



Many farm and ranch women in The U.S. 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 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 brother and sister-in-laws, and 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. So Annie and her husband became 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 an ex-school teacher Annie had never ending patience, and ability to weather bad times.

Annie was married to a farmer for 50 years. She died in 1997, a wealthy woman, and doing things her way.

One of Annie's daughters, Ruth, married a man from a farm. And the story starts all over. One exception to the story; while Annie would never dream of working off-farm, Ruth worked for University of Illinois Extension as a Farm Business Management and Marketing Educator. Upon her retirement in 2009 she started a not-for-profit Annie's Project.

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Through her 30 year Extension career, Ruth observed and experienced all the needs farm women have for information and education. Farm women's desire for education shaped Annie's Project.

Farm women have diverse backgrounds, some which prepare women well for the responsibilities of running a farm business. Other women come into farming operations by way of marrying men who happen to be farmers, or by means of their spouse or family members dying and leaving them in charge. Being married to a farmer or being a woman in a male dominated business has its challenges. Some women have learned to handle this responsibility very well and are valuable mentors to women who have not had it so easy. Through Annie's Project, Ruth takes the skills instilled in her by her mother, and mentors and educates farm women. They find answers, strength, and friendship, in Annie's Project. Farm women grow in confidence, business skills, and community prestige.

Other women and men, equally skilled, educated and impassioned for the role of farm women have expanded the program into surrounding states. Describe Annie's Project to farm women and watch their eyes light up. Instructors as well as students seem to find a piece of Annie in their lives.

As much to fill an educational need for risk management, Annie's Project is dedicated to the life of Annette (Kohlhagen) Fleck (1922-1997.)

Founder of Annie's Project
Ruth Fleck Hambleton
Mother, wife, and educator.

Annie's Life's trivia:

- Left-handed
- One brother who moved to Indiana to farm.
- 4-H Club Member (sewed many fine dresses.)
- Grew up in town visiting Grandparents farm. Father was volunteer fireman in town, canal bridge operator and later worked in a family owned concrete plant in Frankfort, IL. Her mother was a homemaker.
- Rabid Cub fan. (Has Dizzy Dean's picture and autograph from August 1938 game at Wrigley Field.)
- Raised four children, two sons, two daughters.
- Graduate of Illinois State Normal University (teachers college) 1942.
- Taught first and second grade school in Frankfort, IL before marrying Frank Fleck on July 20, 1947.
- Loved to play the organ.



Annette (Kohlhagen) Fleck
Circa 1942.