Our First Year on a Nebraska Farm

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Article Summary: Welker grew up in the 1890s, when farmers used horses and mules. Power machinery has brought many improvements, yet it has also resulted in the loss of family solidarity and neighborly cooperation.

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Machinery Discussed: sod breaking plow, corn planter, walking cultivator, disk, harrow, grain binder, separator

Farm Tasks Discussed: "laying it by" (piling extra soil around the roots of the corn), threshing, corn husking

OUR FIRST YEAR ON A NEBRASKA FARM

A REMINISCENCE

BY H. CLARE WELKER

OPERATING a farm in eastern Nebraska in the 1890's was a comparatively simple but exceedingly burdensome undertaking. Farm machinery was extremely primitive, and motive power was limited very largely to the muscles of horses, mules, and men. Power machinery, such as we are familiar with today, was then unheard of. The nearest approach at that time to the complicated and efficient machinery which our farmers use today was the horse-drawn mower and binder and the steam-powered threshing machine. The steam engine, simple as we would consider it now, had not yet come into general use for threshing. Horse-power machines were still widely used. In fact, it was one of these which my father engaged to thresh his grain the first year we farmed in the state.

A farm of one hundred sixty acres was as much as any one man could manage, and it was a tract of this size that

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my father farmed in the year 1894 which was our first year in Nebraska. My folks had moved from Chicago to a farm three miles northwest of Carroll in March of that year. Shortly after our arrival we experienced a very severe blizzard, but after it was over spring came on with a rush.

The quarter-section which my father had rented was divided into two almost equal parts by a railroad which cut through it from east to west. The buildings, which consisted solely of a small house and a small barn, were located on the north side of this railroad. This portion of the farm had been planted to corn the preceding year, so my father decided to put it into small grain, wheat and oats chiefly, with smaller fields of millet for roughage, and rye for cow pasture. Our livestock consisted of one team of work horses which he had shipped west from Chicago in an "immigrant" car along with the household furniture and our other possessions. As one team was not enough for his farming operations, he bought two more horses. He also bought one or two cows, a brood sow, and some chickens. His machinery consisted of a farm wagon which he had shipped from Chicago, a disk, a harrow, and a walking cultivator which he bought at nearby farm sales.

His first concern was to get his small grain planted. To prepare the seed bed he disked the old corn fields three ways. This leveled and chopped the old stocks and loosened the soil. He borrowed a seeder to plant the larger fields, but the smaller patches were planted by hand. This was a slow and rather tedious job, but he had learned the art of broadcasting seed as a boy on a Pennsylvania farm, and he was able to do a very satisfactory job. After the seed was in, he disked the fields again and harrowed them with a straight tooth harrow.

The disk was equipped with a seat so that he could ride for that operation, but when he used the harrow he had to follow it on foot over the loose ground and in a cloud of dust. Some men rode a pony behind the harrow and drove the horses from the saddle, but he had no extra horse for that purpose so he had to walk.

As soon as the small grain was planted, he began to prepare the rest of the farm for corn. This was a field roughly half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. The whole field had to be plowed, and his only available equipment was a single bottom "walking" plow. This was drawn by four horses hitched abreast. Two of these walked on the unplowed ground, one in the furrow last made, and one on the loose plowing. The one on the freshly plowed ground had hard walking, and Father used to stop at regular intervals and change his teams around. The plow had to be operated entirely by hand. This required him to drive his horses with the lines looped over his shoulder so as to leave his hands free to guide the plow. The whole operation required many days' work from sunrise to sunset. In order to make the most of his time, he would take feed and water for the horses out to the field in the wagon, and my brother and I who were still small boys would carry a warm meal out to him at noon. At regular intervals he would stop his plowing and harrow the ground already turned so as to keep the clods from becoming too hard for the planting.

Father hadn't bought a corn planter, but by the time he had his ground prepared for planting he was able to borrow one from a brother-in-law who lived near by and who had already gotten his crop in. He planted his corn in check rows which made it possible for him to cultivate both ways across the field. So-called "riding" cultivators were just coming into use, but these cost considerably more than the walking type, so he had purchased one of the latter. Then, too, there was considerable difference of opinion among farmers as to which type did the best work. The walking cultivator was a swivel-jointed affair which would tangle up on the least provocation, but the man who knew how to handle one could get excellent results.

