

Winnabow Farmer Learns Lessons In South America

BY DOUG RUTTER

Brunswick County farmer Mary Earp received a good education in foreign cultures and agricultural practices during a recent trip to South America.

But she says the most important lesson she learned was how to appreciate what she had left behind.

"We take too much for granted, and we don't appreciate what we have," she said during a recent interview at her Winnabow farm. "We need to wake up and realize how good we have it."

Mrs. Earp and 19 other farm women from across the United States recently traveled to Brazil and Argentina for a two-week tour sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture. They left Sept. 21 and returned Oct. 6.

Mrs. Earp—who runs a farm with her husband, Wilbur—was the only participant from North Carolina. She said most of the women involved were from the Midwest and California.

The group first toured Brazil, which is made up mostly of Spaniards, and then went on to Argentina, where the people are of European descent. "We would blend in in Argentina," Mrs. Earp said. "In Brazil we stood out."

Mrs. Earp said the biggest difference between farming in the United States and South America is the availability of cheap labor. South American farms are owned by the rich, she said, and it's not uncommon for workers to earn a minimum wage of \$40 to \$60 per month.

Another difference is the size of the farms. The small family farms found in Brunswick County would not survive in South America. Mrs. Earp said a 4,000-acre farm in Brazil or Argentina would be among the smallest.

Mrs. Earp said the soils in both South American countries she visited lack nutrients, and fertilizers are not used very much. Soil erosion is so bad that the rivers are red from the clay.

In Brazil, Mrs. Earp said the group visited an orange processing plant that employed 8,200 workers who processed the fruit from a million trees. Citrus fruit is the biggest crop in Brazil, which supplies about half of the concentrated juices that come into the United States.

"There's no way our citrus producers can compete with them. They have so much labor, and it's so cheap that we can't compete," Mrs. Earp said. "One woman from



MARY EARP, pictured with her husband, Wilbur, at their Winnabow farm, recently returned from a trip to Brazil and Argentina where she learned about those countries' cultures and farming practices.

STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

Texas said she was going to go home and tell her husband to stop growing citrus."

Mrs. Earp, who has 170 sows at her farm in Winnabow, also saw a 750-sow hog farm in Brazil that was similar to her operation. She said the farm was "modern and sparkling clean" and the hog waste was used to fertilize citrus trees.

Before leaving Brazil, the American women visited a coffee farm where the beans are picked by hand, dried out on large brick patios and sorted according to size.

While citrus juice and coffee beans are the chief commodities in Brazil, Mrs. Earp said Argentina's major crop is sugar cane. "The sugar cane stretches as far as the eye can see. It's cut one stalk at a time with a machete."

Besides visiting a sugar cane operation, the American group saw a meat packing

plant where corned beefed was processed and an 11,000-acre dairy farm in Argentina.

Mrs. Earp said Brazil, Argentina and the United States share at least one problem in the agriculture industry—putting programs in place that benefit farmers no matter what type of farming they do.

"It's a problem there and that's what we need to do in the United States also," she said. "You can't do one thing to help the corn grower and not help the livestock producer. We need to bridge all phases of agriculture."

Unlike the United States where there are several socio-economic classes, Mrs. Earp said there are only two classes of people in South America. "You've got the rich and the poor and nobody in between. Most of them are poor."

The rich landowners exploit the poor peo-

ple by using them as cheap labor and generating money that they keep to themselves. "Great wealth has been gained by few at the expense of the masses," she said.

Mrs. Earp pointed out inflation in the United States is nothing compared to what she saw in South America, where the value of their currency changes with each passing moment.

The problem is worse in Argentina than Brazil. But in both countries, she said products in the stores don't have prices marked on them because the prices change from one hour to the next.

In Argentina, the inflation rate jumps between 15 percent and 20 percent each month. She said it costs \$5 just to speak with the telephone operator and it cost one woman on the trip \$80 to call home.

Mrs. Earp said South American people

don't save any money because it may not be worth anything the next day. "There's no credit. You can buy anything if you have the dollars."

Driving through villages in Argentina, she said she saw brick houses in different stages of construction. People literally build homes one brick at a time because the brick is tangible, while money is virtually worthless.

While Brazil and Argentina are similar in many respects, Mrs. Earp said the similarities end when it comes to education.

There is no emphasis on education in Brazil, where only one out of five people complete primary school and most adults are illiterate. "Most of the schools are four walls, a roof and a dirt floor—and you bring your own chair."

In Argentina, she said youngsters are required to go to school until they are 12 years old. There are 100,000 students at the university in Buenos Aires, and people wait in long lines at the U.S. Embassy in hopes of going to the United States to further their education.

In both countries, Mrs. Earp said most homes are made of concrete or brick and the natives don't have any heat. Most Americans who live there use space heaters.

While the conditions in the two countries are usually below American standards, Mrs. Earp said people in the United States could learn some lessons from South Americans.

Both nations she visited, for instance, have good recycling programs in place. Mrs. Earp said she didn't see one bottle or one piece of litter alongside the roads. She said you can't buy a bottled drink unless you have an empty bottle to exchange at the store.

Since the trip was sponsored by the federal government, Mrs. Earp said participants visited embassies in each country. "They open doors for you that you would not get on a private tour," she said. "You get to do a lot more and see a lot more."

Mrs. Earp, who is involved in local agriculture as a soil conservation district supervisor and serves on the N.C. State Extension Advisory Council and N.C. Pork Women's Council, almost didn't get to participate in the tour.

She didn't find out about the South American trip until four days before the group left Miami, and had to hustle to get everything in order. "It was a good opportunity," she said. "I'm certainly glad I was able to hop those hurdles and be a part of it."



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