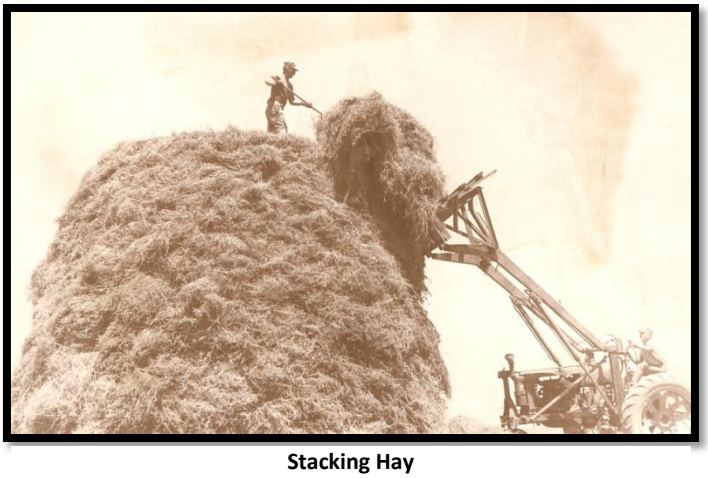
Farming
Then and Now

By Art Bermel



Stacking Hay

My earliest recollections of farming are physical … everything was accomplished by hard, physical work by man and/or beast. Corn, oats, and a small field of alfalfa comprised the crops. Corn was considered a good year when it made 35- 40 bushels per acre. Oats provided a cereal crop for livestock, straw for animal bedding and also served as a "nurse crop" for newly planted alfalfa.

Open-pollinated seed corn was gotten by picking out good looking ears of corn from the crib and tipping and butting them. Corn was planted by a 2-row Hayes corn planter drawn by two horses and usually checked so it could be cultivated both the same direction it was planted and then across to get all remaining weeds.

Arnie Bauer planting corn with a Model H Tractor

My Dad was very solicitous of his horses…a team pulled a single row cultivator and on a hot day, Dad would rest his horses at the end of the row and raise up their collars so air could cool their shoulders to prevent collar burn. He had a remuda of six horses of which it took five horses to pull the two bottom 12 inch gang plow, three horses immediately in front of the plow and a lead team in front of the three. Dad tried to keep at least one horse in reserve to relieve any that were sick and to rotate them.

Picking corn by hand was a long drawn out affair, an endurance test of nearly a month or more. A good picker could pick 100 bushels of corn per day.

On a typical quarter section of land, about 60 to 75 acres were planted to corn, oats maybe 30 acres and the balance being alfalfa and pasture. We usually had about 15 milk cows, about ten sows that farrowed twice a year, a laying flock of about 300 leghorns.

In the late 1930's and early 1940's, hybrid seed corn came on the market, brought on by the efforts of Henry Wallace and Roswell Garst. Hybrids were so much better than open pollinated corn even the most tight fisted farmers were buying their seed for planting.

Also, about this time, tractors began to replace horses more and more every year. Dad's first tractor was a cumbersome International 10-20, 10 drawbar horse power and 20 on the belt. Tractors were in very short supply, Dad had his name in for a new tractor, the local John

Fred Bierschenk Mowing Hay

Deere dealer, Bob Miller informed him that he was next on the list, when it came in; the tractor was a John Deere B. The John Deere B was a good tractor, but too small, it labored to pull a two bottom plow.

Then combines also came onto the scene. The first ones were 5-foot pull type jobbies, you had to windrow the oats first to pre-dry it, and equip the combine with a steel fingered pickup to pull the oats from the windrow into the threshing chamber. Now combines are getting bigger and bigger each year and much more sophisticated. Combines now have 12 rows and more in the corn field and 35 foot headers in the soybean field.

In the horse era a quarter section of land (160 acres) provided a good life for a hard working family. Now some farmers are farming 20, 30, 40 quarters and even more. Some have what they call the CBM rotation; corn-beans-Miami. In earlier days, farms sold for $125 per acre, now $4000 and more per acre.

No more cultivating, this is all done by herbicides. Seed corn used to cost $8 per bushel bag, now the cost is close to $300 for a bag containing 80,000 kernels, but the difference in technology is amazing. Genetically-modified seed corn is impervious to corn rootworm, European corn borer, and now drought tolerance is being bred into the seed.

