

HAYING

By Joe Peck

Today haying seems so simple. Just mow, chop, dump and pack, over and over and over. It is so automatic, sometimes I feel like a robot. It wasn't always this easy or fast.

You see, I grew up harvesting loose hay. This didn't mean the hay had loose morals, just that it was hauled from field to mow in loose fluffy loads. Yes, this was before the days of field balers or forage harvesters that we now readily take for granted.

After the hay was mowed and windrowed we would straddle the windrows, towing a flat bed wagon and pulling a hay loader, an amazing machine which would gobble up each windrow and deliver the hay to a person on the wagon who would skillfully build, layer by layer, a straight-walled load, a near impossibility using something as slippery as mature timothy hay. Surprisingly, that was the easy part. Getting that load of hay into the mow was even harder.

The mow, for us, was the entire third level of our big cow barn, known affectionately as the new barn, even though it was built about 1870. Large chunks of the load were lifted into the mow using a long, heavy hay rope, a large grappling fork, a system of pulleys, rails, and trolleys and one horse. Horses were used because they were strong and economical, but mostly because they were quieter than a truck or tractor. Silence was essential so the workers in the mow could communicate with the person on the load. Remember, this was before two-way radios. As each portion of hay was lifted into the mow, a trip rope held by the person on the load could be yanked on a signal from the mow and the large pile of hay would fall and land exactly between two mow beams and be forked back against the outside walls of the barn. Known as "mowing away the hay," this was hot and dusty work in a mow with little air circulation. If the load was tripped at the wrong time and landed on a beam, spurts of profanity could be heard from the mow.

My job was to drive the tractor in the field and the horse at the barn. The horse, "Chubby," was not known for his ambition or originality but, unlike some farmhands, he could follow directions, stoically and cheerfully. The rope that lifted all of this hay broke occasionally, usually at the most inopportune times, resulting in more profanity. It was repaired by making a long, woven splice smooth enough to pass through large wooden pulleys. Just tying a knot wouldn't do. The hour it took my father to splice a hay rope to us was an all too brief respite from the hot, dusty work of haying. To my father, it was another hour lost from harvesting our winter feed supply. Adults and children never look at these events the same way. Today haying may be faster, but there's more to break than just the hay rope.

Joe Peck is a Saratoga County, NY, dairy farmer, storyteller, humorous speaker, author of "A Tractor In the House & Other Smashing Farm Stories" and "A Cow in the Pool & Udder Humorous Farm Stories". See more at www.joepeckonline.com
