



Farm Talk

by
Jerry Webb

Machinery costs: then and now

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. This has to be a great economic waste.

In fact, this could be what is driving farmers off the land—the high cost of owning all that equipment that really isn't that busy.

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 \$20 or \$30 per hour of use. Operating costs could add at least \$5 more.

It's obvious in this cost analysis that many farmers just can't stand the cost of owning their own machines.

Going back more than 40 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.

I remember the McCafferty brothers, who did the threshing in our 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.

My first real job, beyond carrying water jugs, was driving a team of Percheron horses pulling a bundle wagon. This rig belonged to a neighbor who could see the wisdom of getting an eight-year-old kid to do for pennies what he would otherwise have to pay a man to do.

We'd work five or six farms before it was his turn and maybe a

half-dozen more after his grain was in the bind. There was hardly ever any exchange of money between the farmers. If a man wound up owing at the end of the threshing season, he made it up picking corn.

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 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.

That was during World War II. By the time the war was over threshing machines were being rapidly replaced by combines. Fellows who had always relied on the McCafferty brothers suddenly felt the need to own and operate combines. I suspect they paid dearly for the privilege.

Times have changed and obviously there is no way to go back to the work swapping, custom threshing days of the early 1940s. But there must be some way to cut down a \$200,000 machinery inventory on a 320 acre Delmarva farm and still get the job done.

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