

Planning a trip to Dale Family Farms to “process chickens” was undeniably exciting for my eight year old son, Adam, who had received an invitation as a Christmas gift from his friend Allison. But for me, the trip was clouded by the many stories folks felt inclined to share as soon as they heard about our summer plans....

“Watch out for the smell! Scalding feathers is terrible!”

“I bet Adam will refuse to eat chicken after this experience.”

“I remember the chickens chasing me around the yard with their heads cut off.”

“I bet you’re going to have to pull out all the pin feathers.”

Each person’s story was more horrific than the last and grew in gore and detail. It reminded me of the labor and delivery nightmares mothers freely share with any pregnant woman who is willing to listen. The tales left expectant mothers, and me, wondering, “Why did I ever agree to this for fun?”

Let me be perfectly clear—Adam was absolutely ecstatic about our pending adventure, and I was horrified. It didn’t take long for Andi to sense my hesitation and uncertainty. She quickly began to substitute the word “process” for butcher and slaughter, hoping to calm my nerves. Now the analytical part of my brain knew we were talking synonyms, but the city girl in me found comfort with the more sterile wording.

Adam and I arrive at the farm on a hot and humid July evening. I learn that our chicken processing is to begin at 6:30 *in the morning*. I hesitate to ask about my exact role in the process, and I go to bed that night hoping that I will be able to help, not hinder, the Dales.

The alarm goes off early, and Adam bounds out of bed, heading outside to tag along with Kurt. His mouth is running as quickly as his feet move, wanting to know all the steps Kurt is going through to get ready for ‘fun on the farm’ -

Adam’s description of the weekend trip to Protection. On the other hand, I reluctantly roll out of bed.

Andi and Kurt give me a quick explanation of my job: wash chickens, place in bags, dunk the bags in hot water to seal, add a label, and place in the prepared coolers. Easy. Andi assures me the chickens will arrive in the kitchen without feathers, heads or feet, looking much like a raw chicken found on the grocers’ shelf. “I can do this. I see chickens all the time at the grocery store.” I busy myself inside as I wait for chickens to begin arriving, but no chickens are delivered.

I glance out the window. Everyone is gathered at one end of the yard, engaged in individual jobs. I can’t stand it, as much as I want to stay far away from the processing station, I have to see what I am missing. I move out to the porch and strain to see. I walked down the steps, trying to get a closer look.

My ears searching . . . chatting and laughter, but no screeches.

My eyes scanning . . . folks working, but no chickens running wildly.

My nose exploring . . . farm smells everywhere, but no terrible stench.

I move closer . . . Kurt is placing the chickens in cones where he is relieving them of their heads, dunking them in the scald pot, and plucking them with the homemade chicken plucker designed by Bill Dale. Shelly is eviscerating, gutting the chickens. Andi is quality control—cleaning up the chickens, cutting off the feet, then putting them in a large tub of ice water. The kids are milling around, playing in the dirt, tossing ice, laughing, and playing with the feet. And there stands Adam, mesmerized by the whole scene, taking it all in . . . amazed, and loving every minute of “fun on the farm”.

I stand still, absorbing what is happening, until I snap to attention as the kids start

plunging shoulder deep into the ice tank, pulling out chickens, placing them in tubs, and jogging with squeals of delight to the house.

The three hours fly by quickly. Forty-seven chickens later, and no one had screamed in horror, no chickens had run around the yard, and I not only had participated, but I helped process chickens at Dale Family Farms! Adam sums up ‘fun on the farm’ like this, “Everyone said chicken butchering would be frantic, but it was really calm.” And he is exactly right.

It is amazing how time runs at a different pace and even seems to stop completely on the Dale Family Farm. There are moments that last forever while the clock ticks slowly, allowing me to take in every sight, sound, and sensation. And then, the clock leaps forward and our time at the farm is over.

When I reflect on our weekend, I know the Dales have captured what a family farm should be . . . how it should feel. Each member has a valued part in the process. There is a sense of community pride when we finish and an anticipation of reaping the rewards of our work as the sun sets and we sit around the dinner table.

The phone rings and it is Andi. In mid October, the Dales will be processing over a hundred chickens to satisfy the orders of their growing customer base. Are Adam and I interested and available to come and help? I answer immediately without hesitation, and then realize I hadn’t even consulted Adam.

“Of course, we will be there!”
- Jennifer, Lindsborg, KS