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Life on an Indiana Farm in the 1930s

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The Farming Operation

Today, with the farmscape covered by huge specialized operations on one hand and very small part-time operations on the other, there is no "typical average" farm. This was not true fifty years ago. Then, at least in the Corn Belt, the typical farm was one of 120-160-200 acres. The operation itself was a highly general one, raising a little of this and a little of that. It used a lot of labor. Besides the family, a hired man was common. In this sense the 148 acre farm in Newton County, Indiana, where I spent my youth was very typical.

A crop rotation of corn, oats/wheat, clover/alfalfa, was carried out at the beginning of the 1930s. The clover/alfalfa, besides furnishing the needed hay for the livestock, was a plough down crop for nitrogen. This plus the manure of animals was the major way of maintaining fertility. As the thirties progressed, the new crop, soybeans, became more important. It was used first for hay and substituted for clover and alfalfa. Only toward the end of the decade was it grown for the soybean itself.

Power was furnished essentially by two teams of horses. About mid-way through the decade a Fordson tractor was added to do the basic field preparation work of discing, ploughing and harrowing. Only toward the end of the decade did we own a tractor that had its front wheels together so we could also cultivate corn.



Because of the expensive machinery required, threshing was a cooperative effort of many farmers.



A fine crop of wheat will make a farmer smile — if the price is right!

Field preparation for corn and wheat was a three step operation. We used a two bottom mold-board plough, followed by the disc and then by the harrow. Field work was done in the fall for wheat, but in the early spring for oats and corn. Only discing was done for oats which were seeded by a broadcast seeder. Corn was planted with a two-row planter. With this much spring work to be done, field work started as early as possible in March. Corn, hopefully, was planted by mid-May when "oak leaves were as long as squirrel ears".

There was no chemical control of weeds. Weeds were controlled by cultivating the corn as it grew. Corn was checked - or planted in squares -so that it could be ploughed both up and down and crossways of the field. As a starter I was placed on a single row cultivator with a team of horses. As I became more skilled, I graduated to the two-row cultivator pulled by two teams of horses. Just before I left for college in 1939, I cultivated with a tractor. Corn was usually cultivated four times -twice each way - before it was "laid by" - about "knee high by the fourth of July".

Wheat and oats were harvested by a horse drawn reaper that cut the grain and bound it into sheaves. Wheat would normally be cut before the Fourth of July; oats, some weeks later. This then was shocked to dry.

Shocking wheat and oats brought out the whole family. It was hot, sticky, sweaty work. But it was important to get the grain into shocks before it rained.

The binder was a tricky piece of machinery and apparently much could go wrong. Most repairs were done in the field. Oat and wheat harvest were among the few things that could prevent us from getting to town at a good early hour on Saturday night. However, the family prohibition against farm work on Sunday was not violated.

Threshing generally was done over a two week period in August by a cooperative organization of farmers called the threshing ring. The threshing machine and its power engine was a very expensive piece of machinery—so many farmers organized to use one machine. The participating farmers furnished the necessary bundle pitchers, hayracks, and wagons and stackers.



Both wheat and oats were harvested by a horse-drawn reaper that cut the grain and bound it into sheaves.



Spreading manure on alfalfa with a new Case spreader.

The farmer whose fields were being threshed furnished the water boy. This was a young fellow with a pony and cart. He travelled through the fields with water. This was communally taken from a common jug! I was a water boy until I graduated to bundle pitcher.

The work during threshing season was hard, hot, and dirty. There was one bonus, however—eating. As the operation moved from farm to farm, wives were competitive in their feeding of the crew at noon. The 20-25 men involved usually were seated at tables set upon the lawn and did eat well!

Corn harvest usually started by mid-October, and continued, weather permitting, until done, hopefully by Thanksgiving. In some years bad weather would come early and we would not finish until near Christmas. A snow covered cornfield in below freezing temperatures was not the best of places!

During corn harvest we had a hired man and attempted to keep two wagons in the field. One hired man really could husk corn and could pull out 100 plus bushels daily. In the early years of the Depression he received 1 cent a bushel plus room and board! (To keep this in perspective, I remember hauling corn with horses and wagon to a nearby elevator and receiving 11 to 12 cents a bushel.)