The rows of this particular field were a half mile long, and it was hard, slow work trampling in the soft ground all day, swinging the cultivator beams in and out between the hills both to loosen the ground and to kill the weeds. Most farmers cultivated their corn three times, alternating lengthwise and crosswise of the field. The third cultivating

was generally used to pile extra soil around the roots of the corn. This was called "laying it by." Most farmers tried to have corn cultivating finished by the Fourth of July, as the small grain was usually ready to harvest shortly after that date.

At that time there were yet many pieces of land in that part of the state where the native sod had never been broken by plow. This sod was formed by the native buffalo grass which had a very dense root mass that made it very difficult to break out, and there were special outfits that went through the country doing that type of work exclusively. The owners of such lands would often contract with such outfits to break out their land, usually agreeing to give them the first season's crop in exchange for this labor. Flax was especially well suited to the freshly turned sod, so it was quite regularly planted as the initial crop. Strangely enough, watermelons, also, produced in abundance on the newly broken ground; so, often a row or two of these would be planted as the sod was turned.

The breaking outfits usually consisted of several men and a large number of horses and mules, as it took a lot of horsepower to turn the sod with a breaking plow. The latter was somewhat similar to an ordinary plow, but instead of the curved moldboard, it had a series of long, curved rods which served to turn the sod over as it was plowed. It also had a cutting disk or wheel that cut the tough sod along the inside edge of the strip to be turned. My boyhood recollections of these outfits are not very pleasant ones, chiefly for the reason that they had such sorry looking livestock. Their horses and mules were old and crippled and half-starved in appearance. Sore shoulders and necks were the rule rather than the exception. This was probably due to the fact that the collars were poorly fitted, and the harness generally was old and much patched. Each gang would have a covered wagon or tent for sleeping purposes as well as a chuck wagon, as they regularly did their own cooking. They also had wagons with hay racks and grain boxes for feeding their stock, though all too frequently they merely hobbled their animals and turned them out on the unbroken

prairie to shift for themselves. For water they had to depend on some neighboring farmer's well or on a stream if one were near enough at hand.

While Father was laying by the last of the corn that summer, near disaster struck us. It came in the form of several days of scorching winds which blew from the south, withering and blighting everything in their path. The small grain was far enough along so that it wasn't a complete failure though the yield was greatly reduced. But the corn which was just tasseling out was almost a total loss. What ears finally set on were small, and there were not too many of them, so that instead of having some surplus to sell when harvest time came, he had barely enough for winter feed for the livestock.

As soon as the hot winds were over, the harvest of the small grain was started. For this operation Father exchanged work with a neighbor who owned a grain binder. One man ran the binder while the other shocked the grain. Occasionally the women would help with the shocking, as the bundles were light due to the shrinkage caused by the hot winds, and one man found it hard to keep up with the binder if all went well.

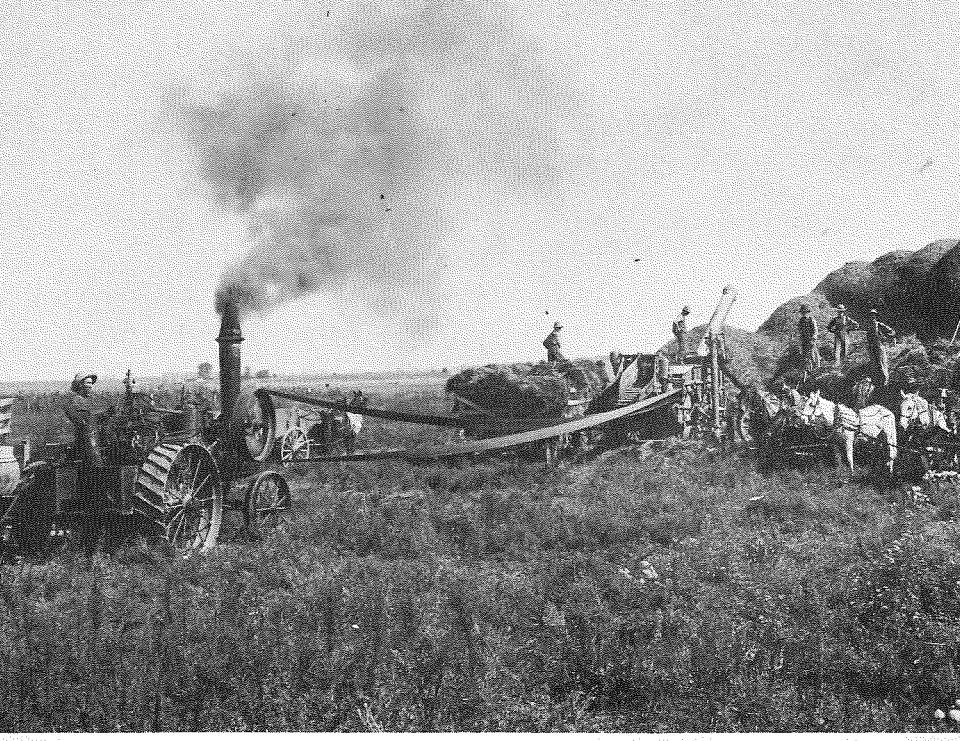
As soon as convenient after the grain was cut and shocked, the work of threshing began. Steam power outfits were then in use, but the price of coal for the steam engine was high in comparison with the price of grain to feed horses, so Father decided to use a horse-power machine instead. The power unit for this consisted of a revolving platform with four long sweeps extending out like the spokes of a wheel. This platform was mounted on wheels so that it could be moved about readily. A series of gears transmitted the power from the revolving platform to a heavy rod which extended to the separator and provided the power for operating that unit of the machine. A team of horses was hitched to each of the sweeps making eight horses in all. When threshing was in progress a man would sit on the platform of this unit and drive the teams. All day long the four teams would tramp around in a circle providing the

