

Coming of Age on a Small Farm

by Hap Hansen

The most fun I ever had as a kid growing up and coming of age was on a small farm during wheat harvest days. That was the time when all the neighbors gathered, day after day, and went from farm to farm with the threshing crew. The wheat had already been cut, banded with twine, and hand-stacked into shocks just waiting for the horse-drawn hayrack and farmers with pitchforks. It didn't take long either, for a couple of callused, tanned, weather-worn farmers on each side of the hayrack to fill it to over-flowing. They would then drive the horse team to the thresher which was usually located in an area where straw would be needed to bed down farm animals the following winter.

The threshing machine was a sight to behold. A farm tractor was hauled up and attached to the noisy, hay-belching, mechanical monster by a pulley attached to a wide belt which turned the equipment that separated wheat from chaff and straw. Horses had to be reined in or they would bolt because of the noise. Bundles of wheat would be pitched into the thresher's wide mouth and be digested somehow in its belly. After a short period of raucous grumbling, the metal beast discharged grains of wheat, or oats, or barley through an auger and into a waiting truck.

At the end of the machine, straw and chaff flew into a manageable stack. Unless, of course, the wind was blowing. In that case, chaff and straw went everywhere, but it seemed mostly down the necks and into the eyes of those pitching in the bundles.

In early to mid-July, it was usually about 100 degrees in the shade and there wasn't any shade! My job was to carry water in a bucket to the workers and they drank so much in the heat I usually had to run back and forth to the well to keep up with thirsty farmers.

They worked from dawn to dusk and later. But so did farm wives. They also showed up to do the cooking, plus doing the daily farm chores that needed doing while the men were threshing. Milking the cows, feeding the chickens, slopping the hogs and other chores. After doing the daily requirements, the wives gathered to cook and provide food for the threshers. And boy, could threshers ever eat! And there weren't many who gained weight during harvest. Typical daily food fare for workers consisted of bacon, eggs, fried potatoes and toast for breakfast; cinnamon rolls and coffee about ten a.m.; fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cream gravy, and all the trimmings for dinner at noon; bologna sandwiches and iced tea or lemonade about three p.m.; and then the big meal of pork chops, baked potatoes with butter, sour cream and chives, veggies of all sorts and a slab of apple pie with homemade ice cream for supper about seven or eight p.m.

Following supper, the men usually went outside to belch, pass gas, smoke pipes or cigarettes, perhaps have a little nip from a community jug, and discuss the possibilities of rain. The wives cleaned the kitchen, chatted and began preparing food and assigning chores for the next day at

the farm down the road.

Those times were hard. Those times were fun. Those times were when I learned the unpaid value of farmer helping farmer, neighbor helping neighbor and friend helping friend and when not a single dollar in payment ever changed hands. And that's what I call, coming of age.