When the wagon was full it was brought to the crib, weighed, then the front wheels of the wagon were placed on the lift of the corn dump. The team was then hitched to the circular power wheel which both raised the front of the wagon and powered the elevator to carry the ears of corn to the top of the crib. The drying down was by air flowing through the cracks in the crib walls.

If the corn was not hauled to town and sold on the ear, it was shelled in the spring. This was done by itinerant custom shellers. This operation was one that I most disliked. By spring the corn crib was infested with

rats. I was always assigned the chore of pushing the last of the corn into the sheller in the great company of what seemed like hundreds of rats!

The farm operation had a full complement of livestock and poultry. There were always milk cows. The herd was four or five during the early years when only the cream was sold. Only in later years did we have a De Laval separator for separating cream from the milk. Before that wonderful piece of equipment was obtained, the milk was placed in large crocks in the water-cooled milk tank. Then, after an appropriate setting time, the cream rose to the top of the crock. It was then removed with a skimming ladle.

A new cheese factory was built in Kentland about the middle of the decade. After we began to sell milk for cheese, the cow herd was expanded to 12-15 cows.

The manure was piled outside the barn during the winter. In the spring and fall, it was loaded with a pitch fork on a flat bed wagon and spread, also by pitch fork, on the fields. We did not have one of those New Idea manure spreaders.

All milking was done by hand, and was one of the most detested chores. In the summer, with the sweaty cows, the swinging tails, the hordes of flies, it seemed to take forever. In the winter, with the frozen mud on the swinging tails, with those ice cold teats, it still seemed to take forever!

There was always a flock of 15-20 sheep to keep the place "cleaned up". They needed little care, and the wool was a welcome cash crop. It came in the early summer when some cash was very welcome. Usually the shearing was done by an itinerant shearer. Prior to the electric shear, this was a laborious, backbreaking, dirty, sweaty job!



After the harvest, farmers ran hogs in the fields, fields that were fenced hog tight.

There were always hogs in the place and numbers grew over time. We gradually moved to a two litter a year system, but it was not easy. The weather meant it was very difficult to farrow before mid-March or after mid-September. Purdue research found if you brought sod into the pig pen, this helped the anemia problem. Cod-liver oil additions to rations also substituted for needed sunshine in the winter in prevention of rickets.

The fields were fenced hog tight. It was possible, and usually done, to run hogs in the fields after harvest. There were no feed grinding facilities on the farm. Any feed grinding had to be done commercially in town. Consequently, corn, oats, wheat, or soybeans were usually fed as whole grains. For hogs, it was common to buy some tankage or meat scraps as a supplement.

After we began to sell milk to the cheese factory, we had another feed for the hogs. The residual whey from the cheese making was returned to the farm in the milk cans. We would put the whey in large barrels and soak oats in it for several days. This made a slop which the hogs ate greedily. Though we did not know it at first, it eventually was determined that the whey was a much needed protein supplement for the hog ration. The concept of balanced rations was just beginning.

We had a breeder flock of 15-20 each of turkeys, geese, and ducks. We did not let turkeys, geese, or ducks incubate their own eggs. We used broody hens in orange crate nests. If the hatches came early or the weather was chilly, the young turkey poults, ducklings, or goslings often ended up spending nights in boxes next to the kitchen cook-stove.

Turkeys, geese, and ducks were sold for the Thanksgiving and Christmas market. We had built up a fairly substantial dressed bird clientele. Since there was no refrigeration, all birds had to be dressed and delivered one or two days before the holiday. This was a major operation.

There was another product from the duck and goose flock besides meat—feathers. About midsummer the adult ducks and geese would be “ripe for picking”. The procedure required that the birds be caught, put on your lap with the head tightly held under your arm, and then the feathers be picked off by the handful. This operation did not make for the most pleasant day! It was usually hot in the crib alley where it was done. The flies were plentiful, the geese mean tempered, the feathers flying around and when well mixed with sweat would stick anywhere! Feathers could be sold - but usually they went into our own pillows and featherbeds.

