



the machine age arrives

I wonder why someone with a flair for collecting does not start a museum of early American farm machinery. It shouldn't be nearly as expensive as, say, acquiring long-forgotten models of automobiles, as the great singer, James Melton, does. Here and there you do see an ancient machine or two, but I know of no place where a considerable number of old and unusual machines are

gathered together. Maybe I ought to start on the job myself. It would be interesting to display in the proper surroundings such items labelled as, "Early American Neckyoke," or "Lumber Wagon — Circa 1897," or "Sulky Plow — In Use About the Time of the Spanish-American War."

Just why they called them sulky plows has always been more or less of a mystery to me. The operator, if he chanced to be a boy around ten years old, was far more likely to be sulky than the plow was. The job probably interfered with fishing or a dip in the water down by the lily pond. A sulky plow resembled in no way a racing sulky, which most people recognize at once, nor did it ride at all like one. I shall have to see what I can do about this museum business. However, please do not ship me, collect, that breaking plow or that McCormick reaper that you've had kicking around in the back part of the machine shed all these years. I simply don't have a place for them yet.

At the turn of the century farming was a hard, grinding business. It isn't easy now, but 50 years ago it was tough. The mechanized age of agriculture was a long way off. Now and then we heard vague rumors of some crazy inventor who had been trying to transform the power of steam or gasoline into a crude form of tractor. We dismissed such rumors as impractical if not impossible. Horses, of course, were here to stay and nothing would ever replace them.

At our farm the first job in the spring was getting the oats seeded. This meant that my father would

borrow an end-gate seeder and high-wheeled wagon from our neighbor, John Moule, who farmed a small place next to ours and whose seeding was finished early. I sometimes got to drive the team while my father dumped oats into the whirring, whining seeder on the back end of the wagon. We usually sowed 25 to 30 acres of oats. Then they had to be disced in with a little three-horse disc that we owned ourselves. This antiquated contraption couldn't cover much ground in a day nor did it do a good job, but it was the best we had.

Then came the harrowing. We called it "dragging," and that's about what the farmer or his boy or his hired man were doing by the time they followed one of those drags all day on foot. We had two harrows, one 12 feet wide, the other 10 feet. Once it took me one whole day to cover ten acres with the 10-footer. Maybe I rested a lot at the ends of the field.

I can just faintly remember a corn planter that we either owned or borrowed before the days of the check-row planter. With this early day outfit the corn field had to be marked off in squares the width of the corn rows with a wooden marker. Then the planter was driven down a pair of the rows that had been marked off, while a man or boy sat on the front of the machine, and, by working a hand lever as the planter moved forward, dropped the corn in hills where the cross marks intersected the rows. This did not turn out a fancy job of check-rowing, but it was a vast improvement over putting the corn in one hill at a time with a garden hoe. We tried to harrow the corn fields a time or two before

the corn came up, just as we do now, in order to set the weeds back as much as possible, but our equipment was limited and the weeds often got a good start anyway.

The first corn plow we had was a Tower walking cultivator. Don't misunderstand me, any of you younger folks. The cultivator didn't walk, but the operator did plenty of it following that machine up and down the corn rows all day. It had three long blades on each side instead of shovels or sweeps. These blades were set at an angle so they sliced off the weeds and stirred up the surface dirt as the machine moved forward. The Towers never became popular with farmers.

When I was old enough to help in the field, around ten or so, my father bought a Deere riding cultivator, and I learned to plow corn on this. It was a pretty good outfit too, with a hammock seat made of extremely hard iron and steel. We had the pelt of an old sheep that had died, and we used this for a seat pad. The machine had both handles and foot stirrups for guiding the shovels. It was painted bright green, a color that has persisted on all John Deere machinery to this day. Dad would go ahead of me with the Tower cultivator, skipping every other row. It was my job to take care of the skipped rows. At first I could not do much of a job for my legs were hardly long enough to reach the foot stirrups, and I didn't have enough weight to hold the plow shovels in the ground properly.

