

## Five O'Clock in the Morning on the Farm

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"John, it's five o'clock, are you going to spend all day in bed? There are cows to be milked!" That was a direct quote from my mother when it was time to get up and start the day's work on the 160-acre northern Illinois farm where I lived as a boy. Starting when I was about eight years old my jobs included feeding Holstein calves milk replacer and feeding hay to the cows. By the standards of today, we were a very small dairy operation with a herd of 20 cows. By the standards of the 1950's we had the largest herd in the neighborhood where every farmer had dairy cows.

We had a grade B operation with a barn that had wooden floors and stanchions for each cow. Fights could break out between two cows if one tried to get into another cow's stanchion. It turns out cows, like people, are very territorial.

As I got older, my responsibilities increased. I would actually put milkers on the cows and lift the ten-gallon milk cans. Each can weighed about 100 pounds when full of milk. During the school year all of this work had to be completed before seven o'clock in order to eat breakfast, get ready for school, and catch the school bus.

I attended three different rural elementary schools. The first two were one-room schools with about 20 total students in grades 1 through 8. It was not unusual for an entire class to consist of one student. Because of consolidation my eighth grade was spent at a much larger school. It had three rooms and about 10 students per class.

In the evening after school, I had additional responsibilities on the farm. Besides the cows we also had Yorkshire pigs and laying hens. I liked the pigs. I did not like the chickens. One job I had with the chickens was to collect eggs. With hens setting on the nest, it was always a tussle to get the eggs. I thought the eggs were mine, the hen that laid them thought the eggs were hers. It was not unusual to have my hands pecked and they would start to bleed.

In addition to milking the cows twice a day, summer time was spent with fieldwork. The fieldwork was composed of cultivating or "plowing" corn to get rid of the weeds in the field, harvesting oats, and baling hay to feed the cows during the winter. They were on pasture during the summer.

At about age 12 my stepfather determined that I was old enough to drive the tractor on the hay baler. That meant driving a Farmall H for an International 50T baler. The 50T (where the T stood for twine as opposed to the 50W where the W stood for wire) had an underpowered 10 horsepower Cub engine to run the baler. A challenging job for the tractor driver was to listen to the Cub engine and if it appeared the load was too heavy, to slow down. If too much hay, or a "slug" as we called it, got into the baler the engine would die. An adult working on the hay-rack behind the baler would have to hand crank the Cub engine to get it started again. Young drivers who killed the baler engine a lot were not very popular.

When I was old enough to pull bales of hay from the baler chute and stack them on the trailing rack, I took turns driving the tractor on the baler and working the hay rack. Each neighbor would help the other when it was baling time. We would trade labor with a neighbor named Roy. One

memorable day occurred when Roy bought a field of hay by the bale. Nothing was said about the size of each bale. Roy got a bargain by making the bales as big as possible. This meant large and heavy bales so big they hung over both sides of the hay rack. Roy got a bargain, but it made for a long hardworking day.

We had two other animals on the farm. One was a cat creatively named Mother Cat. She would have two litters of kittens a year that were typically born in the hay mow. When Mother Cat decided it was time to wean kittens she would grab them by the scruff of their neck and drop them one at a time about 20 feet to the floor of the barn. Typical of cats they would land on their feet. Of course, the cats were fed fresh milk straight from the cows.

The other animal was a dog named Shep. All of the dogs on my home farm were named Shep. Like most farm dogs Shep was more than a pet. He was a working dog. Shep would run with a tractor all day long. While he did not work well with the cows--he wanted to run them not herd them--he did work well with the pigs. Our Yorkshires would eat from a feeder in a lot by the hog-house. Sometimes the feeder would get empty before we could grind the shelled corn and oats ration to refill the feeder. In order to use a tractor to haul the wagonload of feed to the feeder it meant opening a gate with hungry pigs waiting on the other side. There was no good way to open the gate, climb back on the tractor, drive through the open gate, jump off the tractor, and close the gate without about 20 pigs escaping. That is where Shep did his job. He had a great herding instinct for the pigs and was always able to hold them at bay while I drove through and got the gate closed.

Life on a farm can be hard and dangerous work. As a child and an adolescent, I thoroughly enjoyed it all, except the chickens. Career plans through my senior year in high school were to become a farmer. I enrolled in what was then called Vocational Agriculture and became a member of the Future Farmers of America (now officially called the FFA). I was very proud of my blue and gold corduroy FFA jacket. In the end, the high school experience studying agriculture did not lead to a career as a farmer. Greatly disappointing my family, I chose a career as a teacher and a teacher educator. Interestingly, the high school instruction in agriculture and the FFA experience fit perfectly into my plans to become a teacher.

Life on the farm has changed significantly since my childhood and adolescent experience. For example, that 160-acre farm is now a small part of a partnership my brother has that farms 7,000 acres. What took my stepfather and me to farm the year around, now gets farmed in a matter of hours with extraordinarily large machinery and yields per acre double what we achieved. Still all of those early experiences could never have been reproduced any other way. I cherish them all, except for the chickens.