The principal poultry enterprise was the laying flock of about 200 hens. Each spring, baby chicks were purchased and reared in the brooder house with the kerosene brooder stove. Young cockerels were sold in the late summer for cash income. The pullets replenished the laying flock. Eggs, along with milk, furnished the only regular cash income. Eggs, however, were usually sold to the grocery store and the receipts went to pay off the running charge account used for groceries.

All the poultry had free range over the barn yard and nearby field. During the warmer months of the year, the chickens and other poultry pretty much scrounged for their own food. Only in the fall and winter were they fed much extra grain.

With chickens on-the-loose, they were always laying in hidden nests outside the chicken house. When such a nest was found, the question was whether the eggs were good or not. This was determined by putting them in a



On most farms, eggs, along with milk, produced the only regular cash income.

pail of water. If an egg rose to the surface it was not good. If it rose only half way - sell it and let the buyer decide! Neither the poultry house or the grocery store graded the eggs they purchased. I'm sure we sold many eggs that couldn't pass today's grading system. They were "farm fresh" and 100% natural, however!

The farm, though not large in acreage, was large in labor use. Besides the family, we usually had a live-in hired man; in the fall harvest season there might be two. During the worst of the depression years, these men often helped with winter chore work for room and board. When spring field work started, the going rate was \$30 monthly in addition to room and board. When corn harvest came around, pay was by the bushels picked.

Chores took about two hours. In the spring/summer/fall field work periods, the normal getting up time was 4:00 to 4:30 a.m. Chores could be done, breakfast eaten, and at least someone could be in the fields by seven. It was usual to work to around 5:00 p.m. Then chores, and eating around 7:00 p.m.

In the winter months the whole operation took on a more leisurely pace. We didn't start until about 6:00 a.m. and were done before dark in the evening. On Saturdays and summer band concert nights, we finished our work days so we could get to town around 7:00 p.m.

The Farm Home Operation

In the 1930s there was a substantial difference between those who lived in the country and those who lived in town. The major difference was in the equipment and operation of the home and daily living.

My farm home was the classic two-story square design that is often seen in the countryside. The main part of the house had four rooms upstairs and four down. To this was added a wing consisting of the large kitchen, the well room, and another pantry-like room. All along the front of the wing ran a screened porch. This porch was a much-used place in the hot days of summer. Out to the rear an appropriate distance was a quite typical 3-hole privy. (One of the holes was smaller than the others to take care of the smaller children.)

The house had no electricity and no indoor plumbing except for cold water in the kitchen. It had no central heating; there was a large stove in the living room and a cook-stove in the kitchen. The cook-stove had a reservoir that was the source of hot water.

There was no refrigeration except the "milk tank" in the well room. The water and cooling system was really pretty efficient. The windmill pumped the water up to a round storage tank up near the ceiling in the well room. From this, water was piped into the kitchen. When this tank was full, it overflowed into the milk tank. Here things which had to be kept cool were placed. The water then flowed through the tank into underground pipes which took it out to the livestock tank near the barn.

The system worked fine with two exceptions—one in the summer, another in the winter. In the summer, there were always times when the wind did not blow and water would run out both for the house and the livestock. This meant someone had to man the pump handle. In the winter, the system would freeze and had to be laboriously thawed out.

The cook-stove really was a blessing. It cooked, it heated water; it heated the kitchen; the open oven dried shoes and warmed frost-bitten feet. In fact, staying warm in the winter was a major challenge. Basically, wood was the fuel—and we burned it in huge quantities. There were no gasoline power saws—all was hand cut. One winter at the depths of the Depression (probably 1932) we burned ear corn. At 10-15 cents a bushel delivered to the elevator it made cheap, hot, quick-burning fuel.

The cook-stove warmed the kitchen during meals. The living room, where the other stove stood, was also warm. The rest of the house was just a few degrees warmer than outside! In the coldest weather, we would heat rocks or flatirons, wrap them in newspaper, and put them into the bed. Needless to say, in these circumstances everyone wore some type of "heavy underwear". The weekly Saturday night baths were taken in a wash tub set behind the stove.