power to run the separator. When the teams were spirited and well matched they made a fine appearance.

The separating unit of the machine was a comparatively simple device. It was a large box-like affair housing a series of cylinders which shredded the straw and loosened the kernels of grain, as each cylinder was equipped with several rows of projecting "teeth" which tore the stocks of grain to pieces. There was also a series of sieves over which the torn straw and grain passed.. These sieves were constantly agitated, causing the grain to drop through and passing the straw on to the rear of the machine where it was transferred up a long chute by an endless strap conveyor and poured out on the straw pile.

Within the separator, power-operated fans forced strong currents of air through the grain as it dropped from the sieves, freeing it from all chaff and dust. On the earlier machines the threshed grain was delivered from the side of the machine where it was either sacked or caught in baskets and loaded loose into wagons to be hauled to storage. Later, elevators were devised which would lift the grain automatically and pour it directly into a wagon. I can't remember that such machines were yet in use the first year we farmed in Nebraska.

Managing the machine, hauling the bundles in from the field, moving the threshed grain to storage and disposing of the straw took quite a large crew of men and boys, usually a dozen or more. All these had to be provided with dinner and supper by the farmer for whom the threshing was done, and this meant long, hard days for the farmer's wife and daughters. Usually the farm women would help one another with the cooking while the older girls set the tables and did the serving. Working hard for long hours gave the men tremendous appetites, and it was surprising how much food a threshing crew could consume. Great platters of chicken, beef or pork, large bowls of gravy, heaping dishes of potatoes and other vegetables, small mountains of bread or hot biscuits and large pots of steaming coffee would disappear like magic. Then the whole would be topped off with



Threshing—Steam-Powered and Horse-Powered

Harvest Time

generous helpings of pie or dishes of stewed fruit and cake. After the meal there would be a short period of rest, and then the crew would go back to work or return to their homes for the night.

The last big farming operation for the year was the corn husking, all of which had to be done by hand, as there were no mechanical pickers in those days. A wagon with a deep box and a high "bang board" on the left hand side and a farmer with a husking peg constituted practically all the equipment needed to husk the crop. The husking peg was strapped to the right hand and was used to tear open the husks on each ear as it was broken from the stalk. This expedited the work of freeing each ear of its husks. Farmers became expert at the husking operation, and the ears would bang against the back of the wagon in a steady stream as the farmer's team pulled the wagon slowly through the field.

Due to the hot winds, our crop was very short the first year, but Father worked every row and salvaged every ear no matter how small, as the corn was badly needed for feed for our livestock.

We have witnessed tremendous changes in the more than sixty years which have passed since the first year we farmed in Nebraska. Most of these changes have been for the better. Yet it has not all been net gain. Our chief losses have been in the areas of family solidarity and neighborly co-operation. Let us hope we can yet find means of retrieving these losses.