

thrashing time

It generally takes a long time to build a fortune, but it only takes a few weeks or months to grow a crop. There is nothing more interesting than to watch the plants get higher and stronger, day by day, until they fully mature and reproduce their kind. And it is interesting to figure on how much life can be wrapped up in a small seed of grain.

Pap went to the centennial at Philadelphia, and brought home a ten cent tobacco sack of Russian oats, from which we finally got seed enough to sow forty acres. They were the whoppingest oats anybody ever saw, and actually grew to be as high as Pap himself — and he was a six footer. One thing about this oat was that a single seed would produce sometimes a dozen or more stems. “Stooling out” was what the folks called it. I heard Pap say that he found one where he counted forty-seven stalks that had all formed from one oat seed.

Next year all the neighbors just had to have some of those wonderful Russian oats. So they traded with Pap, and secured enough to sow their entire acreage. It all did mighty well, too, and grew to be most six feet high. But just before it was ready to be cut, a terrible storm came along and dashed it flat to the ground. You never saw such a mess in your life. Twisted and tangled in every shape, it was a problem what to do with it. Some folks just cut it with mowers and stacked it up for cow feed. But Pap was bound to harvest his if there was any way to do it.

He started in with the new Minneapolis twine binder. But if you cut the way the heads mostly lay, the harvester would just push the grain down and slide right over it. Going against the way it leaned, the sickle guards just buried themselves under a great mass of tangled grain, and the elevators got clogged right up. So Pap decided to cut the field all one way, and cut only half a swath at a time so the elevators could handle it.

It was my job to walk behind the binder and rake

the grain down into the beaters that made the bundle. It was a steady job, believe me. If I missed one stroke the whole thing would clog up, and the bull wheel would begin to drag. Then Pap would climb down off his high perch on the driving seat, claw out the clogged grain and free the mechanism so that it was possible to go ahead. Once across the field he would turn the machine around and drive back to the starting point light, which means without cutting at all. On this return trip I was allowed to jump onto the rear frame, behind the reel, and ride if I could hold on. Then came another turn through the tangled grain, and back and forth and back and forth until we had that terrible crop finally bound up into bundles, such as they were.

We had to cut the grain very low down, and with oats five or six feet long the bundles were of enormous size. Sometimes three or four of them would be so tangled together that the shockers just tumbled them into the orneriest kind of shocks and let it go at that. I never saw such a shock field. The ground was half covered with them. When we came to thrash that crop there was hardly room in the field to stack the straw.

That cooked the Russian oats in our neighborhood for good and all, and we went back to the good old brands that had proved fit for Iowa soil and climate. Oats two or three feet tall do not blow down like a crop that has stretched up six feet.

Of all the work we were called upon to do in course of the year, there was nothing that quite compared in genuine classic flavor with thrashing. Our neighbors —

maybe fifteen of us — would all thrash together, helping one another in turn until we all were through. That meant going to a new place every day or two and eating the best food the women could cook.

Each woman seemed to try to outdo all the rest in the variety and quality of her cooking. We got so much fried chicken day after day that we honestly got tired of it. Some of the folks would have fresh beef and that was a mighty good treat, because we hardly ever got any beef. Once in a long time a beef wagon would drive through the country from Mediapolis, or New London, but there were not enough customers to make it pay and they didn't try it very often.

Pap always killed a mutton for thrashers and I thought there was nothing better than fresh mutton when you were about starved. That was the condition we were always in when the woman of the house came out and banged on a dishpan with a potato masher — the signal to come and wash up for dinner.

It was a sight to see — twenty farm hands washing up for dinner. Most houses had only one washpan for regular use, but on these occasions something else would serve the purpose and maybe as many as three could wash at a time. First the man pumped water out of a cistern and placed the washpans on the platform or bench, then dipping up a double handful, soaped up for a good scrubbing. Some of the men had the habit of blowing their hands while they were washing their faces. It made a funny sound — just made the soapsuds boil. With rolled up sleeves they would wash as far as

the elbows, and dry themselves all on the same towel. When one got too wet another one would be started. But that generally exhausted the supply, and the last four or five men would have to wring out the towels to get any good of them. Then those that had hair would all comb up, and look pretty respectable.

Generally the women would fix it so that all could eat at once, but sometimes they didn't have enough dishes to do that so the men had to eat in relays. A fellow who was already hungry as a bear sometimes had to sit back and watch another lot eat. Then when he did get his inning, a good many things that ought to be hot were cold and not so good. That was the reason there was always a scramble for the first table. You couldn't blame the men either.

