

Farm Talk

by
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If you ask the typical farmer why he owns so much machinery, he'll talk about the need for timeliness and the size of his operation and how efficient he has become because of his big machines. But when it gets right down to it, I think many farmers have lots of machinery because they like machinery. In fact, that might be the whole reason why they farm, and if they weren't farmers maybe they'd be road builders or they'd run trucking companies. They simply like machinery and they always have. What's wrong with that? When they were little boys they preferred toy trucks and toy tractors to dolls and baseballs. And as they grew older they found themselves riding on farm tractors pretending they were farming rather than practicing the piano or flying kites.

And so now that they are grown up and when they've had a good crop year, instead of buying tax-sheltered securities they purchase new combines. No matter that the old ones are only four years old, they can justify new ones for business purposes. They can save some tax dollars, and besides that they like new combines.

Farmers haven't always been fascinated with machines. If you go back far enough in history you get to the time when the only farm implements were a few hand tools and crooked sticks that were pulled by oxen. The first settlers in this country had very little of what could be called machinery. The tilled their small farms, mostly

with hand labor, and they tended their livestock and otherwise maintained themselves on the land.

The settlers who went west in the 1700s and early 1800s took very little in the way of farm implements with them. Records show that as late as the 1820s it took 50 to 60 man hours of labor to produce an acre of wheat. During that period farmers were using walking plows. They smoothed their ground with brush tied together to form a harrow. Seeding was done by hand, harvesting with a sickle. The only thresher was a hand flail.

It took the Civil War and the accompanying manpower shortage and improved agricultural prices to cause an agricultural revolution. Farmers very quickly grabbed on to the many inventions that were available to them. That's when the horsepower era really got under way and farmers started buying grain drills, binders, hay balers, cultivators, even threshing machines. Productivity took an enormous leap. By the turn of the century only eight to ten man hours of labor were needed to produce an acre of wheat. And a farmer of that period was using a gang plow, a seeder, a harrow, a binder, a thresher, a wagon — all horse drawn.

Then all sorts of motor driven devices started popping up — steam powered traction engines, gasoline powered tractors, lightweight farm tractors. But again it took a war, in this case World War I, to get farmers to

switch over to the new methods of farming. Since then most farmers have been hooked by farm machinery and all the joys and benefits it can bring.

Not all farmers approached mechanized agriculture with the same enthusiasm. I remember the contrast between two of our Missouri Ozarks neighbors — the McCafferty brothers across the road and Curt Williams, who lived a couple of miles down the road. Curt liked horses and mules and cared very little for machinery. You could tell by looking at his place. He had plenty of livestock and not much machinery. What he had was old and worn and it sat out in the barn lot rusting. Every spring he had to work for days just to get his plows to scour, his disks to turn, and his grain drill to function.

That was right before World War II when most farmers in that area were switching to tractors. Then there were the McCafferty brothers — Lester and Okel. They loved machinery. They knew how to take care of it and they knew

how to use it and they farmed the biggest spread anywhere around — about 300 acres at a time when most other farmers had no more than 120. They had the first combine in the neighborhood, the first pick-up hay baler, the biggest tractor, and they were always modifying and improving the machines they bought.

Needless to say, nothing sat outside to face the harsh winter weather. They had sheds and barns for everything, and they spent their wintertime in a farm shop — the only one I had ever seen at that point with all of the tools and the equipment that you would expect in any automobile garage. That's where they spent many hours improving on the best of John Deere, McCormick Deering, Massey Harris, and all the rest.

There must still be some farmers who don't really like machinery and who see it as a necessary evil. They're the dairymen, the hog producers, the beefman of this country. Most crop

farmers, on the other hand, tend to be machinery oriented. They like the feel of the new tractor, the look of a new combine, and the confidence of knowing that when they go to the field they have the equipment to get the job done.

While the American farmer's fascination with machinery has probably cost him in dollars and cents, it has also helped make him the most efficient agricultural producer in the world. So efficient, in fact, that his numbers have dwindled dramatically while his output has continued to increase. The latest figures show one American farmer feeding 75 people — 20 of them in foreign countries. And while a Russian farmer produces 33,000 pounds of raw food products annually, an American farmer produces 375,000 pounds. That's an important difference — one that must be attributed in part to the American farmer's fascination with machinery.

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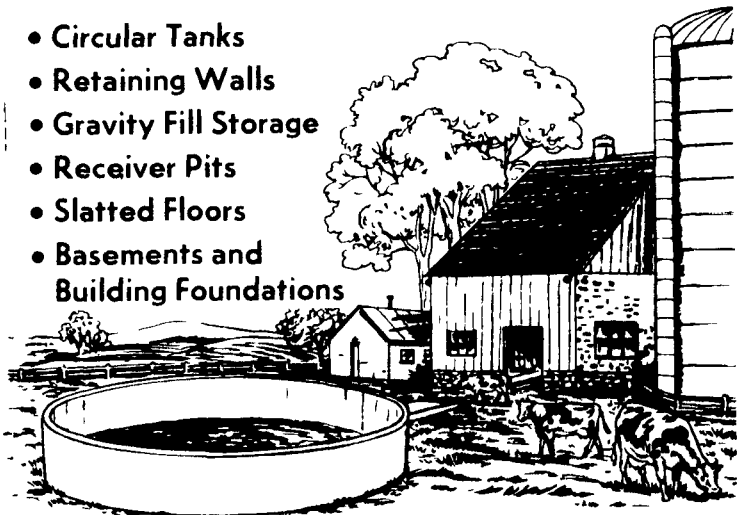
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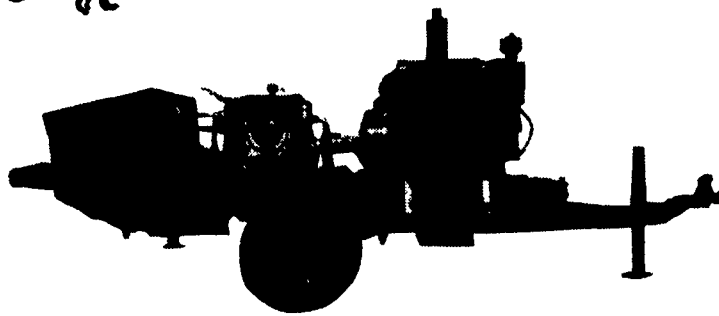
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