It was during those years that I learned to hate morning-glories. Our farm had plenty of them, and they clung like long trains to the corn plow shovels. That

meant frequent stops to clear the pesky weeds off the shanks and shovels, and after you got them off they would pretty near take root again before you could make another round of the field. No field cultivator has yet been devised to do a good job of cleaning out morning-glories, but modern sprays promise to lick them. Other weeds that we constantly fought on my Dad's farm were artichokes, mustard, smartweed, pigweed, lamb's quarter and bull thistles. In later years quack grass and Canada thistles appeared, apparently brought in with northern seed oats, barley or flax. I still hate weeds, probably due to my early encounters with them, and a clean field of corn or small grain delights my eye.

The haying always crowded the corn plowing. We often started putting up hay the day after the Fourth of July, usually mowing along the road first and around the fields for we always had grass headlands. It was quite a step toward the mechanized age when we acquired a secondhand hay loader from Henry Siewertsen, probably in 1905. It cost us \$17. Fifteen years later, after dolling it up with red paint, I sold it in our dispersion sale for \$27. We also bought a C, B and Q (Chambers, Bering and Quinlan) side-delivery rake about the same time as we got the loader. I think this rake was acquired from Jim Schweiger, who ran a blacksmith shop and sold some machinery in Mason City. I remember we got the rake fairly cheap because it had stood around in Schweiger's yard until the original paint was well gone.

For a few years we used slings for unloading hay at the barn. The slings took a load of hay up to the mow

in three trips, but they were a nuisance to handle both in the field and at the barn. Besides that a sling load of hay put a tremendous strain on the hay rope, track and everything else. We finally discarded them and went back to the ordinary double-harpoon hayfork.

My job was driving the team on the hayfork. We had the running gear of an old mower to which the team was hitched and to which the end of the hay rope was tied. When I was small and just learning to drive I had a terrible time getting the team turned around without getting it all tangled up in the hay rope. I remember the name, "Walter A. Wood," stood out in bold letters on one of the iron castings that made up the frame of the mower. At one time the Wood machinery was popular with farmers, but it is no longer manufactured under that name, the firm having long since been absorbed by some other company.

The oats harvest often came on so quickly that we barely had time to get the hay out of the way. This meant getting the old Plano grain binder out of the shed, always with a great deal of prying and grunting and shoving — but no swearing. This machine cut a swath 6 feet wide, was pulled by three horses and was a trouble maker until the crop was cut. My father used the Plano for over 30 years, and in all that time I doubt if that binder made a complete round of the field without clogging, missing tying bundles or otherwise causing a stop. Here again this manufacturer was later taken over by another company, so that the old name is almost forgotten.

One year we had a lot of rain at harvest time, and the oats were down to such an extent we had to cut them all one way. That season we put four horses on the binder, a lead team and a wheel team. I drew the job of riding one of the lead horses. This was great fun for a day or two, but I was soon trying to persuade my Dad to let the hired man do the riding while I shocked the grain. I didn't put this idea over.

There were not many threshing machines in the early 1900's. Nearly every farmer stacked his grain — he could then wait until late in the fall to thresh. It was quite a trick to build a stack of grain bundles. I am afraid the art is almost completely lost now.

The stacker started by making an ordinary shock of bundles on the ground at the center of the space selected for the stack. Rows of bundles were added until the circle was perhaps 12 feet in diameter. Then the stack started to grow upward with the addition of more and more circular rows of bundles, laid with the heads toward the center and with the butts sloping slightly down to shed the rain. The bundles were laid so that the circumference of the stack increased slightly up to about 4 feet from the ground. Then the stack was drawn in gradually to a peak perhaps 15 feet above the ground. A good stacker would have a perfectly cone-shaped job above the "bulge." If the bulge was built out too rapidly there was likely to be a "slide-out," which often meant that the whole stack had to be started over.

