

HAYING SEPARATED THE MEN FROM THE BOYS



Early 1900's photo of haying on the Gridley farm south of Oakley, KS.

Years ago and in some areas today, putting up hay meant bringing in a crop of alfalfa, brome, clover or even oats from the field and storing it in barns. During those days, putting up hay was a hot, tiresome and strenuous job. Conditions might have been improved if the crop could have been put up on cool days. No such luck! Because hay had to be worked in a completely dry state, hot afternoons were reserved for this task. Men “not seasoned” to physical labor seldom finished a haying day, because of the combination of extreme heat and hard labor.

Alfalfa was cut three or four times during a good summer, so that it required at least three sieges of haying, maybe four each year.

The process of putting up hay was a difficult, back-breaking job. It didn't take long to “separate the men from the boys” on hay days. In other words, haying separated hard workers from the slackers. Some were not hired twice because they wore out too fast. If a laborer could

not keep up with his fellow workers, embarrassment followed. Few wanted to appear to be “lacking.”

Young men, not afraid of hard work, kept busy haying most of the summer, depending on their work ethic and the number of acres planted.

Not much was said about muscle building in those days, or tanning booths, but hay workers had well-developed tanned torsos after a season or two of haying. Of course, some older workers wore shirts for protection against the roughness of the hay.

A day or two before the hay crew assembled, the crop was cut and raked into mounds or shocks. At this time, farmers with cut hay in fields wished for dry weather. If rain fell on the crop, it was turned. A hard rain possibly meant a lower grade of feed as some leaves were lost. Dry hay was picked up by men armed with pitchforks or by an implement which loaded it on hay racks.

Of course, too much rain on the crop cost the farmer, as moldy hay was not good for livestock, especially horses. Most moldy hay ended up in ditches.

Once the hayrack was loaded, it was positioned below a high haymow door. The man on the hayrack dropped a hay fork, used to lift the hay to the mow, into the loose hay on the rack. A team of horses attached to the rope pulled the hay up into the haymow. Usually, two men worked in the haymow. Mow men yelled, "Stop!" to the team driver when the hay reached a certain area in the mow. They kept the hay level in the loft, if possible.

Inexperienced and even experienced workers were not always prepared for the onslaught of black and yellow bumblebees making their homes in red clover fields. My Dad, at times, encountered earth nests while cutting hay with his horse-drawn mower. As the mower moved over the home of the bees, angry residents surged out in masses raging at the invasion. Those swarms began dive-bombing anything that moved, making their presence known in very unpleasant ways such as stinging repeatedly. Some horse teams stood and fought, humping their backs, kicking and swishing their tails frantically while others raced away clamping their teeth on bits, causing drivers to lose control.

After encountering one too many bumblebee nests, our neighbor, a very innovative person, solved the problem by asking his wife to sew some old sheer curtains to the edges of a large umbrella, which he mounted on his mower.

Seeing out of his umbrella box was at times difficult, but few irate bees penetrated his net abode. However, he created a multitude of problems with his team and neighboring cattle and horses. Once the hitched horses caught sight of the unwieldy contraption of curtains whipping with the breeze, they often reacted by snorting and kicking in displeasure. Then, too, cattle and horses in neighboring fields frequently bolted with tails held high in the air across pastures, seemingly running for their lives away from this unknown threat.

Haying during the '30s did not bring much income, because men worked for a dollar a day. Driving the horses to lift the hay to the mow brought a "thank you" if the driver was a son of the owner. Other drivers received 25 cents for the day's work.

Cold water was prepared for hay crews by wrapping a gunnysack tightly around a crockery gallon jug and securing the bag with binder twine. Then, the coolest pump water dampened the sack. The jug was then filled with the coldest pump water and sealed with a corn cob. The jug was placed under a shady tree, if possible. Hay crews could empty jugs of water almost as fast as water boys could fill them!

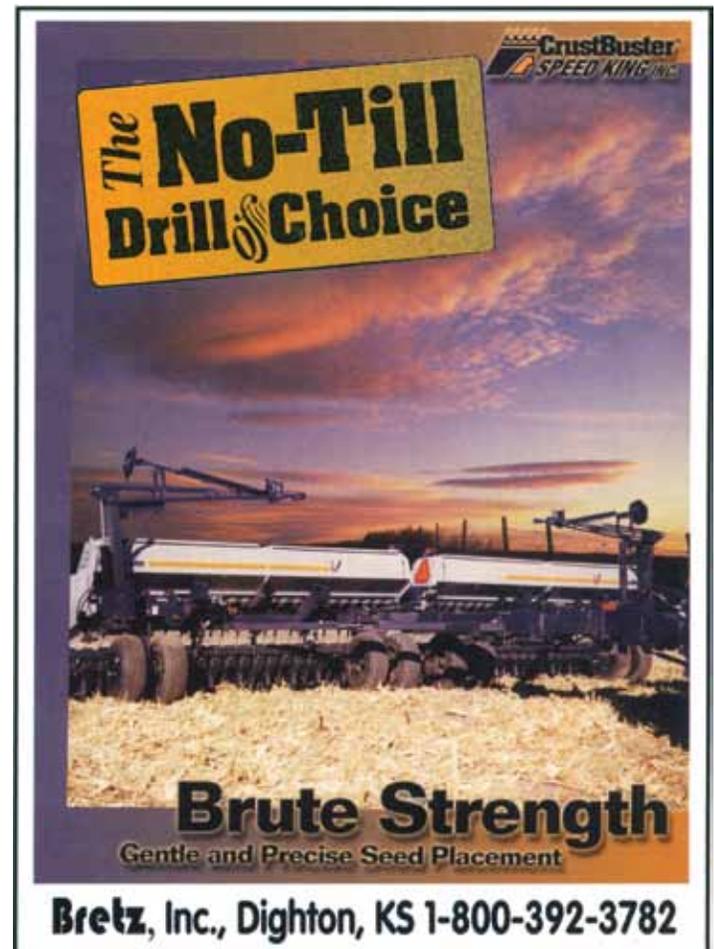
Men usually dressed for haying. They wore wide-brimmed hats, bib overalls and long-sleeved shirts. Most workers wore gloves to protect their hands. In those days, gloves were worn until holes appeared. Then the gloves were turned over, placing the holes on the tops of the fingers. In that way, each glove gave double duty.

Some men preferred to work in the haymow. If older,

they appreciated the rest periods while waiting for another load of hay. Each time one of dad's older workers "hayed," he dressed wearing long underwear under his overalls. No one could understand the layers of clothing, but as he sweat, the moisture soaked into his underwear, cooling his body. Of course, the layers also protected his body from being hurt while handling the sharp sticks of hay.

Injuries sometimes took place during haying time, but some connected to haying did not always take place at that time. A few men were injured when they fell from a load of hay or were hurt with prongs of a pitchfork. However, Dad was hurt in an entirely different way. He kept his hayfork hanging on the wall of his barn shop. One day, grimacing in pain, he limped to the house. After calling Mom, he removed his shoe and sock. Blood ran from a strange-appearing injury. The sharp tongs of the hayfork had speared his foot, gouging out a triangular piece of flesh. Seeing all that blood, mother ran for towels and the iodine. She poured the entire bottle over dad's foot. He never developed an infection, and the wound healed well.

Later years of haying have brought air-conditioned tractors and modern machinery for most farmers. But, to this day, haying represents hot days filled with strenuous labor. Of course, the need for winter feed, the satisfaction of a job well done, and the admonition, "Hard work never hurt anyone," have kept men in the hayfields. 



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