



## The Thresherman

# CHAFF IN MY HAIR by Charles H. Fraser, MD

It's been over forty years since I labored at the roaring mouth of a threshing machine, rhythmically tossing sheaves of grain so they nestled head to toe with each other in an unending line pointing toward the chopping blades.

My memories are of hilly midwestern country where farms were small and equipment minimal, so a group effort was necessary for threshing. A day's work at a neighbor's farm would buy a good day's work in return.

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The man with growing boys was the most admired, because the day would come when he could send one or two of the boys and stay home to get some odd jobs done, while a man with no sons would have to drop everything and go. It was a subtle point deciding when a son's work was the equal of a grown man's instead of two boys.

The day Dad announced, "I think I'll send Chuck today," was a milestone in my life. The amount of work produced that day was stupendous, for no one was going to say Chuck hadn't done his share.

And ah, that lunch! Every farmer's wife was on her mettle to produce the best she could muster. Good times or not, the board at threshing had abundance unlimited and a variety that taxed even the cavernous maw of a growing teenager.

At the first clang from the old bell sitting on the post by the grape arbor, there was a noticeable change in tempo. Wagons in the field would hurriedly "top off" and come scooting in—albeit a bit light at times.

Horses were unhitched and watered. The last load by the thresher had barely pulled away when the tractor's roar was silenced and brown-faced men leaped to the ground. Then, with foreheads white above hat brim lines, they queued up by the porcelain

basins on the back porch.

Seniority existed here. The youngsters last, and woe be to him who seemed to take a fraction of a second too long running the community comb through his damp hair!

The young ladies served their apprenticeship here as did the fellows in the field. While the matron of the house supervised, her daughters, and probably some of the neighbor's daughters, were circulating around the tables set up under the trees, putting out the first of many dishes.

If any young man was known to have romantic aspirations towards one of the girls, the next hour was going to be a hectic one. It took steely nerve and aplomb for a damsel to pour ice water, without spilling a drop, into the glass of an admirer who had recently escorted her to a dance or social.

However, as the meal progressed, piles of chicken, beef, and pork became memories. Perhaps a lone potato remained of a large pile. Bread and butter pickles, preserved watermelon rind, and other condiments were decimated. Only crumbs remained of peach, cherry, and apple pies.

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All too soon, "up and at 'em" came sounding forth, generally from the owner of the threshing machine who was eager to get his job done. The pace back to the barn was at a distinctly different beat, but we were soon in the swing of things.

It was not all drudgery. There was much informal rivalry as to who could build the best-looking load, who could toss the longest unbroken string of correctly placed sheaves into the thresher, and what team and wagon would have the fastest loading or unloading times.

And so it went. If it was a large crop, a decision had to be made soon, whether to work late with supper to be gotten in a

hurry; or should activity be postponed until morning, making necessary many changes of plans and the resultant debt of several more days of work to be paid back.

When the last load had been run through, custom demanded a look at the counter on the threshing machine which measured out the grain in bushels. Every farmer was busy making quick mental divisions by the estimated acreage to see how well his crop-raising ability was going to compare. This was important enough that I was once told by a man with a poor yield coming up to "give the counter a few extra flips," even if it meant a larger bill from the owner of the thresher.

The chatting groups soon broke up as families piled onto their wagons and headed home to chores. The youngest son was usually allowed to drive the team home, since the horses were tired and quite docile by this time. If there happened to be a farm pond around, the older boys might be found slipping away for a quick "skinny dip" to cut through the layers of sweat and dust. Few things have ever been as refreshing as a running dive into the cool spring-fed farm pond.

Once home, the day was not yet over. Horses had to be watered and turned out. Chores were done in spite of aching muscles that bade ill for the morrow. But a man's job had been done and the next day would again bring the work and sweat, the food and fun and the feeling of accomplishment that, to this day, has rarely been equalled.

