

# INTERNATIONAL HARVESTER'S

## Irma Harding

By Kevin Darst

**I**rma Harding . . . Who is she and what does she possibly have to do with International Harvester?

Well, I hope to answer that by writing this article in place of my husband Darrell this time around. He will be working on my O-4 in place of writing this article, so he is not far away from IH. He has enough projects to last throughout his life plus a few extra ones.

I guess my interest in IH refrigeration really got started when Darrell and I would go through old magazines looking for tractor advertisements. Every once in awhile I would come across a refrigerator or freezer ad. Some of them would feature a woman named Irma Harding. Maybe, that is the woman in me or I want to think it was just an extension of my interest in the IH company as a whole product. The company had a way of putting across an ad that was aimed directly at women.

The more I research IH and the role they played in a woman's world in the late 40's and 50's, the more I am impressed at how they always tried to keep farm-family-home entwined with each other. These were main objectives of the company and it showed with the interest and effort put forth by International Harvester. In return, this way of advertising and promoting a genuine concern for the farmer and his family was good for the company. They were conceived as a good company. This is exactly what they wanted to accomplish with their advertisement. What a good job they did too!

By the year 1945, IH was already involved with milk coolers and cooler units. A handful of engineers were called together in the middle of 1945 to form a Refrigeration Division. On Nov. 25, 1945, the first organizational meeting was held in the Congress Hotel. I assume this was the beginning of the refrigeration era of IH.

The Evansville Indiana plant was purchased to become the refrigeration division in 1946. By the Fall of 1947, they were kicking into high gear as promotions were distributed to dealers across the country. This was a

new era with convenience and the benefits of freezing put forth in the ads. Dealers across the nation were holding seminars and demonstrations with the help from the company. A few of the dealer's wives also became involved with the marketing of freezers. They held demos with either themselves or a home economist from the company to demonstrate the benefits of home freezing from start to finish. They would take a chicken that had been frozen for months compared to a fresh chicken butchered that day. Both chickens would be fried exactly the same way and taste tested to find out which was frozen and which was fresh, proving the benefits and convenience of freezing food products. Yes, freezers were worth keeping in the kitchen.

An interesting ad that really got my attention was a comparison of a typical Sunday of a farm wife. One woman was getting up at the crack of dawn killing her chicken and getting it ready for Sunday dinner while also rushing to get ready to go to church with her family. In church she

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daydreamed about preparing her dinner in time with so many things left to do. The other side of this scenario is a very elegant woman rising with her family, getting ready for church and before leaving, taking a chicken out of the freezer to thaw for Sunday dinner. She enjoys her day with her family, prepares her dinner and afterward leisurely spends time with her family and reading a magazine for herself. How much easier life would be with an International Harvester refrigerator freezer!

The marketing of the refrigeration products included advertisements along with the dedicated IH dealers. Without the dedication and commitment of their dealers, refrigeration did not have a chance. I feel this was a major part of the whole IH company, including any item the company manufactured. As usual, the IH dealers were ready to go with freezers in 1947 and refrigerators in 1948.

The method IH used was for a Home Economist to visit dealers and state fairs or anywhere else a promotion could benefit sales. These women were energetic, friendly and enthusiastic about the job they were doing. IH wanted to be informative to the point that every woman on the farm or otherwise needed a product of International Harvester in their kitchens.

By 1948, IH also came up with a symbol to represent the refrigeration division. This new symbol became known as IRMA HARDING. It just so happens that her initials were I.H. She was made up of all the things that were good in American life as a homemaker. Her attributes were a beaming personality, character, and intelligence. She was a composite of all the home economists that had already conducted nearly 3,000 frozen food demos. She was the symbol of IH refrigeration. A likely comparison would be Betty Crocker.

The company itself hired five women to make up the composite of Irma Harding. These women worked daily to answer questions and give ideas to further the future of the division. A kitchen was set up in the Evansville Plant to model a normal atmosphere in a household. Daily usage was done for wear just as they did with tractors or trucks. These women helped the engineers with the designs, telling them the size of the shelves needed to the looks of the finished product. They even designed the fabric to go on the refrigerators. Any questions put forth by the general public concerning any food preparation were sent to these women. They would experiment and answer all problems asked concerning refrigerators or freezers. Engineers and designers would stop by the kitchen daily to taste test the

many recipes tried by these fine ladies. These women were a great asset to the company. They also became known as the IRMA HARDING GIRLS in the company. The symbol IRMA HARDING GIRLS was used to promote refrigeration in magazines, cookbooks, literature, etc. Irma existed in the hopes of having millions follow her wisdom and intelligence by choosing an IH Refrigeration product.

*I would like to thank John R. Prosek for information on Evansville. If anyone has any information about the refrigeration division, I would certainly enjoy corresponding with them. Last, if any of you IRMA HARDING girls read this, please call or drop me a line!*

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