The man who pitched the bundles up to the stacker was supposed to drop them at his feet in a position such

that they could be laid in the stack with the least possible handling. Some stackers used pitchforks for laying the bundles in place. Others did it all with their bare hands. Stacks were said to go through a "sweat" during their first few weeks. If they were well built the grain did thresh out of them in excellent condition. A group of four stacks was called a "setting," which meant that the threshing machine, when set in the proper spot between them, did not have to be moved until all four stacks were threshed. The grain separators had no blowers then, and the swing stacker attached to the rear of the threshing machine was considered best for handling straw. Many of the older farmers declared they wouldn't let a threshing machine on the place if it had a blower. In a few years they all changed their minds.

The last big job in the fall was getting the corn out. It had to be done by hand, one ear at a time. Usually we were able to hire some extra help to pick by the bushel. Anyone who could husk 100 bushels a day was looked upon as a sort of superior man. There were some Olson boys who lived not far from us who had great reputations as corn huskers. One year we got Ole Olson to help us, and the way he fired those ears into the wagon was amazing. A corn husker, working at so much a bushel, would be in the field at daybreak. Some of them used to brag that they got to the field so early they had to sit around until it was light enough for them to find the ears. Hardly anyone believed this boast.

The huskers wore mitts of cotton flannel on their hands. A trick to make these mitts last longer and

roughen them so it was easier to grasp the ears of corn was to pour thick black tar over them from a small can carried on the husking wagon. Then, because this was sticky stuff, the huskers hunted around until they found a cornstalk with a growth of brown smut on it. This smut was rubbed into the tar, and with this odoriferous combination on the mitts, a husker was supposed to be geared up to the highest notch for fast and clean corn picking. A good man like Ole would have 40 to 50 bushels on his wagon by ten o'clock. Then the load had to be shoveled off at the crib, dinner eaten, and a similar load brought in before dark.

Twenty-five years or so ago I had the audacity to write a poem entitled "Corn Husking." This appeared in the *Chicago Daily Drovers' Journal*. Some time later I happened to meet my good friend, Bill McArthur, who said, "I see where a poem of yours was printed in a Chicago paper." I admitted as much, no doubt being unable to conceal a certain amount of smug pride. "Well," said Bill, "the only thing wrong with it is that it gives the impression you had actually picked corn yourself!"

Changes in farming methods usually came slowly, too slowly in fact for us younger fellows who thought there was entirely too much hard, back-breaking labor connected with the "way of life," as Herbert Hoover once called it. But in the decade from 1910 to 1920 many new machines began to appear. The first tractors came into use, none of them too satisfactory, but they pointed the way for the almost complete mechanization that was

to come later. I once heard my father say that a manure spreader was the last machine he would ever buy, but we soon followed the example of our neighbors and bought one, an "American," I believe it was. Bigger discs and harrows were manufactured; two-row corn cultivators were used by some of the bigger farmers; the eight-foot grain binder became common, most of them made by McCormick, or Deering, or Champion or John Deere. Corn binders came along to replace the old, terribly slow way of cutting corn by hand and building shocks around a three-legged frame designed for that purpose. Nearly everyone switched to threshing grain out of the shock, and the art of building shapely grain stacks gradually disappeared.

As soon as I was big enough to pitch bundles I began to pester my Dad to let me go threshing. This was the most fun of the whole summer, for it meant getting together with the other boys nearly every day for a couple of weeks or so while we threshed out all the jobs in the "ring," as we called the group of neighbors working together. I was delighted when I was told to take the team, wagon and rack and go haul bundles to the threshing machine. The Heinold boys would be there and Eddie O'Donnell, John Hanson, Elmer Hersey, George Patton and others who lived for a time in the neighborhood and whose names I am sorry I can't remember. Usually there would be eight wagons hauling bundles, two or three wagons to haul the threshed grain away from the machine, a man or two at the grain bins to help unload, a couple of men in the strawpile, and, of

course, the crew that ran the threshing outfit. When a job was being started, or at the beginning of a day, there was always a lot of friendly kidding and rivalry to see which bundle haulers would draw the "clean side," and which ones would be stuck with the "dirty side" — meaning which ones would get to unload with the wind blowing the dust and chaff away from them, and which would have to face it. Once you drew a certain side of the machine it was considered bad manners indeed to change, especially if you tried to change from the dirty to the clean side.

