



LIFE on the farm

By DIETER KRIEG

Silo filling - hectic but fun

WOODBINE — It won't be long now before the hum and roar of tractors, choppers and forage blowers fills the air again.

Bringing in the corn has always been one of my favorite jobs and even now — away from the farm — I look forward to days when I can help with the work.

I remember the whirling knives, choked goosenecks, squealing belts and roaring engines when we filled silos at home. There were some frustrations from time to time, but overall, the only thing I didn't like about it was that it meant winter wasn't too far away. I recall those good old days vividly.

September mornings aren't by any means cold in this southern York County village, but the mugginess of July and August is absent now during the early part of the day. We won't have a good frost until late October, or even early November.

The steady humming of forage harvesters and blowers can be heard from several directions before the fog has lifted, and occasionally even before the sun appears over the hill at the eastern boundary of our farm. I recognize some of the choppers to be the old fly-wheel type, and some to be the newer ones with cylindrical cutterheads, by the distinctive noise each makes.

The distant songs of the choppers makes me want to get started too, but our corn isn't ready yet. Maybe in a week or so. Besides, the milking machines haven't been washed yet and the heifers need some grain.

After breakfast I hop aboard "Big John," our biggest tractor, and drive over to the old barn to get the chopper and forage wagons. The wagons look pretty good, we had used them throughout the summer to haul some hay or straw, but that poor chopper will need a real thorough cleaning.

It isn't long before I have the chopper running like a Swiss watch — cleaned, oiled, greased and ready to swallow all the corn stalks I'll later force into it.

Next job is to attach the blower pipe to the receiving end of the stationary gooseneck inside the silo. I remember the first time I had to do that, 55 feet up in the air — I was sweating without doing a thing. Now there was nothing to it.

Marvin Sliver, our hired man, pushed the clutch in gently on his "620" and the blower pipe made a slow ascent to the top, where I was waiting to clamp it to the gooseneck.

With the blower in place and stabilized to insure smooth performance, all we have to do now is

mount the distributor and wait for the corn to get ready.

Crawling up the chute of the silo after thousands of spiders and dozens of pigeons had done their work is no joy. It's amazing how fast they can mess things up when silage is not being thrown down the chute daily. Installing the distributor was not exactly fun either. It meant having to haul up a heavy, and rather large contraption which had to be completely assembled below. It rested on the silo wall and stretched out towards the center, just below the gooseneck.

Several days later we're all set to go. The sharp knives of the chopper are already whirling as I approach the corn field with my 54-foot long "train" of tractor, chopper, and wagon. "Big John" has his work cut out for him now, but he won't disappoint me.

Corn stalks are being chopped up by the thousands. It amazes me. The power. The speed. I know what kind of job it is to cut corn by hand when we open up a field or cut along fence rows and woods — and I appreciate just riding along, watching the wagon fill up with chopped corn. The sounds of the operation are music to my ears. Bits of cobs hit the spout like a thousand drummers tapping feverishly; there's a low, steady grumble; and the rapid pounding of two gallon-jug-sized cylinders. The smell of chopped corn is fresh and sweet.

Marvin hauls each load to the silo and is kept busy emptying the wagons before the next one is loaded. Our utility tractor has its throttle wide open and throws silage to the top of the silo with power to spare. Once in a while a mass of silage tumbles over the beaters and is whisked into the blower. That can make you miss a heartbeat as you anticipate the pipe being clogged, but usually the blower just slows down for a moment, the tractor engine strains, and then speeds up again, howling as it did before.

With the exception of tightening a chain or two and replacing a belt that came off, it's a smooth operation. The weather is good too. I enjoy the warm sunshine as row after row of corn is devoured by the harvester.

Milking time is one of the few times the equipment gets a rest. The rig coasts to its resting place behind the house. "Big John's" two cylinders are now just idling at a pace not much quicker than a man's heartbeat. There's a slight jolt as the full load of silage exerts its force when the tractor is stopped.

After milking I normally eat supper, but during silo filling time it is often replaced by a quick snack

taken on the run. On some evenings Marvin and I would work until 10 p.m. — making use of our time now, knowing that sooner or later something would happen which causes us to lose half a day or more.

Besides regular maintenance of all equipment, including the distributor inside the silo, time is also used up by such things as flat tires, knife sharpening, the replacement of a bearing, and filling in a gully on the hill. There's a lot of equipment undergoing tremendous stress right now and a lot can happen.

In past years we've had the misfortune of a twisted or even broken tongue on the chopper; and a knife that worked itself loose and . . . The latter incident wasn't as bad as I expected when I heard it happen. The machine could have been ruined, but it took only two new parts and a patch in the curve of the spout.

It takes about three weeks to fill the silos. Fields were planted to allow for plenty of time for this job. By the time a silo was full, it really was full — it wouldn't settle more than a few feet. With no crops other than corn to be concerned with, we didn't have to be as rushed with the job as many other dairymen.

The day the silos were full found me with mixed emotions. The work had been hectic and tiring enough to be glad it was over. But it had also been fun.

Sitting by the silo's shiny metal roof, I look out across the fields — most of which are bare now. They looked better when they were green. It is a sign that the summer is almost over, although you'd never know it sitting on top of the silo where the heat from fermented silage engulfed you and swarms of insects, including wasps, were attracted by the scent.

About 37 acres of corn will be left to pick. We'll soon be starting that too, I say to myself as I get back to levelling the silage. As usual, we didn't stop filling until there was a "mountain" of silage in the silo which was a good six feet higher than the staves of each of our two 18 x 55's. The distributor had been taken out long ago. By the time I have it all leveled off, the crown of the pile is only about two feet above the silo wall.

I'm glad the job is done, but I'm also looking forward to it again next year. The chopper and blower are thoroughly lubricated and put to rest for the next 11 months. It seems like a long time, but between now and then there's much to do which will make time fly. And that includes listening to Nittany Lion football games.