

Threshing bee recalled

By H. B. DISBROWE
for The Free Press

While driving along a rural sideroad the other day, I stopped to watch a combine at work. The great machine moved ponderously across the field, cutting a wide swath of ripe grain. A stream of golden kernels flowed into the hopper at its top, and behind it, as it moved along, it left a neat windrow of crumpled straw.

It was controlled by a solitary man seated comfortably in a glass-enclosed cab, from which issued the sound of radio music. He, with the aid of this complicated machine, was accomplishing what in my distant boyhood days would have required the exertions of several teams of horses and a dozen men.

This lone farmer seated in his mammoth machine, whose cost would have sufficed to purchase a 200-hundred-acre farm 60 years ago, somehow symbolized the impersonality that characterizes modern life . . . even on the farm. In the rural Ontario of bygone years threshing was a community enterprise . . . a social occasion that was enjoyed by all who had a part in it.

In the unsophisticated early days of this century, the arrival of the threshers at the farm was an exciting event. The big engine came down the road puffing and clanking, and emitting clouds of smoke and steam. Behind it, in tandem, it towed the red grain separator with its myriad pulleys and belts, and the sloshing gurgling tank-wagon.

It pulled into the yard and stopped; in the sudden silence one could hear the hiss of escaping steam and smell the odors of hot oil and wood smoke. But the silence was short-lived, for the crew, climbing down from their various perches, proceeded with much shouting back and forth, to set the machine.

The separator was unhitched and turned around, and then pushed backwards up the ramp into the barn by the puffing laboring engine. Next, the engine was backed down the slope and brought to a level position by backing the rear traction wheels onto a sturdy platform constructed of old railroad ties. Then the big rubber and canvas belt was unrolled, and one end slipped onto the flywheel of the engine; the other was attached to the drive-pulley of the separator. The crossed belt was tightened by cautiously backing the engine, which was chocked into position when the right degree of tautness was attained.

While this was going on the exchange hands drifted in from the neighboring farms; as they arrived they were assigned to their work stations. Most were sent to the mow to pass down the sheaves; but one was sent to the platform to feed them into the machine, and two were designated to carry away the grain as it came from the separator. The job of steering the straw-blower, an easy task, was usually given to the boy of the family. The farm owner, in conformance with convention, claimed the least-favored assignment, the suffocating unpleasant task of spreading the straw in the dusty confines of the straw shed.

When all was ready, a couple of sharp toots of the whistle warned everyone that work was about to start. The engine chugged purposefully, and the drive belt slapped a few times as it gathered speed. The various pulleys, belts and conveyors started to revolve; then sieves began to shake, the bandcutters flashed, and a blast of air came from the blower-pipe. When the sounds converged into a purposeful rumble, the separator attendant signalled that threshing could commence.

The engineer responded with a short whistle-blast, and the platform man started to lay sheaves onto the conveyor that fed them head-first into the maw of the separator. The whirling blades of the bandcutters severed the twine bands of the sheaves, and the machine growled protestingly as they went through the cylinder and were stripped of their kernels.

Down through the roaring, quaking machine went the mixture of straw grain and chaff. The straw was sucked up and blasted out through the blower-pipe into the straw shed. The grain and chaff passed over a

succession of shaking sieves that separated them, and permitted the grain to pour from the side of the machine into the waiting one-bushel containers. As each was filled, it was whisked away to the granary and emptied into a bin. As the carrier returned with the empty container, he paused at the granary door to put a mark on the tally-board.

As the men settled into the work, they instinctively adopted a rhythmic pattern of motion that kept the sheaves flowing at a pace that kept the separator operating at optimum capacity. All the while, the separator man moved around and over the whirling pulleys and belts to perform his duties. He filled and adjusted grease cups, applied belt dressing, and kept a sharp eye out for real or potential trouble.

At the engine, the engineer kept busy firing the boiler. The fuel, supplied by the farmer, consisted of old fence rails and pine stumps, of which there seemed an inexhaustible supply. These items were cut into lengths to fit the firebox by means of a circular saw attached to one of the tender boxes on the rear platform of the engine. It was driven by a short belt that connected it to a small pulley attached to the flywheel. Throughout the day the high-pitched z-i-n-g of the saw could be heard as the engine man cut the wood to feed the voracious firebox.

If the farm possessed an ample water supply, water from the boiler was obtained from the farm well; otherwise it had to be hauled from a convenient pond or stream. Supplying it was the farmer's responsibility, and a man and team were dispatched for this purpose from time to time. Sometimes, while they were away on this errand, the water supply ran low, and the engineer would let loose frantic short blasts of the whistle to signal the man on the tank-wagon to hurry back with the fresh supply.

While the threshers went about their work, all was bustle and chatter at the house, as the women prepared to feed the hands. Providing good meals for the threshers was a rural tradition, and each housewife did her best to uphold the standard expected of her.

A prodigious amount of roasting and baking was done in preparation for the annual epicurean rite. When the tables were ready they literally sagged under their burden of food — huge platters of meat and pitchers of brown gravy; bowls of mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots; plates of sliced tomatoes, cookies, cake, and homemade bread; as well as numerous kinds of pie, pickles and preserves, and great pitchers of tea and coffee, occupied all available space.

In the backyard, the family washtubs were set up on trestles and filled with water. Bars of brown soap were laid out, and fresh towels draped conveniently over fence or clothesline. When all was ready, a wave of the hand to the engineer brought in response a prolonged shrill wail of the whistle that halted the flow of sheaves from the mow and brought the work to a halt.

After allowing a few minutes to clear the separator, the engine was shut down, and the clattering belts and pulleys slowed down and stopped. In the unaccustomed stillness, the voices of the men sounded unnaturally loud as they climbed down from their work stations and made their way to the house. At the water tubs, there was a tremendous amount of hawking, blowing, and snorting, as the men washed the dust and grime from arms and faces before going in and seating themselves at the table.

All was concentration as the hungry men set to. There was little to be heard but the clatter of knives and forks as the platters were emptied and replenished again and again by the hovering women. But, as appetites were appeased, the pace slowed down, and there was talk and good-natured laughter around the table.

Afterwards the men drifted outside for more talk and to smoke, before returning to work; or, if at day's end, to their respective homes for evening chores. And thus the job went on from day to day, the outfit moving from one farm to another, until all were threshed out.