Combining Bee for Scott Junck Fall 2010

Fertilizer was unheard of in the early 1940's. It came onto the scene after the war, a by-product of the munitions industry. Before fertilizer, manure was all that was available, and then in the early 1940's sweet clover was advanced to be plowed under as "green manure". Al Kuhl was a great proponent of sweet clover and stories are told of people who bought a quarter section of land and paid for it in one year with the sale of sweet clover seed.

In the 1940's cultivation was the only means of controlling weeds in row crops and even then in the summer you had to walk your corn and bean rows to hack out the cockleburs and sunflowers. Creeping Jinny was an invasive noxious weed. Now herbicides (at approximately $100 per acre), yield picture perfect fields. As fore mentioned, corn yields were good if they made 25-40 bushels per acre, now 200 plus bushels per acre are not exceptional.

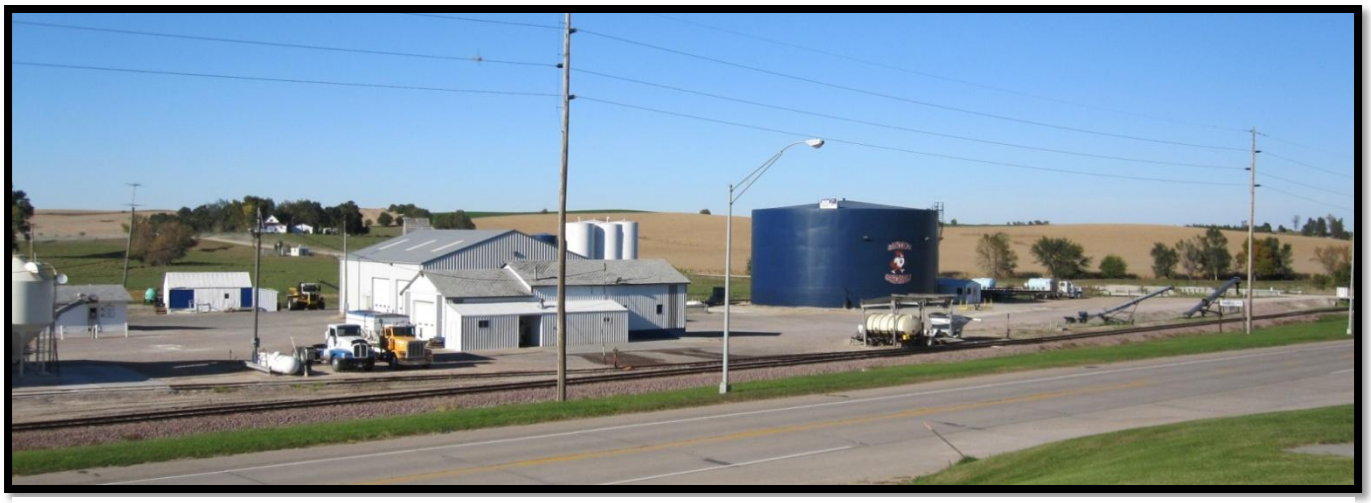
Livestock is not found on many farms now days, though some cow-calf operations are still around. Most cattle feeding is done in concentrated operations of 100 to 25,000 units. Tractors, now behemoths of 250 P.T.O. horsepower cost $275,000 and gargantuan combines run over $340,000, not counting the row units and the grain header.

What is the future for agriculture? Actually, pretty optimistic. Are land prices too high? Most land purchase are made by established farmers and recent land purchase have been well leveraged. Land yields a good profit for owners, both in growth and returns on investment. Demographics indicate the population numbers to be 50% higher than now by 2050 and land is a finite product. Corn and soybean geneticists, notably Dupont and Monsanto, say we haven't anywhere reached ultimate high yields.

Economists state there have been four states of note in the agricultural field: 1) The steel plow invented by John Deere; 2) the internal combustion engine (Tractors); 3) chemicals and fertilizers and 4) Ethanol.

Worrisome is the trend to socialistic political ideology and the record high national debt. Right now (April 2010), National Defense, Social Security and Medicare and interest on the National Debt take nearly all of National Income. Little is left for infrastructure and other social programs. Also, lurking potentially in the future is the specter of inflation. Worrisome, too, is the trend toward super farms and the difficulty for young, new farmers to enter this vocation.

2010 Bountiful Corn harvest



Randolph Central Valley Ag by Highway 20