

Too much machinery may strangle profits

By JERRY WEBB
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NEWARK, Del. - Whether a farmer can hire custom work cheaper than he can tool up and do it himself is questionable. Most farmers

say they can't stand the inconvenience of waiting for a custom operator even if owning does cost more.

As a result, we have a few million farms in this country - each with a complete line of

machinery. What a great economic waste.

In fact, this could well be what is driving farmers off the land - the high cost of operating a fully equipped factory with so much idle machinery.

The combine has come to be the classic in any discussion of custom vs. owning. And the question that is asked - can a typical farmer afford to own one? The fixed cost to a farmer who uses it a couple of hundred hours a year could easily be \$15 per hour of use. Operating costs could add at least \$3 more.

It's obvious that from a purely economic point of view most farmers just can't afford the cost of owning these machines. They could well be the millstones that make farming unprofitable - the status symbols that destroy the business.

Going back 30 years to a time when there were very few combines and most small grain went through a threshing machine, it was a different situation. Very few farmers owned threshers. Custom work was the common practice with one machine handling hundreds of acres.

The McCafferty brothers did the threshing in my boyhood home community. They were good farmers who knew their machine and how to get every bushel of grain that was possible. No one else in the neighborhood had the skill and mechanical know-how to operate that machine at peak efficiency and it would have been foolish for a farmer to try on his own.

The McCafferty brothers would usually do their own fields first, then start down the road from one farm to

the next threshing oats, barley, wheat, and rye. The season ran from early July until September, with the last farm as much as 20 miles from where it all started.

Grain was cut with a binder and shocked, so leaving it in the field an extra month was no problem. A farmer usually had his own binder - or maybe he teamed up with a neighbor so he could get the grain cut when it was right. He also needed a fairly large crew for shocking if there were many acres.

Work swapping was more important when threshing machines were used. It took a lot of hands to keep the big machine running at full capacity. It wasn't unusual to see as many as a dozen farmers, plus their hired hands, working together at threshing time.

Those were the days when a man could start farming with a team of horses, an old tractor, plow, cultivator, disc, harrow, and a wagon. If he lacked a grain drill or corn planter, he swapped work with a neighbor. It wasn't unusual for a fellow to start farming on no more than a thousand bucks. That was enough for a down payment on some used equipment and seed and fertilizer money. But then times changed - new machines came along that farmers could operate and timing became more important. Fellows who had always relied on the McCafferty brothers suddenly felt the need to own and operate combines.

Times have changed and obviously there is no way to go back to the work swapping, custom threshing days of the 1940's. But there must be some way to cut down a \$100,000 machinery inventory on a 320 acre farm and still get the job done.

One idea that might work involves joint ownership - not the usual neighborhood partners however. How about a mid-Atlantic farmer teaming up with a Western farmer on the ownership of a combine? A Kansas wheat farmer needs his machine for a few weeks in mid-summer. A Delmarva corn and soybean farmer doesn't harvest an acre much before Labor Day. Plenty of time to truck a combine East and make sure it's working properly. It can be trucked West again next spring before it's time to start field work. Ownership and operating costs could be shared and the combine's usefulness could be doubled.

Here's an added benefit - hitch a small car behind the truckload and the Mrs. in the cab and take a vacation at the end of the delivery. Leave the truck with the combine and return by car, taking advantage of the tourist attractions along the way.

This system could work to the advantage of both farmers with no more inconvenience than hauling a combine 1500 miles once a year. It would take some consideration and some careful matching of farmers. But the economic gain could make the effort quite worthwhile.

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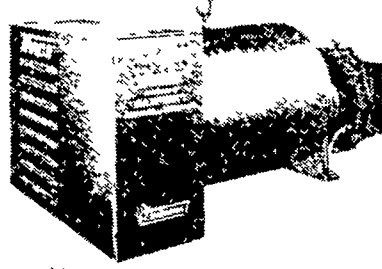
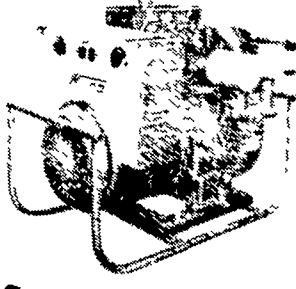
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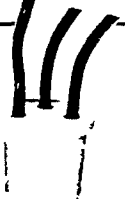
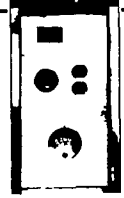
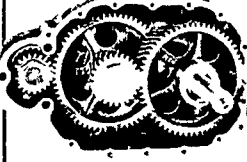
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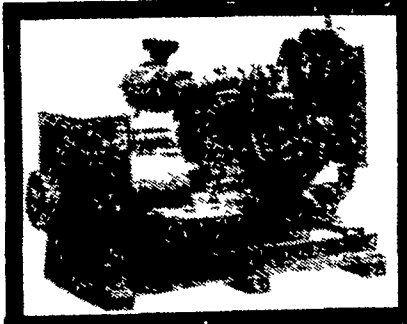
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