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Tractor Trouble

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ing cattle. I drove Queen and Daisy (the work-horse team that Fritz had bought at our sale) to haul silage, hay, and corn fodder. In the short winter daylight I could just get the cattle fed in the morning before it was time to start feeding them their afternoon rations. How well I remember getting the flu during December's cold spell, but knowing that the cattle still had to be fed. Wrapped to the gills, I'd go out to feed the cattle and then go down into the base-

ment by the furnace and shiver for awhile.

Shocking oats meant long, hot days of stooping over the bundles and setting up the shocks. Then came threshing—in my mind, the most overrated event in the work year (perhaps because in our small threshing ring the hired men had to haul the bundles). Elmer Lake owned and operated the small Red River Special threshing machine, powered by a big, old McCormick-Deering tractor. He was a

Tractor Trouble

I GREW UP during the transition from workhorses to tractors.

In the 1930s we had a row-crop Farmall tractor and a big, clumsy John Deere. But we also still had several teams of horses, which we used for hauling feed and some field work.

Queen and Daisy made a particularly good team for a green kid to drive.

Then when I worked as a hired man myself, in the 1940s, I had my first experience operating tractors. It was a challenge starting the old John Deere "D," turning over its massive flywheel. Once I got it a'popping, I was loathe to shut it off for nearly any reason. We used it mainly for plowing, and once, without benefit of tractor lights, I plowed with it myself on a moonlit night. The furrows turned over so smoothly on those rolling hills, and so little steering was needed as the "D" lumbered along in the semi-darkness that it seemed I was just out for a ride.

The John Deere "A" was the best tractor of its day, and running it gave me the satisfaction of getting a lot of field work done. One spring day during

corn-planting season I was out in a far field with the "A." Mid-afternoon an approaching storm out of the west showed every indication of being a "gully washer" so I decided to harrow the just-planted field. I zoomed over on the tractor to a wide, grassy gulch and lined up on the harrow by setting my uphill brake hard. Suddenly I was flying through the air—as was the tractor. I knew I didn't want that tractor landing on me, and I lit upon the ground running. The tractor landed upside down like an up-ended green bug, roaring mightily.

The tractor was hauled away to town as I, a humbled hired man, looked on. My boss, Fritz Brueck, and my dad were relieved at my escape, and little was said about my stupidity. Of course, my buddy Bob Brock did refer to me not as G. W. Marshall but T. W. Marshall ("tractor wrecker").

There were lighter moments with tractors, too. For several spring days Curtis Iversen, Alvin Schultz, and I had been driving tractors hooked to manure spreaders. The layer of rich, leached manure in Fritz's feed

yards was stripped off, dumped into our spreaders with a hydraulic loader, hauled by tractor to the fields, and spread on our cropland. Curtis and Alvin each bragged repeatedly about the superior power of his tractor—Alvin on a small, new John Deere "B," and Curtis on an old Farmall on steel-lugged wheels.

Fritz had warned me about the seriousness of a tractor breakdown in wartime. Certainly, tractor pulls were forbidden. Nevertheless, as soon as the hauling was done and our boss had headed for town, the boys prepared for their tractor pull. I even found the log chain—so I was a facilitator, no less. The tractors were chained back-to-back in the barnyard near the gas pump. Yet in this most unscientific test, the slope and the drawbar heights could not be equalized. The result was that Curtis on the Farmall was inched backwards slightly downhill as he, by every physical contortion, struggled against defeat to Alvin. I laughed so hard that I lay helplessly gasping for breath across a horizontal gas barrel.

—Gordon Marshall

wise, fatherly, safety-minded boss for our generally green crew of bundle haulers.

