having 13 big brothers and, while they did manage to raise my blood pressure at times, the group has worked very well together! The staff at Kildalton College have been very supportive and I was never treated any way differently to the rest of the group.

I am now living in Kansas, USA, and am six weeks into the work experience component of the course. I know that if I had not attended the course at Kildalton College I would not be working here today.

The American way

I decided to do my work experience in America, as I always wanted to be part of a team on a large arable farm in the States. Kildalton College has links with the Ohio International Agricultural Training Program. This program organises placement for students on large farms, with combine crews and dealerships throughout the USA.

I joined the Ohio International Intern Programme in November following a presentation in the college by Mick O'Keefe, one of the program's co-ordinators. With support from my family, friends, Kildalton College and Ohio State University I am able to write this report from Kansas. There is a wide range of placements available through this programme and the co-ordinators took into account my training requirements and past experience when choosing a location for my placement.

Heading off

I left a cold and wet Ireland on March 27 having said goodbye to my family and friends. After a long and tiring flight I arrived in Columbus, Ohio. I spent two days at Ohio State University on a short induction course. I found the staff at the university were really friendly and helpful. I then flew in to Denver on March 29 where I met my host farmer Lon Frahm. The final leg of my journey was a three and a half hour drive to the farm in Colby, Kansas. This is where I now work.

The Frahm farm

Frahm's farmland is made up of 7,500 acres of which 1,300 acres is rented. The main crop grown on the farm is corn (maize); 4,000 acres of corn is grown on irrigated land while a further 1,000 acres is grown on 'dry land'. Other crops include some 2,000 acres of wheat and 500 acres of soy beans. At the moment there are four other people working on the farm David, Jason, Dewey and Dan.

We have just finished planting corn. Who would believe that in the middle of April temperatures can rise up to 85 degrees Fahrenheit and you can get a tan (well mine is coming along nicely).

Long days

When planting we were in the field and working by 7:00am and we worked until it gets dark which is around 8:30-9:15pm. In the last seven days we have 'field conditioned' and planted 5,000 acres of corn using three John Deere planters (one 24 row with air assist and two 12-row standard machines). We have planted an average of



Jane Smith, a student on the Diploma in Machinery and Arable Crops at Kildalton College, sits in the sun on a John Deere 9300 series and field conditioner on a 7,500 acre farm in north west Kansas.

660 acres a day. The planters are pulled by 8300 series John Deere tractors and liquid phosphate is drilled with the seed.

I am working a field conditioner which is pulled by a John Deere 9300 tractor. This machine can prepare 300 acres a day and works directly in front of the planter on the irrigated fields. None of the 'dry corn land' is tilled and about 1,200 acres of the irrigated land is also untilled. None of these fields has been ploughed since World War 2. Fields are disked once and then a field conditioner is run in front of the planter.

On Sunday April 22 there was a 1 inch of rain in the area but next day we were back in the field and dust was flying high. I was very surprised by this when you compare it to the interruption caused by rain at home.

A typical field has 160 acres. In the irrigated fields the sprinkler system covers a circle of 120 acres. The corners (40 acres) are used as dry land for wheat, soy and sometimes corn. The fields are planted north to south so that when working in the morning and in the evening the sun is not in your eyes. This system seems to make a difference.

My average day starts at 7:30 am and finishes at 5:30 pm. When we are not cultivating or sowing the main tasks are jobs such as sprinkler maintenance, tractor and machine maintenance, etc. The farmers here think a lot of their farms appearance and cutting of the grass and the hedges is a job done regularly.

Better attitude towards women

From what I have seen to date, women seem more equally accepted in farming circles. For example, when you arrive in a co-op, you don't have anyone looking strangely at you and wondering why is she here? No one treats you as if you are helpless.

When I arrived here a month ago everything was very brown from the winter snows. Now things are starting to green up and even the winter wheat has improved. Fungicides are not used on the wheat crops. The other day I saw a neighbour's field covered with yellow rust which will not be treated.

Coming from a 'blue' New Holland background it is hard to look around and see everyone here driving the John Deere green. One of the hardest things to do is to try and remember which side of the fresh soil cut to drive on. I also miss the smell of the fresh soil cut by a plough on a spring morning. But then again through my training programme I am getting to realise my dream of working in the wheat plains of America.