

The Last Word *Still making hay when the sun shines*

By Ted Brown

Early summer is that time when the weather is warm and sunny, yet hasn't reached that hot, humid stage.

It's a time when school is almost done and the kids are excited about what summer vacation has to offer.

And it's a time when the farmers start haying.

I was thinking about haying as I finished cutting the lawn last week. I put the lawn mower away and the sweet smell of nearby freshly-cut hay permeated the air.

I recalled those days when I finished school at the end of June to come home to face almost 100 acres of hay that had to be brought in.

Back then, it wasn't my favourite job.

In the early days, the mid-1800s, haying was incredibly labour intensive. Originally cut by hand with a scythe, it was later cut by a horse-drawn mower that was driven by the wheels turning, transmitting power to the mower by gears, which drove the five-foot wide cutter-head. The cut hay was left to dry, later raked, then loaded onto a wagon—originally by hand with pitchforks, then later with a mechanical hay loader. It was drawn to the barn where it was lifted off the wagon and into the barn, by means of a hay fork.

The photo (right) shows a load of hay being unloaded into one of our barns. The hay fork, a huge 'harpoon' type of tool, was dropped into the pile, the points on it were locked up (like big barbs) then it was hauled up into the barn by ropes and pulleys pulled by a team of horses. Once in the barn, the fork was released and the hay tumbled into place in the mow. This photo dates around 1920 at home on the Brown Farm.

The industry has made great advances in haying technology since this photo was taken.

Recalling my first memories of haying, we had a tractor-mounted seven-foot-wide mower to cut the hay, leaving it flat in the field. Years later we added a conditioner to follow the mower, (a machine with two meshing rollers which the hay was fed through, putting a crimp in the stems, to allow the air to get in and thereby dry faster).

The hay would lay in the field to cure until it was dry enough to be baled, then raked into long windrows, so the baler could pick it up.

We eventually progressed to a mower-conditioner, which incorporated all three processes (cutting, conditioning and raking) into one machine, cutting nine foot wide as well. It was a huge improvement for cutting hay.

Today, many farmers are cutting with 12-foot-wide flail-type machines— all geared to cut closer and cover more ground in less time.

Baling hay has come a long way too. When I was a kid, we had a square baler hitched to a tractor which drew it around the field with a hay wagon attached behind. The bales emerged from the back of the baler and someone rode on the wagon to stack them— a very dirty, dusty job.

I'll never forget the day our bale thrower arrived. A thrower is a device attached to the back of the baler which literally 'tosses' the bales up into a

wagon with high wooden sides on it. The thrower was a welcome addition, eliminating the need for a person to ride the wagon.

Back at the barn, we moved in big steps too. Originally we had a bale elevator which was like a conveyor, set up to a window or door in the barn. The bales ascended it and dropped in the mow where someone would stack them like building bricks.

In 1963, the mow conveyor was installed. Still in operation 47 years later, the bales are loaded onto an elevator outside the barn, and move along the conveyor mounted in the peak of the barn. The conveyor is equipped with slides that allow the bales to be directed to any one of six mows in the barn, just by changing a deflector with the tug of a rope.

Even though small square bales are still popular, many farmers have found a more labour-efficient way to take off hay. We all have seen huge round bales that dot the fields this time of year. Baled by a machine that rolls them up like a gigantic jelly-roll, they are later picked up with a front-end loader, equipped with huge spear, loaded onto a wagon and hauled away to be stacked in storage— sometimes under cover, sometimes in the great outdoors. There are also large square balers, most often employed to bale hay that will be transported great distances on a tractor trailer.

Although we've come a long way in the haying department, and manual labour has been dramati-

cally reduced, one thing will always remain— hay still needs good weather to be harvested. A hay field requires two or more days to dry after it's been cut and a day to be baled— fair weather is a 'must' to take off quality hay.

If the hay is rained on, it develops a moldy smell and the animals won't eat it. Protein levels in the hay are also depleted if it is weathered.

No one ever said it was easy taking off high quality hay. The operation relies on second-guessing the weather, having the equipment in top working order, and split-second timing when it's time to take to the field.

When I sit on the verandah and view the end of the barn where that old photo was taken in the 1920s, I smile with satisfaction at the advances we've made in cutting hay over the decades. It was certainly a necessary development— the work-force in the farm community has dwindled over the years. Fewer kids work on farms for summer jobs, opting to work in air-conditioned comfort at an inside job, often at twice the hourly rate.

But the hay must be taken off, and today's equipment is up to the challenge. Operators can now accomplish so much more than they did when I was a kid in the 1950s and 60s.

And there is one thing that will always remain— we will always need fair weather to 'make hay when the sun shines'.



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