

Crowded House

-but the happy parents wouldn't have it any other way.

by Jenni Austin

ANY family that eats its way through 45 loaves of bread and drinks 100 litres of milk a week has to be worth a close look.

"But why us?" the family asks. "There is nothing special about us. Just because we have 16 children, it doesn't make us different, or better than other families."

Yes, that's right, 16 children - ranging in age from one to 21 years. And all still living at home with Mum and Dad, Lida and Bert Assen, on their smallish dairy farm near Hamilton, New Zealand.

The Assens may not consider themselves special, but to the rest of us the mechanics of running such a large family is, at the very least, interesting.

How do they manage?

First of all - the identification parade. Mum and Dad are Albert and Lida, aged 46 and 44 respectively and married for 22 years. Then there are Robert (21); twins Linda and Corina, born six hours apart (20); Diane (19); David (17); Paula (16); Terry (14); Teresa (13); Peter (12); Bernadette (10); Michael (7); Maria (6); John (5), Joanne (3); Joseph (2); and Catherine (1). From the outside the Assen house looks like an ordinary farmhouse. But once inside you know no ordinary family lives there. In the back porch there is a vast array of coats and gumboots, while the shed is lined with countless bikes. The house has three bedrooms - each has a set of bunks and sleeps three or four children. Outside there are four sleepouts for the older children. The house is furnished comfortably and functionally. None of the furniture is new, but everything is clean and neat. There are no dishwasher, microwave or labour-saving kitchen devices. The dining room is filled with a large refectory table with benches down either side. A smaller formica table takes the overflow.

Getting the family up, dressed and off to school or work each day takes some doing. But it is done with a minimum of fuss and panic. At dawn each day Bert retreats to the relative peace and quiet of the cowshed where he is kept busy milking his herd of fresians - he runs about 85 on his 32-hectare property. Inside, Lida and the younger children sleep on but the older working children are up and bustling by 6.15am. Robert, who works as a fitter and turner, has to be at work at seven as does nurse aid Linda. Corina and Diane start later, but they like to attend seven o'clock mass each morning before work. And there are always chores to be done first

The key to the successful running of this family is the amount of work done by the children, particularly the girls. There is no equality of the sexes here - the girls' jobs and the boys' follow very traditional lines. During the day we visited, the girls, from Bernadette up, rushed around helping Lida with the chores - laying the table, serving the food, washing the dishes, feeding and dressing the little ones. The boys do the dishes on Sunday, to give the girls a break. Otherwise, their work is confined to tasks such as bringing in the firewood, collecting the milk and, on the odd occasion, helping Bert on the farm. Each of the older girls spends a year or so, between leaving school and starting work, at home full-time, helping Lida. At the moment it is Paula's turn - she's into her second year of helping now. She seems happy enough, although regrets leaving school without School Certificate.

So, as the rest of the family begin to stir around 7am, it's Paula, helped by Teresa and Bernadette, who lays the table and starts breakfast. Lida is kept busy looking after her three youngest children and making a start on the three or four loads of washing she and Paula tackle each day. She also finds time to hose out the cowshed before sitting down to breakfast. Lida has been washing nappies daily for the past 21 years and only during the past couple of years has the family owned an automatic machine.

For breakfast there is porridge, by the gallon, followed by bread and butter with jam and glasses of milk. Food is plain and simple in this household, prepared in enormous quantities in large, functional pots. Later in the day Paula will peel half a bucket of potatoes for the evening meal. Bert proudly boasts that the family eats its way through a sack of spuds each week.

The older daughters usually do the grocery shopping once a week, easily filling two shopping trundlers to the brim -- one is usually needed for bread alone. The weekly food bill comes to around \$200 - not much for a family of this size, even considering milk, meat and some vegetables are produced on the farm.

At 8am the secondary school bus arrives to collect Terry and Teresa and take them to their respective schools in Hamilton. And at 8.10am the family's own "school bus" leaves for the day. Driven by seventh former David, the four primary school children are taken to and from their convent school, also in Hamilton. That white van, even fitted with bus seats, is no longer big enough to take the entire family; So, whenever there is an en masse family outing (rare these days, apart from church) another car has to be taken, too.