But la, me there was an abundance for all and a lot to spare besides. There was every kind of thing that grows on a farm — potatoes, cabbage, beets, onions, apple sauce, and always the mighty good kind of meat. Home-made bread and pies, several kinds of jam, spiced relishes, pickles, green beans, corn on the cob you spread all over with butter and ate right out of your hands — all was on deck. There was pie, cake, coffee, tea, milk, doughnuts and everything you ever heard of. Sometimes there were things you had never heard of — and you ate them on faith.

One of the things I remember about those old times was the great numbers of flies that infested every farm home. It seems strange that people lived on earth thousands of years before anybody ever thought

of screens to keep the flies out of houses. I was nearly a man grown before door and window screens were introduced.

Before that it was a battle from June to November, when the frost got the flies for good. How the women ever managed to do any cooking without getting flies mixed into it is more than I can understand. There were literally millions of them swarmed in the kitchens, attracted by the odor of cooking.

Just before dinner was called there was an order to drive flies. Half a dozen women would arm themselves with dishcloths, towels, papers and tree twigs, and shake them with great vigor all about the room. The flies would move out the door like a swarm of bees, but the effort never came anywhere near getting all of them. Even so, those they succeeded in driving out were mostly all back within a minute or so.

While we were seated at table three or four women would do nothing else but drive back flies. Armed with fly brushes — which were generally made up of strips of paper fastened on a rod — they would get after every fly that ventured upon the table. If they missed a stroke or two, maybe to pass something, here the flies would come and settle down on everything. It was ticklish business, for if you happened to swallow one of those flies with your food it made you mighty sick, as any farm hand can tell you.

Once when we were eating thrashing dinner, at the Manson farm, Old Mrs. Manson came in with milk for the coffee, saying as she did so: "Here's fresh

milk, men, fer your coffee. 'Tain't even been strained. Well, I did sorter strain it through my apern when I was milkin' the cow, but that's all."

Nobody at the table seemed to appreciate the extra value Mrs. Manson placed on her milk because of its not having been strained, but she must have been pretty proud of it, for she went over it several times before dinner was through.

During the meal, a fly dropped into a cup of coffee at Dave Michaels' place, and Dave passed it up to Mrs. Manson expecting a fresh cupful. But she dipped the fly out with the corner of her apron and handed the cup right back to him, remarking: "Some men is mighty hepless." Poor Dave went without coffee that meal.

There were all kinds of cooks and all kinds of places to eat, and all kinds of things to eat. Generally they were about as good as any human being ever tasted.

After dinner the thrashing hands sat around in the shade while the boys struck up all kinds of athletic sports. But we never called them athletic in those days — in fact we had never heard of athletics.

Chinning was a common favorite. It was done by grasping a pole with both hands and drawing your body up until you could stick your chin over the pole, then letting down to arms length and pulling up again. The one who could do that the greatest number of times was the champion. Moritz Fisher chinned himself twenty times once. A good many could do it as many as fifteen times.

The first five or six hoists are easy enough but then it

begins to grow tiresome. By the time a dozen is passed it is real hard, and the last four or five lifts are just the hardest kind of work. It required more effort to do a turn chinning than to perform a day's ordinary work, but there is no kind of a game in just plain work. There *was* in chinning, and that was no doubt its charm.

Rolling the barrel was good too. We would take an empty barrel and go over it heels first, lying flat on our backs and inching over by hand power. It looks easy enough but there comes a time — just as you think you are going to make it — when the balance goes against you and unless you are lucky, you are liable to land on your head. I have seen a good many pretty smart fellows fairly scalp themselves when they came heaving back on their heads at the turning point of that game.

Lifting the wagon tongue was another good game. A fellow lay down under the tongue with his feet toward the wagon. Then he was supposed to grasp the tongue with both hands and get up with it. The trick was to maneuver the thing so as not to move the wagon forward. And, of course, you were not allowed to lock the wagon. Anybody could do it with the wagon locked.

Square Holts was another wonderful game. Two men would sit on the ground facing each other with their feet against a board. Then they would grasp a fork handle and see which could pull the other up. It took a good grip to do that and you had to know how to keep your weight near the ground. The fellows who

sat up straight to pull were never in it at all. We had some mighty good square holt pullers in our crowd and there were not many who dared challenge them. When they did, they got yanked up mighty quick, believe me.

