

# *future farmers*

It was a big day for us boys when we began to actually get a hand in the farm work — especially handling the horses. Horses are so big, and gentle, and brave, and strong. They are fast on foot, never get much tired of work — like people do — and they are not afraid of water, or mud, or the dark, or anything like that.

About the first thing a kid gets to do with horses

is to lead them out to the water trough to drink, then back to their stalls. After we had a few months of that, we were allowed to put a blind bridle on a trusty old mare and ride her to drive up the cows. We worked up a little at a time until the day finally came when we could actually hitch up a team to a plow and do work in the fields. That was what every country boy looked forward to.

I used to like to run the cornstalk cutter. It was a big red machine with two wheels, and underneath there was a set of great heavy knives that just naturally chopped the cornstalks to smithereens. I would drive, and drive, and drive that big team of smelly horses up and down the long corn rows all day long, and used to wave at everybody that went along the road to be sure that they saw me. Noontime was entirely too long, and one o'clock was welcome for that was when I got the horses out and hitched them to the cutter again. I was sorry when unhitching time came at night.

But following a harrow was a different story altogether. In those days nobody had ever thought of such a thing as rigging anything behind a harrow to ride on. The ground was soft as could be, and we sank into it halfway to our ankles every step. Of course we had some help from the lines but it got to be the most tiresome job you ever saw to wade across fields all day.

But there is an end to every day, and a boy rests up so fast that after a good night's sleep we were about as good as new and ready for another day of it, whatever it was we had to do. Farm work never hurt anybody and

we hadn't got to the worrying place yet. We were always having a good enough time in spite of our troubles.

The harvest season was about the finest of all. Cutting and binding the grain and setting it up in shocks all over the field was as fine a thing to work at as we ever had. And Pap had a way of keeping us at it — and keeping our interest up — with all kinds of baits.

One of these was "catching the rabbit." When the reaper had cut off all four sides of the field a good ways in, Pap would say, "It won't be long now 'til we catch the rabbit." What he meant was that there was a rabbit in every grain field, and when it came to cutting down the last of it the rabbit would jump out and we would get to chase him. I don't think we ever stopped to think what we would do with the rabbit if we caught him. They were no good to eat at that time of the year. I guess it was just the natural hankering we had for chasing something that is wild.

Putting up hay was a fine job too. Pap always drove the mowing machine since he claimed to be a mechanic. He made out that it took quite a genius to handle the harvesting machinery.

Newly mown hay lying there in the sun — curing for the stacks — has the most wonderful smell. There is no perfumery that I ever ran across that comes up to it. It was fun to pile it up with a horse rake, load it onto wagons, and ride on top of it to the barn. Away up there in the cool breeze it was mighty comfortable, with four or five feet of loose hay underneath you — better than any springs or cushions you ever read about.

Always looking for improvements to work with, Pap bought a new-fangled contraption called a hay carrier. A carrier on a long track, fastened up under the rafters in the haymow, carried the load back to where you wanted to dump it. The man on the load of hay would jab a scissors fork deep down in the hay and set it. Then he would give the word to Pete — the rope horse — who would start out away from the barn pulling on a great long rope that ran under the wagon, through several pulleys, up the far side of the barn, along the track and down to the hayfork.

Right away the load would begin to go up, pull loose from the main pile on the wagon, hit the carrier and go rattling back into the barn. The fork man held a little rope that was fastened to the fork and at the right time somebody in the mow would yell "Snack!" Then the fork man would give a little jerk and the whole pile would fall down into the mow. Eight or ten forkfuls would empty the wagon, and back to the field we would go for another load.

One thing that made haymaking a kind of skittish business was bumble bees. They get "ripe" about the same time hay does, and the work of putting up hay interferes with their plans. And they get mad about it, too. There isn't a particle of pacifism about a bumble bee. He doesn't know a thing about turning the other cheek. He is out for a fight the minute you disturb him.

Bumble bee colonies have only about a dozen bees in them. They build their nests in the ground, if they want to live in a hay field. Really it looks like they don't build nests at all, but steal them from mice and take them over

for their own use. In these nests they will lay up the best honey that anybody ever saw. It isn't put up in any kind of comb, but is sealed up in little sacks about the size of a marble. Any kind of honey is mighty good to eat, but bumble bee honey is the best of all. It is sweeter, in the first place, and it has some kind of a flavor that seems to be made up of all the fine tasting things to be found out of doors. No wonder bumble bees are willing to defend their honey with their lives.

