

68. Down on the Farm,

September 15, 2010

Hayfields of Yesterday

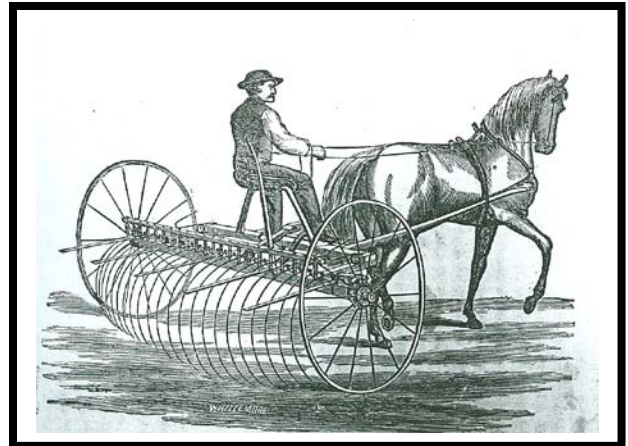
The Hayfields of yesterday, Oh, how those memories flow! Back in the 40s and 50s most of our hay crop was fall lespedeza, a popular variety planted in those days, easy to grow, easy to cure. Daddy tried in vain to grow alfalfa but he could never get the high yield like the dairy farmers; his focus was on growing a crop of peaches. We sometimes made a little spring hay, clover, but fall was the main hay season because lespedeza fitted better with all of the other crops we had, plus the hot days of August and September was a super time to cure hay.

Hay making came after peach harvest and before apple season. We cut hay after we had put the tobacco crop in the barns. Back then in the 40s, we used a horse drawn mower to cut the hay. The hay cured right on the spot where it fell. Harvesting hay was usually a “day after tomorrow” deal; cut the hay today and then day after tomorrow, if you are really lucky and the hay was dry, you could get it up. It would depend entirely on how thick or “heavy” the hay was and how much sunshine came. Prolific stands of clover required at least an extra day or more to cure. Clover hay was a favorite. The livestock loved it, but it was the devil to cure. The odor of clover hay; it smelled so good. Putting damp hay in the barn could mean trouble, big time. Some farmers’ barns caught fire through spontaneous combustion when damp hay was packed in the hay lofts.

When the hay was ready to be carried to the barn, the men hooked one of the horses to the dump rake, which was used to pile the hay into long narrow rows. Those old dump rakes are visible along country roads today as a reminder of the yesterdays of haymaking. About every farm had one, it was a trade mark of that era of agriculture. There was a lot of hard work with haymaking: doing it with the dump rake and pitchforks. It was itchy and sweaty, a lot of hard work!

A crew with pitchforks would then go along the dump rows and make little piles of hay. This made the forking of hay onto the wagons much faster. A couple of the strongest men with very long-handled pitch forks, forked these piles of hay onto wagons for the trip to the barn, or the hay rick in the field, which was just a haystack shaped in a conical, beehive shape so it would shed the rains better.

The dump rake made fairly tight rows as it really bundled the hay in a row. This did not allow for good air movement within this bundle-row. It did not spin the hay into giant cork screw curls which would enable it to dry faster as the side delivery rake did in later years. With the side



The Dump Rake

This is an artist's illustration of the “dump rake” shown in the late 1800s book “How to make the Farm Pay.” The cost of a rake of this type, 10 feet wide, from the 1902 Sears Roebuck Catalog was \$18.80.

delivery rake came the hay loader, a machine which was hitched behind the hay wagon. It straddled the windrowed hay, and as the wagon was pulled along, it loaded it onto the wagon.

The wagon loads of hay were then pulled alongside barns, where most were equipped with an ingenious hay-fork unloading mechanism which extended a few feet beyond the eaves of the barn roof. Just below the roofline an unloading system hung or dangled down over the wagon loads of hay. This mechanism lifted the hay into the hay loft and saved the laborious job of using pitch forks to “fork brigade” the hay high into the hay loft. One design of hay forks was a set of grappling claws, which acted like a clam’s claws. Others included the harpoon forks, one a single “harpoon” and another and the most popular, was the U-shaped wishbone type.

