



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

We talk in glowing terms about the tremendous progress that has come to agriculture. There's been a revolution, we say.

Gone are the days of back-breaking work in the hot sun. Gone are the long hours and the physical demands. We talk about the machines that do everything, leaving the farmer to ride over his land in air-conditioned comfort while technology does the work.

And then I watched one of those modern farmers harvesting a hay crop. It was like seeing a dinosaur in his dairy barn along with his high-producing Holstein cows.

This guy, who owns the latest in farm equipment, bales his hay about the same way he did 30 years ago. He has air-conditioned tractors for plowing and cultivating,

a self-propelled, do-everything combine for harvesting corn and soybeans, and yet he bales hay the way his father did.

Now I'm not against baling hay—some of the very best farmers do it—but the way this guy was doing it was a shame.

There they were, two guys, a baler and a wagon. One guy sits on the tractor and steers it down the long windrows while the pick-up attachment gathers up the hay and feeds it into the self-tying baler. But that's where progress stops.

On the back end of that baler is an upward tilted chute that funnels the bales toward a flatbed wagon hitched to the baler. And on that wagon is the other guy—trying to pull 80 pound bales out of that shoot and stack them on the wagon.

That would be a hard job standing still and it's worse at three or four miles an hour as the rig goes bumping and bouncing over the field in its never ending quest for hay.

You know what it's like trying to stack bales four or five high without falling off the wagon or having the bales fall off.

There's another problem—as the load builds, the floor space, shrinks until finally the worker is trying to stand in a spot the size of a hay bale while heaving one of those heavy, bulky objects onto the stack which is now higher than his head.

The job is made even worse by the fact that hay is baled on bright sunny days in summer when the temperature is quite high.

This scene is not unusual. Many of the best equipped farmers bale hay this way—even though machines are available that eliminate most of the hand work. Either they cost too much or farmers don't like them or they don't make enough hay to need them—and there are other reasons. But the result is the same; their haymaking techniques are of a Stone Age variety.

If you look back in machinery history you'll find farmers baling hay the same way in the late 1930's. About the only improvement has been the self-tying baler

that came along after World War II.

As a small boy of 10, I worked one of those bale wagons along with my older brother. It was all two of us could do to manage those big bales in such a precarious position. It took both of us to get them from the chute and into some order on the wagon. And I knew even then that there had to be a better way.

There was! A few years

later manufacturers developed bale throwers and wagons that scooped the bale off the ground and placed them in stacks. Then came the large round and large square bales and their associated systems. Also, there are now hay handling techniques that don't involve bales at all.

And yet out of habit or economics, or whatever, farmers cling to the old ways. The hot, sweaty, dirty

ways that have made so many farm boys swear they were going to leave the farm and never go back.

The same ways that remind some one-time farm boys why today they only write about hay baling.

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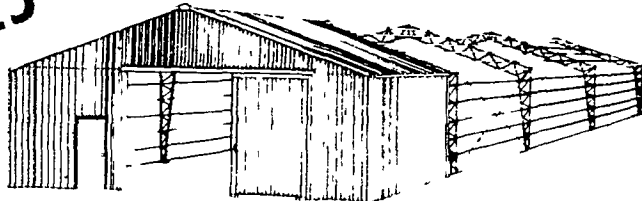
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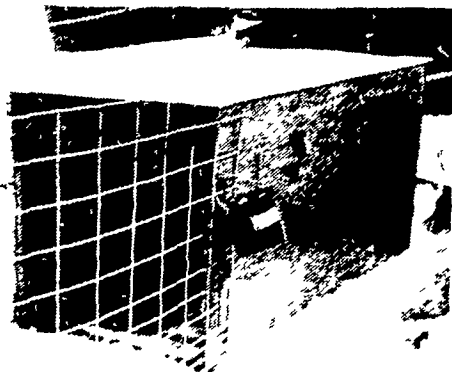


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