Serfs Work the Land

By Sharon Fabian

Serfs were the all-important, but under-recognized, group of the Middle Ages. The economy of the Middle Ages was a farming economy. It was based on the land and the people who worked the land day in and day out - the serfs.

Serfs were the farmers of the Middle Ages. They got up at dawn and went to sleep at dusk; they spent the daylight hours working the land. Their day was the same as the Earth's day. Their year followed the natural seasons of the year too.

One job that took up lots of the serfs' time was plowing. Their plows didn't run on gasoline; they were powered by humans or animals. Many peasants couldn't afford an ox to pull their plow, so they did much of the backbreaking work by hand. Fields were plowed whenever they were available. Some fields were allowed to lay fallow each year to replenish the soil, so these fields could be plowed during the growing season. Fields planted in crops were plowed after the fall harvest.

During the winter months, serfs caught up on chores that needed to be done. They made new tools and repaired old ones. Winter was also the time for slaughtering animals. Sometimes, their lords asked serfs to work on other projects too, such as building a dirt road.

Spring was the season for planting. The serfs carried their bag of seeds to the field and sprinkled the seeds into the plowed earth. Then they used their harrow, a tool something like a big rake, to cover the seeds with soil.

The summer months were the time for hay-making. Serfs used a long scythe to cut the tall grass. Then they let it dry to make hay, which had many uses including stuffing for their mattresses.

In the fall, the serfs harvested their crops of rye, oats, peas, and barley. If the weather had been good, the harvest would be good. It would provide enough to pay their lord and enough for themselves.

While they were tending to their lord's fields, serfs also had their own chores to do. They raised vegetables and herbs, and maybe fattened a pig, for their own meals.

Serfs provided for nearly all of their own daily needs. They made their own clothes from scratch, starting right from the sheep. First they had to shear the sheep to remove the wool. Then the wool had to be carded and spun into thread. The thread had to be woven into cloth. The cloth was sewn by hand into simple garments.

It is no wonder that the average serf owned only one outfit of clothes. He wore that same outfit for years, and when a piece of clothing started to wear out, it was cut down to make a smaller garment for a child in the family.

Every chore that the serfs did required manual work. Just taking a bath required the serf to carry the water, bucket by heavy bucket, heat it up on his hearth, and carry it again to a tub. This chore was done about once a month.

Cooking wasn't convenient for the medieval serfs either. They cooked their soups and porridges in a big, heavy pot on the hearth. At least, they didn't have to wash many dishes. The serfs ate their meal from a trencher, made of bread, instead of a plate. After they emptied their trencher, they ate it too.

Housekeeping was simpler then, because serfs' houses were small - just one main room. However, there weren't only the parents and kids to clean up after, there were also the animals. In cold weather, serfs brought their animals in to sleep at one end of the room.

Serfs had a simple and hard-working lifestyle. Everyone, from the lords and ladies in their manor house to the knights getting ready to ride off to battle, depended on the serfs. The work the serfs did was essential. They were the backbone of the Middle Ages' economy.
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Questions

1. During the Middle Ages, ______.
   A. there were few serfs
   B. there were many serfs
   C. everyone was a serf
   D. there were no serfs

2. The economy of the Middle Ages was based on ______.
   A. industry
   B. credit
   C. farming
   D. consumerism

3. Serfs worked for a ______.
   A. knight
   B. lord
   C. farmer
   D. king

4. Since serfs worked all day in the field, their own food was provided by other medieval workers.
   A. true
   B. false

5. The work done by serfs was essential to the medieval economy.
   A. true
   B. false

6. Serfs had no houses, so they lived outdoors.
   A. false
   B. true

7. The jobs done by a serf varied with seasons.
   A. false
   B. true