Summer, on the other hand, was either hot or hotter. As summer progressed, heat in the house would build up. The upstairs got unbearable—the downstairs not much better. Everyone moved to the screened porch for sitting. The upstairs was vacated for sleeping and most slept on the downstairs floor in front of open doors and windows. If the heat really built up, many of us shifted on out onto the front lawn to spend the night.

Flies also were part of the summer challenge. There were sprays for the livestock and some for the house. However, the basic control mechanisms were sticky flypaper strips and "Daisy" fly killers plus the old stand-by, the fly swatters.

Lighting was by lamps and lanterns of one kind or another. The Coleman gasoline lantern, similar to our present camping lantern, was available then—but very expensive. Rather, we had two or three kerosene lanterns. At one time we had a fancy Coleman lamp for the living room. Later we had a nice Aladdin lamp which we liked much better. Most of the light, however, was furnished by various sizes and styles of kerosene lamps that were carried from place to place as needed. One of the chores was to give daily maintenance to all these lamps: fill them, trim the wicks, and wash the chimneys.

Doing the family laundry, also, was not a simple operation. We had the luxury of a hand-operated washing machine. Here you sat and pushed a handle back and forth which agitated the clothes in the washer.

If any possibility for drying existed at all, clothes were hung outside. The alternatives were clothes racks by the stoves inside. As can be imagined, this whole process was easier in the summer than in the winter.

One of our luxuries was a good battery radio which could get a wide selection of stations. The battery was a big battery similar to a car battery and had to be re-charged periodically. The battery "going down" was a major crisis - for it took real money to get it re-charged. The farm station was WLS in Chicago. It was the source of markets, new knowledge, and the Barn Dance on Saturday night.

We were never hungry! Meals were seasonal, however, in their make-up. Some things were real standards when other stuff was unavailable. I think this is why I am not now an oatmeal fan (had it everyday) and

why it took me some time to again eat with pleasure fried mush and potato soup!

Meat supplies varied by the season (meat was rarely purchased - no money, no refrigeration). In the fall, a hog and sometimes a beef were butchered. Hams and bacon were cured with rubbing salt. Additionally, sausages of various kinds were made. As long as the weather was cold, the fresh meat could be handled. In the summer, poultry was the main dish. It was a mark of achievement to have young frying chicken by the Fourth of July. Old cull hens were also available and considerable meat was canned. Of course, there were always eggs, milk, and butter available.

Fresh vegetables were rarely purchased. Vegetables came from the extensive garden in season and from the big stock of home canned vegetables and fruit in the cellar. Additionally, root crops - carrots, beets, potatoes - were buried to keep them from freezing until they were needed. The orchard furnished apples, cherries, and peaches. The large truck garden was surrounded by raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries, asparagus, rhubarb, and mustard. We also took wheat over to the local mill that did custom flour milling. "Luxury crops" such as watermelon, musk melons, and popcorn were also produced. (One year we also tried to grow peanuts with not too much success!)

We never "ate out". I ate in a restaurant more during my first month in college than during the previous 18 years of my life. I was first exposed to salads - especially with head lettuce - and several other "unusual" vegetables when I arrived on campus.

Electricity arrived via REMC in about 1937-38; an electric pump was put in. Water ran. A bathroom was installed; we flushed! A refrigerator replaced the well room. A laundry stove that heated water and an electric kitchen range replaced the cook-stove. We were ready to enter the modern life of living conveniences.

The Good and Not So Good Life

The Depression that started in 1930 took a heavy toll on both farmers and town folk. There were good times as well as not-so-good times. However, it is important to remember that regardless of how little we had, we did not consider ourselves poverty-stricken - poor folks. There was no official definition of poverty and few outright relief programs. Some people simply were harder hit than others. People made do as best they could.

The major social events of the on-going life on the farm were going into town on Saturday night and to church on Sunday. In the summer, band concert night was added to the schedule. Though we lived only three miles from town, we usually did all our town business on Saturday night. On this night, the men got together, talked, and played cards in the pool room; the women got together in the parked cars, watched the people, and talked. Young people got together, walked the streets, had a Coke at the drug store, and talked.