At the point of the forks were metal prongs about four inches long which, when triggered, extended into the mesh of tightly packed hay. These pencil-like prongs held the hay to the fork. The hay “sticker,” a man on the wagon, would shove the forks deep into the hay piled on the wagon and he then set the trigger on the forks. He jumped off the pile and signaled to another helper that all was ready for the hay to be lifted into the hayloft.



The Big Barn

This was our main hay barn built back in the 1920s. It stood near Tye River and was washed away in the flood of Hurricane Camille in 1969. One of the first things we recognized during the early morning hours after Camille was a panel of the boards of the barn entangled in the steel superstructure of the bridge across Tye River. The opening to the hayloft where the hay entered was on the far end of the barn. Hay stored in the loft was forked down through chutes and the 100 or so steers would eat from a large central trough.



A hay loader about 1950

The hay loader is straddling a windrow of hay which had been placed in a long narrow row by the side delivery rake. The two men spread the hay over the wagon in preparation for the trip to the barn. When the barn is full, the remainder goes into the hay rick as insurance for feeding during the bitter cold of winter. Betty Kennedy Saunders is in the foreground. Charlie Johnson, right, with his hat cocked to one side, was one of the faithful workers for a lifetime.

After World War II, mowers mounted on tractors replaced the horse drawn ones, and the side delivery rake replaced the dump rake. Along came hay balers; the first used wire to tie the hay in the bale, and then came more efficient twine tying balers. The youngsters of those days remember

their father calling them as they got off the school bus, “Boys, hurry up, we got a bunch of hay bales on the ground, and we need to get it in tonight before it rains.” “But Daddy, I have a date tonight and I have to get ready.” “That’s no problem, just tell her that you have to get the hay into the dry before you can come, and you might be a little late.”

The little square balers are now giving way to giant roll balers which put 20-30 small bales in one big roll. Most of the toil and sweat of the early hay season is no more. One person can do all of the work alone, sitting on a tractor, sometimes while in an air-conditioned cab. They can move the bales of hay with a tractor mounted spear and hoist them high in the hay shed with a front end loader.

I can remember so well those days of long ago when we filled the barn with loose hay, the yell of the sticker, “Pull her up!” Then Emmett or Buck, both who knew so well how to handle the horses, driving Major (or was it Sam,) the strongest horse on the farm, started tightening the big hay rope. Slowly, straining every muscle in his body, using stout, deliberate, planted, powerful “Percheron” steps, the horse pulled. The pulleys groaned, and I wondered if that hay fork rope was going to hold the load. Slowly a pick-up size load of hay left the wagon, and slowly went up to the top of the barn, and once there, it moved easily, creaking, shaking, and swinging along the track under the hot tin roof. The “tripper,” the guy in the hayloft, yanked the rope and the hay fell into its place. The tripper yelled down to the crew on the ground, “All right, give me another’n.” And ever so slowly the hay loft began to fill.

So long for now,

Paul Saunders



Baling Hay about 1951

Our first hay baler in action, a wire tier! Daddy is standing in the distance watching. Ned Cashwell is riding the backside of the baler using a stick to prevent hay from clogging the baler. Another man, his hat barely visible is sitting on a seat on the baler where he feeds wire into the tier. I am driving “Buck’s old Case”(now a part of our farm machinery museum.)

Directly behind me is a Wisconsin gas engine that powered the baler. This engine was contrary as the mischief to get started. It had to be hand cranked, and the engine often backfired when cranked. I now carry a scar where the crank flew off and split my lip as I cranked it.

Over in the distance, behind the baler and beneath the shade of the trees is the “Little Case,” the tractor we purchased as World War II ended and the one I loved so much. It is pulling the side delivery rake that had put the hay in the windrow for the baler to pick up.