Oscar Heinold was always the clown of the outfit and took special delight in playing jokes on the rest. He had a lot of steam. Sometimes he would pick up a whole shock of grain bundles on his pitchfork at one time and heave it into the wagon. Most of us were satisfied to pitch one bundle at a time, or at the most, two. Any showing off that we did usually took place only if we were working in a field near the house and thought some of the girls might be watching.

No one should ever write about threshing days without telling of the marvelous meals those farm women put together. Duncan Hines has glamorized a lot of eating places both for the gourmet and the straight meat and potatoes trade in his "Adventures in Good Eating." I venture to state, however, that I doubt whether he ever sat down at a real old-fashioned threshers' dinner table. Getting meals for threshers meant serving both dinner at noon and supper at night. The idea of sending the men to a restaurant in town for dinner, or

letting them go home at night without their supper, would have been considered downright sinful by the farm wives of that era. If you couldn't set out a banquet at noon and again at night you just weren't the kind of woman the neighborhood liked to have around. Nearly always, when a thresher got home at night, his wife or his mother could be depended upon to ask casually "What did you have to eat today?" If she was able to pry any of the details out of her tired man, she immediately set about planning the meals that she would serve when the threshers came to her place, with the idea in mind of serving something no one else had thought of.

How those women ever got together the great quantities of potatoes and gravy, the beef, and the pork and the chicken that often appeared simultaneously at the table, the light bread, the brown bread, the baking powder biscuits, the cabbage salad, the sliced tomatoes, the baked beans, the pickles, the jam, the preserves, the mince, or apple, or cherry or custard pies, the chocolate cake, the white cake, the cookies and all the other gustatory delights that tried to crowd each other off the table will always be a mystery to me.

We could hardly wait to get to the table when meal-time came. But we did have to go through the motions, at least, of washing some of the threshing grime off first. There would be wash basins, soap, towels and water — sometimes warm — set out for us under a tree in the yard. There was always a lot of friendly water splashing, fighting for a clean place on the towels and wanting to know why so-and-so even bothered to come in for dinner

at all — “He ain’t done nothing all morning.” When we got to the table and settled ourselves on the planks along each side — there were seldom enough chairs to go around — there was little talking. We just ate — “fed from both sides,” as some of the boys called it. I envied those who could hold two or three times as much as I.

Perhaps the queen of them all when it came to putting on a feast was Mrs. Peter Olson, who lived on the farm joining ours on the north. She and her husband had both been born in Sweden, and no doubt it was there she learned to prepare those gastronomical masterpieces she set before us. There never was room for every dish on the dining table itself, and extra tables had to be provided to set some of her culinary creations on. Her layer cakes with fancy icings were famous throughout the neighborhood. As a matter of fact dinner or supper at the Olson’s was a treat any time of the year, not just at threshing time.

It was rare indeed to find a family that did not come up to the standards set by others for threshers’ meals. If it got around that the food was not good at a certain place, the men and boys were adept at finding excuses for going home at mealtime.

A friend of mine told me once of sitting down to a threshers’ dinner at a farm where the food was known to be somewhat indifferent. A dish of unappetizing food was started at one end of the long table. Each man glanced at it and passed it along to the next fellow. The last man was sitting close to an open window. He sniffed briefly at the dish — and dropped the whole mess out the window.

Among the threshermen we employed over a period

of perhaps 20 years were Mr. Carmany, whose first name I have forgotten; Fred Friday, who was a huge red-headed man of German descent; Fred Heinold, who was an older brother of the boys who went to the Falls Township school when I did, and later on, the Gildner brothers, Arthur and Albert. Arthur ran the separator and Albert ran the steam engine. These boys were extremely popular with the farmers and were excellent threshermen.