There were two other really major social events. The Fourth of July was celebrated with a big family picnic at some place that had a carnival and fireworks. And, of course, everyone went to the county fair that was held in September.

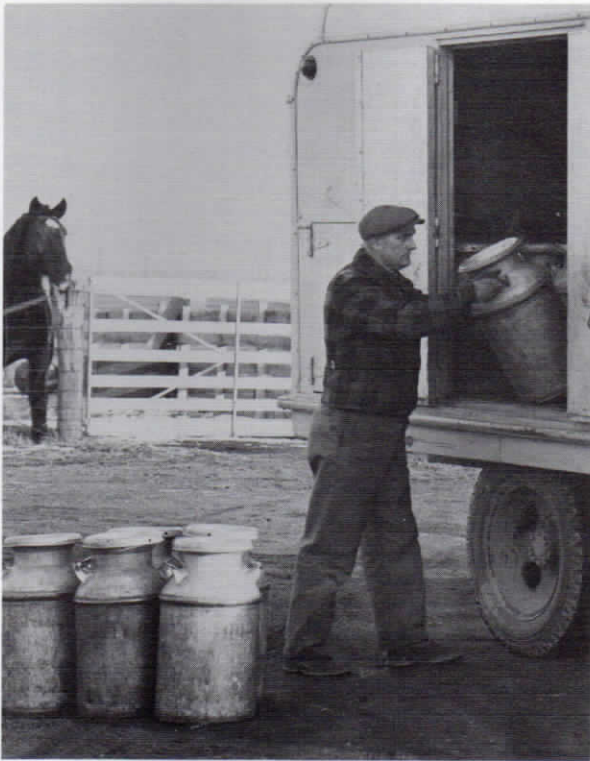
Net farm receipts of U.S. farmers during 1930-34 were 40% less than in 1925-29. Cash expenditures then were proportionately much less than now to produce farm products. Even so the net cash income left to farm was only 50% of the 1925-29 levels. The Indiana corn prices averaged 77 cents in 1929 and 26 cents in 1932. Egg prices averaged 29 cents in 1929; 12 cents in 1932. Hog prices averaged \$10.14 in 1929; \$3.77 in 1932. This situation meant that cash farm income by 1932 was almost nonexistent. This was particularly difficult if the farm had a mortgage debt which required annual payments of interest.

Our farm did have a mortgage debt. In 1926, a \$6,000 20 year loan was obtained from the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. The idea of amortized debt in which some principal is paid each year along with interest had not yet been developed. The situation was that half the interest was due in the summer after wheat harvest and half after corn harvest in the winter. Specific principal payments were scheduled, but these were continuously postponed in these years. The debt was refinanced in 1943 at a 4% rate of interest. At that time \$5300 still was owed. The mortgage was finally paid off in 1953 largely from the improved farm profits of wartime.

Meeting the necessary interest payments became a semi-annual crisis. To put the problem in perspective, corn yields generally were about 35 bushels per acre. So at 1929 prices it would take the gross receipts from about 14 acres of corn to meet the interest payment; in 1932, it would take the receipts from about 40 acres! With our rotation we would grow about 40-50 acres of corn a year. Since not all of the money received from corn sales was profit (there are expenses!), it is easy to see we simply could not meet our obligations by 1932.

The early reaction of the holders of farm debt (who were largely insurance companies at that time) was to foreclose. However, by 1932 and 1933, the insurance companies owned more land than they could handle as buyers of land became nonexistent. Additionally, the mood of the countryside turned ugly. Foreclosure sales normally took place on the courthouse steps. By 1932, many farmers turned up at these sales, some with their shotguns. They just stood around staring at who might be potential buyers. Amazingly no one would bid! The insurance company may have taken title, but the original farmer stayed on to farm the land. As times gradually improved, many of these farmers bought their land back by paying the delinquent mortgage. Our Metropolitan man habitually threatened but never foreclosed!

