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## Thrashing

Ellen Hoffman  
*College of DuPage*

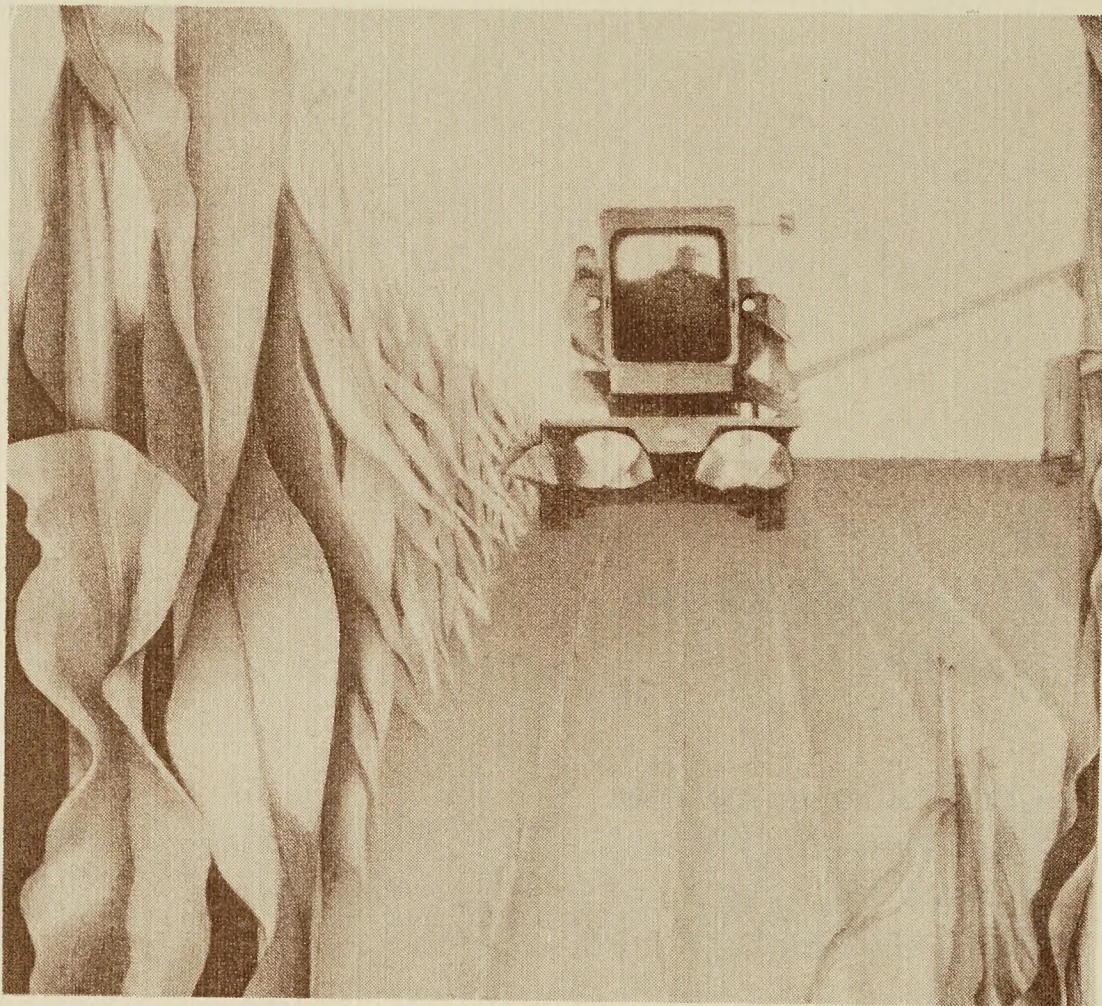
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*Karen Baxa*    October

## THRASHING

*Ellen Hoffman*

The oat shocks stand in long neat rows across the field as far as my eyes can see. They sit there from early July till August, until the McCormick-Deering tractor and the thrashing machine turn and slowly make their way up our lane. The lugs on the tractor's huge wheels leave deep patterns along the road.

Men in straw hats, blue shirts, and striped overalls, cling with their calloused hands to the reins as they balance, bounce, and jolt along in the empty team-pulled hay racks. When I see the teams and hear the jingling harness, I run to tell my mother they are here. These are our neighbors, who have joined with us to go around from neighbor to neighbor to help with the harvest. With pitchforks, they pick clean from the fields, the shocks, and bring them, rack-full after rack-full, to the thrashing machine. The men, with three-tined forks, drop the oat bundles into the waiting mouth of the monster machine. Its claw-like hands reach out to grab and devour them. From the blower it spits the straw and the chaff. The dry plump kernels of oats separate and find the spout, the wagon, and the grain-bin.

Mom and we children have been up since dawn and have picked and cleaned spring-chickens and fresh corn from the field. We peel potatoes and unroll the green and white oil-cloth, and stretch the table, with four leaves, across most of the dining room's length.

At noon the horses rest. They stand at the water tank and lower it with each thirsty gulp and go through the barn door to the stalls as if they belong there.

Near the house and the hydrant, a wooden bench sits with wash basins, soap, and combs. Clean towels and a mirror cling to the tree. The men wash up, looking cool and refreshed. They are warmly welcomed to my mother's table. We serve fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, cole slaw, sweet corn, pie and coffee. The food goes around the table several times. The men eat, laugh, and enjoy each other's company. I refill bowls and water glasses, pass food and listen, as the easy, interesting conversation flows.

After dinner dad goes back to the straw stack. He stands with his sleeves rolled down and the collar of his shirt buttoned tight. The straw and the chaff blast relentlessly from the long blower of the thrashing machine. He, after many hours, forms with a pitchfork, a straw stack to be proud of.

The men stop under the shade tree, a welcome retreat from the afternoon sun. I tend the lunch basket. They drink coffee and cool lemonade, eat sandwiches and cake. They visit. I listen and learn about families, the weather, work, local politics, farm animals, customs and, a lot about people.

When the last of the bundle-racks go up over the hill, the thrashing machine follows the patterns made by the tractor's huge lugs. I look out over the oat field; it is picked clean. The neat rows are gone; the bare expanse of emptiness is a beautiful sight to behold.