Arthur liked to jump from the separator, where he stood most of the time closely watching the whirring pulleys and belts, onto your load of bundles, grab your fork and unload part of the load while you took a short rest. Then he would solemnly hand the fork back and say, "I thought that was kinda nice of me, didn't you?" Then he would burst out with his booming laugh and hop back on the separator, leaving you searching for a comeback. I find myself still using this remark if I think I can embarrass someone.

There were endless arguments around a threshing crew about which machine was the best. Some of the boys said you couldn't beat a J. I. Case; others stuck up for the Nichols and Shepard separator, while still others declared the only machine that was fit to pull in your yard was a "Yellow Fellow," so named because of its paint job. I don't think these arguments ever settled anything, but they went on year after year. Once in a while a threshing machine would have the bad luck to catch fire and burn up. That particular make would then be in disrepute for some time. But, generally speaking, they all did a pretty good job.

You could get in just as hot an argument over the

relative merits of the steam engines which furnished the power for the outfits. Here again, the proponents of a return-flue boiler job were just as sure of their ground as the ones who said that it was all foolishness to make the smoke and flame travel so far, and that the place for the smokestack was at the front of the boiler where it belonged. Now and then an engine, probably through the carelessness of the engineer, would blow a cylinder head to kingdom come, and it was unhealthy indeed to be in line with it when it happened. My own favorite among the steam engines of that day was the Gaar-Scott. This was due, no doubt, to the fact that my Uncle Cal Bitterman owned one, and I thought that what was good enough for him was certainly good enough for me.

Threshing engines had a certain individuality due to the fact that each had its distinctive whistle, which the engineers liked to cut loose with shortly after dawn when they had gotten steam up for the day. We could tell from those early-morning blasts just whose threshing outfit was in the neighborhood. There was one that had a rising and falling siren effect, and when we heard it we would exclaim, "There's old Pete's outfit!" Other whistles were hoarse and throaty. Some were so shrill they nearly split your ears open if you happened to be standing near.

However they sounded, they meant just one thing at an hour when the sun was scarcely over the eastern horizon, "Hurry up boys, and get here with your teams and wagons, there's a threshing job to do!" During the day, while threshing was going on, the whistles meant

other things. For instance, a long series of short, impatient blasts was a signal to the water hauler to get back to the engine with his tank wagon. Those old steamers needed a lot of water to keep up a head of steam, and many times the water supply at the farm where threshing was going on would be too low. Then the water hauler headed for the nearest creek, where he pumped his tank full with a suction pump the hard way, by hand. A few short toots, sort of in the manner you would say, "Ah, ah, ah," to an erring child, meant that the engineer had caught some of us crowding bundles of grain into the separator too fast, or perhaps wrong end to — they were supposed to be pitched into the self-feeder heads first. We would turn and grin at the engineer sheepishly, and the engineer, if he was a "good" guy — and he usually was — would grin back and shake his head warningly.

Often, in order to finish a job, threshing went on until dark. Then the men who ran the outfit — there were usually three or four — had to move to the next farm in order to be ready to start threshing the following morning. This slow, tedious trip was often quite hazardous, for if any wooden bridges or culverts had to be crossed there was always the chance that the tremendous weight of the steam engine, or the separator, might break through and let the machines fall into the ditch or creek below. Sometimes this happened, and a thresherman was carried to his death. My Uncle Cal Bitterman was once caught between the cab of his engine and the self-feeder of the separator when a bridge gave way

without warning. He survived, however, with only a badly bruised chest to show for it. Usually the threshermen carried heavy planks with them to lay across the smaller bridges for the great iron wheels of the machines to cross on. If the outfit had to be taken across a bridge that was too wide to be planked, the man at the steering wheel of the engine said his prayers and stood at the outer edge of the cab or platform ready to jump clear if anything gave way.

As I grew older, threshing gradually lost its glamour and excitement for me and became just another dusty, dirty job that had to be done every summer. With the coming of the small combines, owned by nearly every farmer, the old-time threshing rig has just about disappeared. It had its day, just like the surrey with the fringe on top, and nobody was very sorry to see it go. But gosh it was fun to haul bundles, back in 1910!