If you happen to shake up their nest any way, the whole colony of ten or twelve bumble bees will fly right into your face with the idea of stinging you right then. Unless you know your business, you are going to get stung, too. But we finally learned how to handle them and hardly ever got the worst of it.

One of the sports we used to like was "fighting out" bumble bee nests. Sometimes we found them in a hollow place around an old crib, and sometimes along a hedge row. The bees made nests almost any place they could find a mouse nest to steal. Generally three or four of us would go together to fight them, so as to help a fellow who might be getting the worst of it.

We would fix paddles out of shingles and stand all around the place where the nest was, 'til some one of us stirred it up. Out they would come, buzzing like everything and as mad as all get out. They would scatter out to take in all of us at once and we would swat them as they came on. Generally we would squash them all without getting a single sting. It was kind of ornery to gang on them that way, but it was safer.

Every acre or two of hay land had from one to three

bumble bee nests in it. When the mower passed over them they sometimes stayed stirred up and would sting the horses a little when they came around on the next swath. Then when the rake came along the next day and pulled their nest loose and scattered it around some, they got madder yet. By the time the wagon came along to pick up the hay, they were ready for the biggest kind of a fight.

But if you know how, you can catch every one of them in a jug as slick as you please. We tried the system and it worked fine. Take a jug half full of water and leave the cork out, and set it down right beside the nest. Then stir them up and run away before they can come out. Those fool bees will buzz around the top of that jug a few times and then flop right down into it and get drowned. They just seem to explore around the hole, then drop down in, tail first, and that is the last of them. By stirring them up several times, you can get the last one of them that way.

The first time we ever tried it Pap was mowing on a back lot not very far off, and along towards noon he got pretty dry for a drink of water. He wouldn't ask for a drink on a bet. He would do without for a whole week before he would ever admit that he was thirsty.

But Pap saw our bumble bee jug sitting out there in the open — with no one around — and walked over there to have a drink. We had no way of knowing what he was up to until he raised the jug to his mouth. Then it was too late. We jumped out from behind the haycock we were hiding in and yelled at him, but he didn't pay any attention to us. I'll bet there were a dozen half-

drowned bumble bees in that jug of water. Pap spit out something and set the jug down. By that time we were pretty close to where he was, and trying to tell him about the jug. But it was no use saying what we knew. He scolded us a little for losing the corncob stopper, but never said a word about the bees. You never *could* figure him out at all.

Once a doctor in Burlington told him that the sting of bees was good for the rheumatism. It was the dead of winter, and the honey bees were all dormant and lazy as could be, all shut up in their hives. But he managed to get a handful somehow, then opened his shirt collar and poured that mess of bees right down his neck. Then he sat about in a warm room and waited for the bees to come to and sting him. After a while they began to crawl around inside his shirt, and one showed up under his ear, and he flicked it back inside as cool as you please.

He managed to get stung a good many times by those bees. He claimed they helped him, too. But mother raised a fuss about some of them that got loose in the house, because she was afraid they might sting the children. So Pap didn't get any more out of the hive, but just caught the strays he found buzzing around the house and put them inside his shirt front. There wasn't anything he was afraid of or wouldn't try if somebody recommended it to him.

At harvest time we used to trade work with the neighbors. Some of them didn't have harvesting machinery like we did, and they would help us through, and then we would go and help them.

We had a good many German neighbors and they

were the best of the lot — for they had a practice of eating five times a day at harvest time. On top of the three regular meals that other folks have, they would slip in one at half past nine in the forenoon, and another at half past three in the afternoon. The women folks would come out to the fields, lugging baskets full of sandwiches, radishes, onions, cheese, bologna, a big jug of buttermilk or something like that. We would all sit down on the ground and eat together. There was something to that kind of life. I always wished that I had been a German — but it was too late, and I always had to make out as I was. But I liked to work with those German neighbors, and eat and visit with them.

As a youngster, I never could understand Pap's talk about being glad for a bumper crop. I was always glad — especially after I got big enough to work steady in the fields — when there was a *short* crop of either small grain or corn. That made less work to do. Hard work and youngsters never did go well together, so I was always glad for a missing hill of corn at husking time and for the wet places where the grain had been drowned out. I was almost grown before I began to see that we had to depend on the crops for our living, our comforts and all our food.