

# Farm Talk

by  
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### Good Ideas Don't Die

Some farming ideas are so good they just don't die. Even though farmers may not readily accept them, they keep hanging around until the time is right. Many of the important developments of agriculture were discovered or invented and then introduced and reintroduced many times before they gained favor.

It's hard to believe that horse-drawn implements, including the reaper, the gang plow, and the grain drill had been developed for several decades before farmers, forced by the labor shortages of the Civil War, accepted them. That

seems strange until you consider that in the early 1800's most farm families had an abundance of hand labor and very little money, and so buying a reaper to replace family labor served no real purpose. It would have been a costly investment in an unproven and unnecessary convenience. In fact, in those circumstances, a farmer who bought one might be considered downright lazy.

The same could be said for the acceptance of tractors. It took World War I to push farmers into wide acceptance of farm tractors and their related equipment.

Even today, if you look at

agriculture worldwide you can find millions of farmers who still don't rely on modern machinery to do their farm work. Oxen and wooden plows are the state of the art in much of the world, and the adoption of the horse collar which revolutionized agriculture in Europe and paved the way for an agricultural revolution has passed them by even yet.

### No-Till Revolution

And that brings me to a revolution that is sweeping agriculture, a system called no-till that is considered new and different and an important breakthrough in agricultural production. Current literature touts no-till as a system for conserving energy, building soil fertility, and increasing profits. It allows crops to be planted with minimal soil disturbance, thus reducing erosion potential and allowing otherwise unsuitable ground to be farmed.

The pros and cons of no-till farming have been debated hot and heavy over the past decade and a number of today's scientists have been credited with making major contributions to this tillage system. Some have ever been honored as having created the system.

If you believe no-till farming was invented a decade or so ago, then

perhaps some of the current researchers can be given much credit. But if you look back a little further, you find that no-till farming is not all that new. In fact, a major farm equipment manufacturer produced the forerunner of today's no-till planter to fit a Farmall M Tractor. The last one of those ran off the assembly lines back in the fifties.

A product promotion piece was given to me some time back by Merle Teel, a plant scientist in the College of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Delaware. It touted the virtues of International Harvester's McCormick M-21 till planter, a piece of equipment that was marketed more than three decades ago to do the same thing we're talking about right now — no-till farming.

### Old-Time Literature

Quoting from the literature, the M-21 was designed to "produce cultivated row crops under soil improving rather than soil depleting conditions. This is accomplished by combining two beneficial practices. Number one: maintain a mulch on top of the soil to absorb and retain rainfall, retard erosion and wind and water, and make maximum use of crop residues to build up soil fertility. Number two: make more efficient use of chemical fertilizers to in-

crease yields, as a result of which a greater volume of organic matter becomes available to improve soil structure and fertility."

The literature went on to extol the virtues of mulch planting in controlling erosion and reducing water runoff. It said, "Mulch plantings on the contour and across slopes can virtually eliminate the costly soil erosion that so often results from clean tilled row crop production under such conditions." The McCormick till planter mounted directly on a Farmall M, Super M or Super MD tractors. It included three components, some cultivator-like implements that prepared a seed bed, fertilizer units that applied both deep and starter fertilizer applications and a two-row drill planter. The components attached both in front of and behind the drive wheels and were said to work well in any soil which could be tilled with a moldboard plow. It could be used to mulch and plant directly in corn, soybean or small grain stubble, cover crops or sods of clover, alfalfa, lespedeza, and other grass crops.

The McCormick literature goes on at great length to explain the till planter and how it worked. I have no idea how many of them were ever sold. I never saw one nor have

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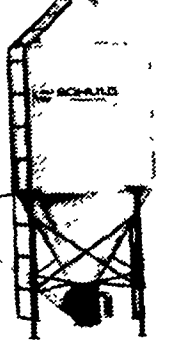
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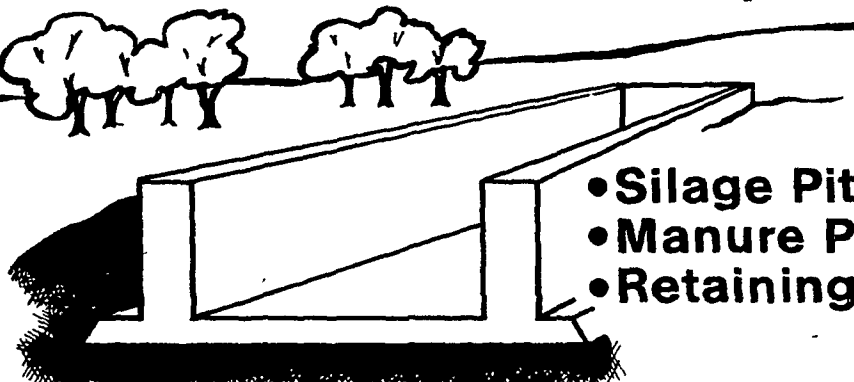
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