

Detasseling Corn: Hard Work but Better Pay Than Babysitting

by Liz Gibbons

In the 1940's and 50's one way for young teens to earn extra money in the Midwest was by detasseling corn. Purdue University's Agriculture Department had some experimental farms where they were growing hybrid corn. To produce hybrid corn two varieties of corn are planted in the fields. The fields are configured in a pattern such as one row of corn of one variety followed by four rows of corn of another variety, this pattern being repeated through the whole field. The tassels produce the pollen, so when the corn reaches a certain maturity the tassels on the variety of corn in the four rows are removed so that the pollen from the variety of corn planted in the one row can cross pollinate. Hybrid corn produces higher yields and is the seed corn sold to farmers for their crop the following year. Depending on the varieties used the hybrid can have certain desirable traits such as drought tolerant or disease or insect resistance.

I detasseled corn for two summers, probably when I was fourteen and fifteen. The date when teens would be needed depended on the rate of growth of the corn plants. In Indiana it was usually in mid-July and lasted approximately two weeks. School buses were used to take us to the fields. The first year we had to walk the rows and reach up and pull out the tassels which we dropped on the ground. The corn was pretty tall so it usually required some stretching. We got sun burned. Most of us covered our nose with zinc oxide to protect it from the sun rays. Despite being sunburned and working in very hot humid weather most of us stuck it out for the duration of the detasseling season, for if we did we were given a ten cent per hour bonus for every hour worked. Water was our saving grace. Large jugs of water at each end of the fields helped quench our thirst.

The second year the crew I worked with used detasseler carriers, a motorized contraption that carried us through the fields. A crew leader drove it. He sat in a seat on top of the carrier. As I recall the carrier held eight detasselers so eight rows would be detasseled as the carrier moved slowly through the field. We stood on a platform which was about eight feet in length. We were up off the ground about 18 inches so it was easier to reach the tassels which speeded up the work a bit. Sometimes one of us would not be aware of where we were on the platform and would fall off. That was just a part of the job. For two weeks of work I earned a little over \$50, much more than I could earn babysitting. I used it to buy most of my school clothes for the coming school year. Fifty dollars went a long way back then.