There were no government programs in the early years. Farmers were particularly upset by city processors who obviously "made all the money". Though we did not sell Grade A milk to Chicago, many of our neighbors did. One time in the early 1930s, it was decided to have a milk strike to force higher prices. Farmers were supposed to withhold their milk. Of course, some didn't. The alternative then was to stop the milk trucks and dump the milk. This was done. Farmers with their kids gathered along Highway 41 near the Iroquois River bridge. We kids threw nails and boards with nails in them on the road as milk trucks approached. When the trucks had to stop, the farmers simply dumped the milk cans into the ditch.



Sending milk to market by truck.

One of the early government price raising programs killed little pigs and calves to reduce supplies. We did not participate in this. With so many hungry people this just was not right. As the acreage reduction programs were phased in, we were reluctant cooperators. The price support loan permitted us to store our grain at harvest time. Previously we had to sell immediately at harvest to raise needed cash. Leaving land unfarmed, however, never seemed quite right.

By 1933, prices seemed to have bottomed out and the foreclosure holocaust had somewhat settled down. I, of course, did not know all these details then, but I recognized that our lives were not getting any worse. It was this setting of "some improvement" that made 1934 and 1936 doubly hard. In both these years drouth and chinch bugs struck. Acres of corn, wheat, and oats were destroyed and the yields on the remaining acres were sharply reduced.

I can still recall the deep hopelessness of these two years. The temperature was sweltering. And starting in June there was no rain. Each day was the same: a hot searing wind out of the west; beautiful sunsets as the higher atmosphere was filled with dust from the great plains. We doggedly plowed the corn even though there were no weeds; the corn was fired and rolled tight and growth had come to a standstill. In those days, the idea was to keep the top soil in a dust mulch in order to preserve the moisture underneath.

To this was added the chinch bugs. These tiny black bugs would attack a plant and literally eat it up within a day. They started first in wheat, then oats, and finally moved to corn. The plant would become black with bugs as they moved across a field like a giant scythe.

There were no sprays then which would kill the bug and not the plant. The control, which was developed as the season progressed, was physical in nature. A ditch was dug with a plow about a foot deep and as wide around the infested area. A log was dragged through this ditch to create a thick dust mulch. Then every ten feet or so a deep hole was dug. On the side of the ditch away from the infestation a line of creosote was poured. (The government finally furnished supplies of this.)

The principle was simple. As the bug devoured one plant, they had to move to another by crawling. They came to the ditch, the dust mulch slowed them, and they would not across the creosote line. Then they proceeded to follow the ditch until they fell into the holes. Then you poured gasoline on the little devils and burned them up!

God was directly involved in all this. As drought and bugs got worse and worse, petitioning the Almighty got more vigorous. On Sundays there were special prayers for rain and relief. This increased until we were having midweek prayer meetings! As I have become older, I realize why great and deep faith goes with farming.

Through endless sweltering days we battled. Some would get across the ditch. You gave up that area and re-established your battle lines. This repeated itself time again. You worked digging ditches, pouring creosote, and burning bugs from dawn to dusk. We lost sizeable acreages of wheat, oats, and corn. And the yields of the remainder were sharply reduced. Prices rose substantially, but we had little to sell. God had wrought what the government couldn't do! (In 1934, Indiana's harvested corn acreage was 15% below 1933 and the harvest yield average was 27.6 bushels; in 1936, the harvested acreage was 30% below 1935 and the yield average was 25.6.)

Improvement in economic conditions gradually came, but it took the World War II years to really bring a measure of prosperity back to the farm. The decade of the thirties saw the beginning of many developments that were to revolutionize rural America. As electricity reached the farm, the major barrier came down that separated farm from town life. The growing availability of the narrow front wheeled tractor and the development of the combine and corn pickers, the beginnings of hybrid corn, commercial fertilization, and improved rations for livestock - all laid the ground work for the modern agriculture that was to arrive in the 1950s. Growing up in these times left permanent marks on one's mind and behavior - and not all of them were bad!



During the 1930s, many farmers shifted from horses to a tractor for ploughing.



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