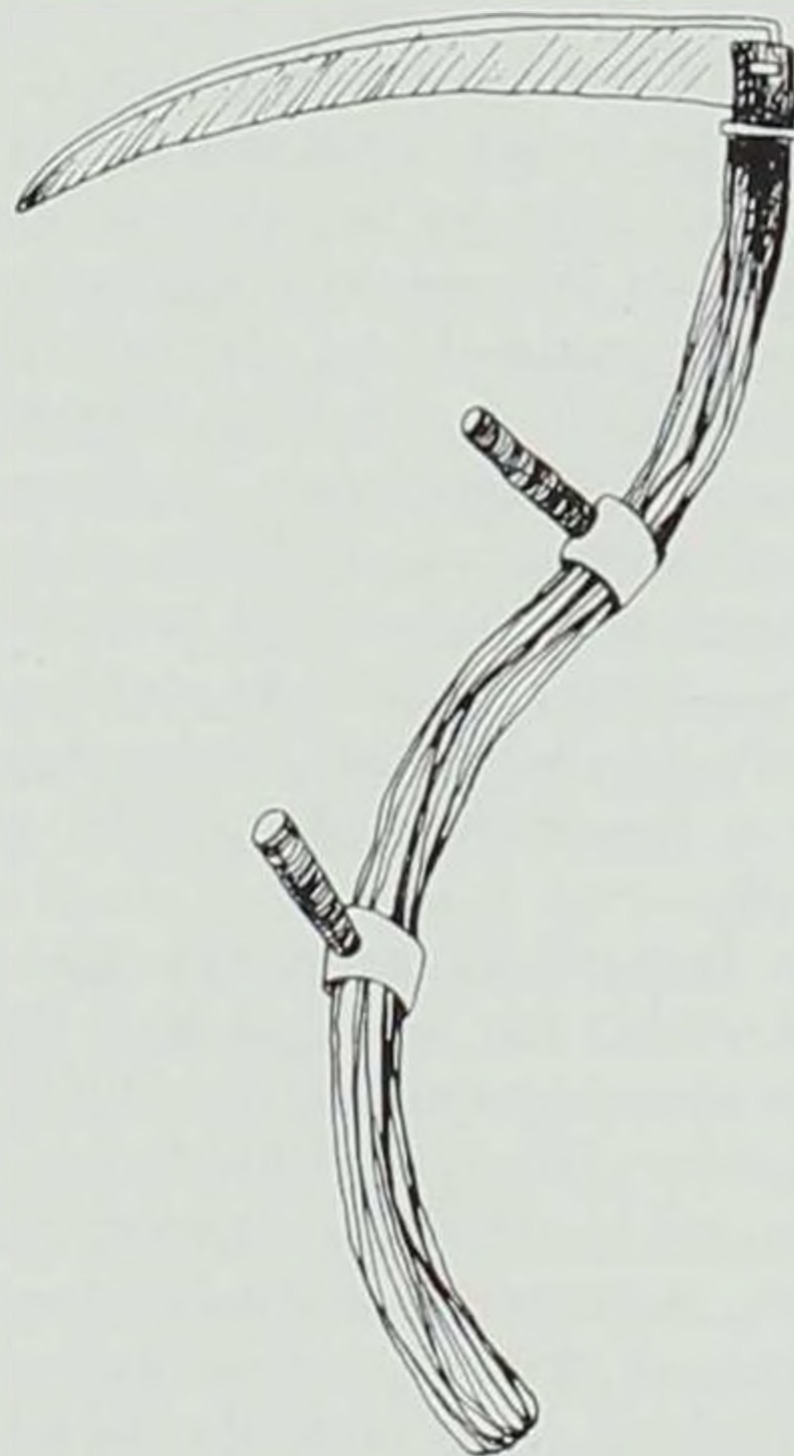
Our teams would walk along the rows of shocks while we pitched the bundles onto the hayrack and artfully built our loads until the rack was full. Then we hauled the load to the farmstead, where the threshing machine separated the grain from the chaff, and blew the straw into the barn or onto a strawstack.

We young guys soon grew tired of the grind, despite our sociable competitions to haul the biggest load—or to even just keep up. Fortunately the threshing dinners interrupted the hot workday. I would quickly unload my last load of the morning into the separator, carefully water my sweaty team at a scummy water trough and tie the horses in a barn, then head down to a cool farmhouse basement to wash off a coating of chaff, dirt, and sweat. Then I would join the gang at the long table for Swiss steak and mashed potatoes and gravy served by friendly, flushed women. We ate quickly with little talk. After a dessert of pineapple upside-down cake, there was time for a brief sit in the shade of the yard for a little talk and kidding around. Then it was back to work. Trotting the team along a rough lane back to the oat field, I stood on the rack trying to digest my big dinner.

A short hitch in the navy and a year at college intervened before I returned to our farm for the summer of 1947, to work for our current renter, Alvin Iversen. I used to show off at noon by leaping the backyard fence to get to dinner. But it was worth the leap for Lena Iversen's cooking. She was an efficient woman who could finish the housework and make a sour cream raisin pie by noon, and play the organ at church all afternoon.

I remember coming back to Alvin's early on warm Sunday nights after dull Sundays spent with the folks in town, not seeing pals or dating. Smoking a cigarette out on the east balcony, I looked beyond the huge cottonwoods that bordered the front yard. I was frustrated that my old house was no longer home. When I had worked for Bruecks, I had been too busy and too young to reflect on that. I knew that I would have to try other kinds of summer jobs, away from Battle Creek. The summer of 1947 turned out to be my farewell as a hired man.

Willa Cather summed it up best about hired men in her novel *My Antonia*: "What good fellows they were, how much they knew, and how many things they had kept faith with!" When my father died in 1972, several of our former hired men stopped by to pay their respects to my mother. On our farm Dad had been a fanatic about weed control, and we had cut weeds endlessly every summer. My brother and I now offered each man one of the scythes from the farm. Hans Schumacher and Winston Mortensen, who had worked several years for us, accepted a scythe as a treasured reminder of their days at "Marshall Fields." Howard Nielsen declined, wanting "no damn scythe." I understood both responses—that of the fellows who wanted to remember how hard they had worked, and that of the fellow who would just as soon forget. □



ART BY M. TRAFTON