



Farm Talk

By
Jerry Webb

Picking Corn: Then and Now

It's a common failing to reminisce about the good old days of agriculture and think only of bright spring mornings when the plowing and planting was done, and hot summer days when the grain was harvested and they hay was baled. But there was one job - picking corn - that was usually done around our neighborhood in November and December when it was cold or wet, or both, and it could also be muddy - at least until the ground froze.

So there I was, still a growing

boy up before daylight to feed and harness two black horses and hook them to the wagon. These tasks were usually completed before the paid corn pickers arrived at 7 a.m. Then off to the field for a long cold day of hand picking.

The sun never shone and it was never warm like it is during the fall in this part of the country - or at least I never remember it that way. It was just one long, cold corn row, husking the ears, snapping them from the stalk, throwing them in the general direction of the

wagon.

With two men and a boy working and a team of horses that would keep the wagon moving along beside the workers, we could make one load before lunch. If the yield was particularly good we could get a load and a half, and on a day three loads by dark.

Of course, it got dark early in November and December - so the afternoons were pretty short and often we were still finishing a load when the sun went down. That meant unloading and taking care of the horses in the dark. Back then, we were lucky to have electricity in the house so you know there was no light in the barn. That meant tending to the needs of two large horses in almost total darkness - not an easy task.

It's funny how certain things stick in your mind over that many years. When I think about picking corn by hand and the first thing I remember is being cold. Despite all efforts otherwise, my feet were always cold. I also remember the men I worked with - two rough talking farmhands who enjoyed wine, women and off-color humor in that order. When they were without them they amused themselves by harassing the kid

who was trying to hold up his end of a man's job. I got to pick down the rows, hustle the ears that missed the wagon, use the worst shucking peg and suffer all sorts of verbal abuse.

I remember picking corn in the snow, which happened fairly often. An early December snow would come with corn still in the field and there was no choice but to bundle up and continue working.

It was a cold, lonely job, made bearable only by the thought that if we hurried we'd be done before Christmas.

What a change those big machines made. At first, there was the one row picker, towed behind a Farmall tractor with a wagon behind that. Then came the mounted pickers that bolted right around the tractor. They were replaced by self-propelled pickers and finally the combines that pick and shell in one operation.

What a difference. Today a farmer spends about four times as much for his combine as our family received for the farm when

it was sold in the late 1940's. Today's farmer sits in a glassed-in cab that is soundproof and heated, or cooled, depending on the weather. There's also a built-in radio, power steering and power brakes, a tilting telescoping steering wheel and levers that control every function, including unloading without stepping out into the weather.

This machine can do in a week what took three farmhands two months to do. The corn picker changed agriculture just as the tractor did before it. Now it seems to be a matter of how much land a farmer can gain control of that limits his operations. With rare exceptions, the machines are there to do the work.

I can look back 40 years and honestly say that I don't miss anything about picking corn by hand. If we lost anything when the machines came along I can't think what it was, with the possible exception of gloves with two thumbs. That still sounds like a pretty neat idea.

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