And jump: we used to do every kind of jumping act that was ever heard of, and we had some real experts at it too. Barnett Hale was a man of some fifty years and stood kind of stooping-forward like, with a short body and awfully long legs. He was a carpenter by trade as well as a farmer, and had built nearly all the barns and houses in the country. He liked to tell that when he was a young man he used to be able to do a running hop-skip-and-jump of forty-five feet, and of course we believed him. It was the ambition of the best of our crowd to at least equal Barnett Hale's record.

I do not know how many weeks time I put in trying that myself. Plowing corn in the field barefoot, I used to use all the time that the horses were resting at practicing to hop-skip-and-jump. I calculated the distance by the corn rows. Week by week I could see that I was gaining a little. Noontime, while waiting for the horses to finish their hay, I put in the entire time hopping, skipping, and jumping. The pep that is stored up in youth for this sort of thing is beyond belief. We were never tired of any kind of sport or game. But I never quite reached the record of Barnett Hale. Forty-two feet was my absolute limit, but I could beat anybody in our crowd as far as that is concerned, or anybody else I ran across.

We had broad jumpers who could leap twelve feet with the use of weights, and that was the way we did it. We had high jumpers, and high kickers, and two or three of the boys were good at foot racing. Charlie Plunkett, son of the village doctor, was the leader of the bunch. He could do a hundred yards at about ten and a half seconds. John Fye was about as good and Elt Conklin was not a bit slow. But Elt was a religious boy and never mixed with us in the sports to any great extent.

But the prime sport of all was wrestling. We had three or four prize wrestlers who would spend the noon period at thrashing time with one another and all comers. Once in a while some has-been would take a chance, announcing that he could throw anybody in the crowd. Generally he wound up getting a sprained hand or ankle, or something else. You just can't wrestle to amount to anything after you get settled and stiff.

I had a pretty good reputation as a wrestler myself, and wasn't afraid of the best of them. But one time a hired hand of Chauncey Blodgett, a fellow by the name of Kelly, tackled me for a bout. He was short and stubby, and his hair was just like the bristles on a pig. We cavorted around over the barn lot for several minutes, both at our utmost capacity, and finally edged over on a kind of mound made by the remains of a corn cob pile of the winter before. We came down on our knees together with great force and lit on a cob that busted my knee cap loose. I almost fainted with pain and was laid up for three or four weeks. And I

carry a lame knee with me to this day, as a result of my ambition to beat them all at wrestling.

The older men took a great delight in our antics, urging us on to our utmost endeavor. It's a wonder we were not all crippled for life — and some of us were. But we never quite came up to the records of the older men. Nearly every one of them had done something in the sport or game line — when he was young — that was away beyond anything we could ever do. Maybe they were stretching a point but we believed them then and nearly busted ourselves trying to equal them.

Henry Fye was the boss thrasher of our time. He owned a ten horse rig, which meant that it took ten horses to work the horse power machine. A long tumbling rod connected this with the separator. Then there was a great big cog wheel that engaged the cylinder — the noisiest thing about the machine. It was geared to revolve the toothed cylinder and thrash the grain out of the bundles fed into it by hand by members of the thrashing crew.

The band cutter stood by the side of the feeder, knife in hand, and cut the bands around the bundles so they could be fed into the machine loose. But once in a while a bundle would slip through with the band on, and such a chug you never heard. It would nearly stop the horses on the sweep.

Four or five men worked on the straw pile, the dustiest and dirtiest job you ever saw, and five or six wagons brought the grain in from the field. It was a steady job to measure the grain at the spout with a half

bushel measure, and dump it into a wagon box to be hauled away to the bin. It kept a fellow right at it as long as the machine was running, but every once in a while a belt would come off or something would give way. That gave everybody a rest — except the crew, and they had to fix the trouble while we all idled.

It was a great treat to see Henry Fye come driving in to do our thrashing. First the great separator would lumber past — drawn by four big horses and driven by one of the Fye boys, perched away up there ever so high and looking down disdainfully on us poor creatures who never had a chance to go with a thrashing rig. Then would come the horse power and the wagon load of traps and fixings that had to be put together before thrashing could begin. There was a lot of work to it, driving long stakes into the ground to anchor the horse power, leveling and bracing the separator, attaching the carriers, and setting the concaves, screens, and the like. We generally had the thrashing crew overnight, and that furnished a welcome change from having just the family around.

We had about three weeks of this sort of thing every fall, and it was worth all the rest of the plowing, planting and cultivating, to get to go through that experience. Every boy in the neighborhood wanted to grow up to be a thrashing man. But very few of them did. By the time they got to be old enough to do it the charm had worn off. It's the same way with a lot of things.