With all the school-age children and workers gone for the day, the farm suddenly seems very quiet. When milking is finished Bert and Lida head back to the house for breakfast. Paula, who has already pegged out a couple of loads of washing and whizzed round the house with the vacuum cleaner, takes the four pre-schoolers for a walk so their parents can have breakfast in peace. The couple's meal is preceded by a lengthy prayer - all meals in this house begin and end with grace.

Faith lies at the heart of the family – the Assens are devout traditional Catholics. "We try to teach our children to do things for God, not for themselves," says Lida. "We have taught them the values of purity and honesty."

"We have been criticised for sheltering our children and told that when they leave school they will fall to pieces. But they seem to be coping OK. They have learnt to find their place."

It would be easy for a family this size to fall into either total chaos or rigid discipline. The Assens have found the middle ground. There is a happy relaxed atmosphere, even at meal times, while everything that needs doing gets done. Says Bert: "We have rules. You can't have a family like ours with everyone doing their own thing. But we like to give our children as much freedom as possible."

Financially, the family operates on a shoe-string. Last year Bert earned about NZ\$30,000 (around US\$15,000) from the farm. He also qualified for about \$3,000 (US\$1,500) in family support, he says.

This year the milk fat prices are better, so it's unlikely he will receive family support. But no one is complaining. "A good year is when there is food on the table and we can pay the bills," he says. The family gets by with considerable help from other people - fellow church members, friends and neighbours. All their clothing is donated but the older children buy some new for work.

Ask Lida and Bert what their usual routine is after breakfast, and they can't give a definite answer. For Bert there is always something to do on the farm and as Lida says: "The housework is never done." She doesn't get the time to bake any' more, but on Saturdays the older girls always have a session so there is something nice in the tins for Sunday.

Lunch, similar to breakfast, is a simple meal of more bread and butter, perhaps using up some leftovers from the previous night's dinner .• It is always a sit-down meal.

Afterwards, the four youngest have a nap. So does Lida. "I am always so tired, I usually just fall asleep," she says, then adds hurriedly, in case she should seem dissatisfied with her lot: "But I only need 15 minutes and I am fine again." No, she doesn't resent having no time to herself. In fact, she is surprised at the question. "What do I need it for? I have my children." All the children are gifts from God, she says. And it is in God's hands whether she has more.

After school is when you really notice just how many kids there are in this family. They are everywhere - outside playing with the family pony, in their rooms doing homework, playing in the front yard and sitting at the dining room table reading books. Terry is in the milking shed helping Bert. "He is one of the most interested in the farm," says his father somewhat proudly.

By 6pm only Robert is still missing; he had to work late.

Several of the children sit down to eat their dinner earlier than the others - they are off to evening Mass at the local church.

The rest wait until 6.30pm for their meal. Dinner is always a good meal. Tonight there is home-made soup, followed by meatballs, boiled potatoes and spinach, finished off with home-bottled fruit and custard. Throughout the meal Teresa, Bernadette, Diane, Corina and Linda automatically leap up to clear empty plates, help their little brothers and sisters and serve the food. And once the meal is finished they disappear to the kitchen to start on the dishes.

There is no television - a couple of years ago the family decided to get rid of it, much to Bert and Lida's relief. They didn't like any of the programmes their children were watching. Some of the older children get out a board game, others settle down with books. Bert produces a well-thumbed children's bible and settles down with four of the little ones.

"I am going through it for the fifth time now," he says. "It generally takes about a year and a half to get right through it and all the children, when they reach a certain age, want to hear it."

By 7.30pm it is bedtime for the little ones. Lida scoops up Catherine, and her older daughters each grab one of the others and whisk them off to the bedroom.

Changed into their nighties and pyjamas, it's back into the dining room for goodnight prayers in front of the statue of Jesus, a kiss for Mum and Dad and off to bed. The older ones begin slipping away from 8.30pm onwards and by 10pm the house is in darkness.

To Lida and Bert there is nothing unusual about their family. Both come from large families themselves. Lida is youngest in a family of 15, Bert from a family of nine. To them having a large family is an integral part of their faith.

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