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As Harvest Used to Be

by John Cape

A MILE NORTH OF DALTON a dusty road leads off the main highway, across treeless, rolling hills to the west. Follow it for about a mile, climbing and dipping through the hills as though on a roller coaster, and turn in at the first farm place.

The neat white house is closest to the road. To its right and behind it is the big red barn with the bright tin roof, nestling in the sheds, corrals, and post-piles that are a part of every farm. Surrounding all this is a grove of evergreen trees, painstakingly transplanted from the cool depths of the canyons along the north edge of the pasture.

It is one of the brightest, hottest days of early fall. Heat waves are shimmering on the horizon, and the chickens are lazily dragging their wings in the dust in the shade of the cedar trees.



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Suddenly there comes a shout from the front yard:

"Hey Mom! Here come the threshers."

"You kids stay in the yard and keep out of the way."

"Can't we go out by the barn and watch?"

"No, you stay right here by the house. If you're good I'll let you go watch after they get started."

The first of the crew to arrive are the bundle-pitchers, with hay-racks of all sizes, shapes, and descriptions. Some are bright and freshly painted, others weathered and cracked, barely being held together by baling wire.

Pulled by sweating teams, they move on to the fields without stopping in order to be loaded and ready when the threshing machine is set up. Finally into the baryard rolls the creaking rattling separator, pulled by

a huge Rumley tractor with wheels higher than a man's head. After much testing of wind and speculation as to its changeability, a spot is picked and the machine is backed into position.

Ralph Hendricks operates the tractor and separator and is in the height of his glory at threshing time. He is a mediocre farmer, his corn always needs going over and his fences are never in repair, but when it comes to running a threshing rig he knows no equal. He will stand at one end of the machine, eye it for a while, tug on the brim of his battered felt hat, let fly a stream of tobacco juice at some innocent dog or cat, and say:

"Reckon if we drop this corner down about four inches and that one about six it'll be purt near level."

He is always right. The proper holes are dug and the rig is dropped into place. Ralph never bothers to check it for levelness, but he does carry a level in the

tool box for the use of those who doubt his ability. Those suspicious souls who want to be sure that none of their grain is going to pass over the screens and be blown out with the straw.

The long belt is strung out, the blower slowly cranked around and by the time the tractor is in position and the machine oiled up there is a load of bundles on each side of the feeder. The bundle pitchers are waiting on the racks ready to start pitching as soon as the machine is wound up.

The belts and wheels begin to turn, slowly at first, but gathering momentum with every puff of black smoke from the tractor, until there is a steady rumbling howl from the threshing cylinder. Soon the whole machine is shaking and shivering like a dinosaur with the palsy, and steadily devouring a stream of bundles to be separated into straw and grain.

The tractor leans back into the belt and seems to be watching the operation with smug satisfaction. Belching a big black smoke

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ring now and then as a warning to some individual who has pitched in too many bundles cross-ways.

"You kids can take turns riding with your Dad in the grain wagon if you keep out of the way." At last Mother has remembered us. Starting with the oldest, he's the biggest, we are allowed to ride in the wagon from the granary around to the side of the threshing machine where it replaces one that has just been filled. There amidst flying dust and chaff we mow the grain back and wish we'd had sense enough to stay in the yard where it was a lot cleaner. For the separator is always placed so that the wind favors the bundle pitchers.

As each rack is emptied another pulls into its place in order to maintain a steady stream of bundles into the feeder.

About 10:30 we ride out to the field with Mother when she delivers a lunch to the spike pitchers. Those unfortunate individuals who are assigned to spend all day in the field, helping to load each rack as it comes along.

At noon the teams are unhitched and tied to the rear of the racks while everyone goes in to dinner.

It's a great disappointment to be not quite big enough to sit at the table with the crew. Being allowed to eat with the men at threshing time is the first indication that someone has decided that you are growing up.

The crew, freshly scrubbed from wash-pans set up in a row in the shade of the house gathers at the long table. There they satisfy limitless appetites and compare your Mother's cooking with the meal served by Mrs. Walker the day before.

Food that has been long hours in preparation melts away like a late spring snowfall on a sunny day. Mountains of creamy white mashed potatoes with thick brown gravy vanish from sight. There are platters of golden brown chicken, fried in Mother's special way, with savory slices of roast beef for those who prefer a variety. Individual salads of crisp lettuce and a creamy mound of cottage cheese, topped

with home-canned fruit, nestles next to each coffee cup.

Flaky tender biscuits, fresh from the oven, and slices of home-baked bread, the work of the late evening hours of the day before, are stacked at each end of the table. Hot coffee, sending up streamers of steam to advertise its savor is placed near each plate. The remainder of the table is filled with side dishes of vegetables, fresh from the garden or off the long rows of canned goods in the root-cellar. Then to top off the meal there is a generous wedge of the first pumpkin pie of the season. Each piece reinforced by another hidden away in the pantry to be borne triumphantly out for the individual thoughtful enough to save an extra notch in his belt for dessert.

It's some consolation to be allowed to sit by and listen while the coffee is being finished and the toothpicks passed around. The individual who dropped his pitchfork into the feeder, or let his team run away that morning is the butt of all the jokes and comments on the morning's work.

Before you know it the meal is over and it's time for the men to go back to work. Then the womenfolk and kids get to eat, but nothing seems to appeal to the appetite as it did when the first sitting was served.

By the time we have finished eating the outfit is going full blast again and a considerable straw-pile has been built up under the blower.

About 3 it's time to deliver another lunch to the field, and everyone is beginning to feel the first sense of weariness that comes with a long day's work. Everyone that is except Hank Jackson's team. After standing docilely by the feeder all day they suddenly decide that they are deathly afraid of it and take off at a dead run, scattering dogs, cats, and onlookers like leaves before the wind, and almost throwing Hank off into the feeder. They don't get far, until he has the reins and midst shouts of "Turn Em!" "Hang on Hank!", and "Look out for that gatepost!" he gets them headed for the new straw pile. There they plunge in, belly deep in bright shiny straw.

After catching their breath they allow themselves to be led back to their place by the feeder where they will be content to stand until the next day.

"Hank, why don't you trade those nags off and get you a good team?" queries Ralph.

"Well I 'spect they'll get over that skittishness one of these days."

"They've been doing that every season for the last three years and don't seem to be getting any better."

"Yeh, but I think I'm about to get 'em broke of it."

At least it can be said that Hank has confidence in his ability, but he's the only one who does. The first thing you notice about him is the way he talks to you. He is a short man and carries on a conversation with his head tilted to one side, peering up at you out of the corners of his eyes, like a chicken warily watching a hovering hawk. He is unmarried, although there is no single woman or widow of marriageable age in the community who has not been offered Hanks' life and love. Every fall there is a small fortune wagered on how long it will take him to propose to the new schoolteacher. He usually accomplishes this in about three weeks, although there have been times when he has not worked up enough courage until Hallowe'en.

By nightfall there are only a few scattered windrows left in the farthest corners of the last field. Now comes the time when Father can breathe the annual sigh of relief that signifies that the harvest is judged completed. By noon the next day the job is finished and the crew and rig have pulled on to the next place. The only evidence of the bustling activity of the preceding hours is the overflowing granary and a huge mound of straw filling one end of the stack yard.

Modern combines and equipment have taken much of the community spirit from the threshing season. However, the same excitement will be there as long as there are farms with crops to harvest.