



# Farm Talk

by  
**Jerry Webb**

## Driving tractor at 9

"Hey boy, can you drive a tractor?"

"Nope," came the nine-year-old's reply, "but I can handle a team of horses."

"Don't need a horse man," the farmer replied. "We're looking for a boy who can steer that old tractor there so Billy can get down here and do a man's work buckin' these bales."

"I guess I could try if you don't mind me runnin' over one now and again."

"Sure boy, you just climb right up there and steer straight down the row. No need to stop. We'll be able to keep up. Just don't get excited or mess with any of them levers."

It was a hot day in July and a crew of men and one small boy

were loading hay bales left by a pick-up baler. The year was 1942. There was a war on and farmers were lucky to get enough help to make a crew. Those with lots of kids were fortunate because field hands were hard to get even though some could get draft deferments. It was patriotic back then to go to war and farm boys went even though they didn't have to.

So the farming was done by old men, small boys, women and a few drunks who couldn't pass a physical but could sober up now and then long enough to bale some hay and earn a few bucks.

Paul was one of those drunks. He worked the dusty side of an old Case baler like no one else could. He'd be right there tying those

wires with the dust so thick you could hardly see him. Paul's clothes would be soaking wet with sweat and his face a different color from field dust and chaff. But he never complained. In fact, he never said much of anything. He just chewed a great mouthful of Beech-Nut tobacco and tied bales as fast as that old machine could make them.

It was generally thought that Paul had an incurable disease and was slowly dying. But no one was sure. He was a big husky man who could do two men's work and had no idea of his own strength.

He was a day-hand for neighboring farmers who would call on him when they had work. During the threshing and hayin seasons he was always busy. What he did the rest of the time was not known. They said he visited relatives out of state when he wasn't at home in that old converted chicken house. Maybe he was a sort of one man migrant crew working the hay and wheat fields of Missouri in the summer and the vegetable fields of Florida in the winter.

He always did manual labor—never drove a tractor—didn't even own a car. He was the one who

pitched bundles—a chock a throw if you wanted—stacked straw from the thresher or tossed hundred pound hay bales over his head into a hay loft.

He always took the heavy end of a two-man job and small boys soon learned that Paul could be a big help during a hot, hard day.

Being a nine-year-old farm boy wasn't just steering old tractors. There was other work like dragging bales, sacking grain and digging post holes—all jobs a little too big for a boy. But Paul was there to help out, demonstrate the best way to hold a pitchfork or hay hook and how to lift a hay bale the easy way. And if there were 12 bundles in a shock, he would more than likely pitch seven of them.

Paul was the "Big John" of agriculture. He could do back-breaking work all day, take his \$5 pay and spend it that night on booze, and be right back in the field at 7 a.m. the next day. Maybe he'd shake a little and sweat more than the rest, but he never quit and he never complained.

Paul went away one fall and

never came back. Maybe he died in Florida or wherever it was he went. Small boys weren't always told the truth in those days. It was probably just as well that he didn't come back. By the time the war was over, farmers had switched from threshers to combines and bales were tied by machine.

But that was several years later. Right then the war was blazing and farm help was scarce. So boys, old men and drunks could find plenty of work.

"Hey boy, you think you could learn to plow corn with a tractor? Pay's pretty good—say 15 cents an hour."

"Sure, I can learn if there's that much money in it."

"Stop by my place Monday morning early and we'll get you started. I've got an almost new Allis Chalmers just right for a boy your size. You have to crank it to start, but that's only once or twice a day and the rest is easy."

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