THREE TO THE HILL

GROWING UP IN IOWA
1928-1946

by

JOHN WIEGMAN

FOREWORD

I've often said that "I wouldn't take a million dollars for having grown up in a small town." Although the small town of Rolfe, Iowa—with a population of 1,058 in 1940—was a comfortable and comforting place to grow up in the 30s and 40s, it was not a place to offer many opportunities for non-agricultural employment. Therefore, like many small town graduates, I never went back.

Since being born there on an early morning in late November of 1928, I've often pondered what made my growing up years so treasured. The answer has always been the same: A rare combination of family, friends, relatives, and teachers in a living—and loving—environment that was totally supportive.

Perhaps the experiences that I relate herein will help explain why I remember that period of my life so fondly…

John Hauck Wiegman

7/01/08

Dear -

With many fond memories...!

John

THE THRESHING RUN

Summers were hot in Iowa—temperatures often over 100 and humid! But it was the kind of weather that made the corn grow—and the oats.

Before the days when cholesterol made oats famous, we grew oats on the farm for two reasons: 1) the grain made nutritious feed for the stock, and 2) the straw made excellent bedding for the horses, pigs, and cattle.

Late July and early August—the very hottest time of the Iowa summer—was oat harvesting time. The reaping, threshing, and hay-stacking operation during an oats harvest was extremely labor intensive. The threshing machine itself was a shared piece of equipment, fired with wood and coal—a noisy, hot steam-breathing beast of a machine that required constant oil injections to keep it running.

All the farmers in our immediate area shared the Schonberger threshing machine. The Schonbergers owned the machine, and all the farmers on the Schonberger threshing run shared the machine, brought their own horses and wagons, and contributed their own labor during the harvest season. Lots were drawn to determine the order of harvest rotation among the various farms.

But labor and machinery weren't the only things that were shared on the threshing run. Wives and daughters prepared the noon meal on a communal basis. (The noon meal was our big meal. We called it "dinner" and deservedly so. It served as the fuel for afternoon labor. The evening meal was "supper", a lighter repast to avoid any possible disturbance of sleep due to a full stomach!) The farmers' sons also pitched in—the older ones beside their fathers; the younger ones—like me—doing the simpler, more menial tasks. These involved everything from carrying out the mid-morning and mid-afternoon lunches from the main house kitchen to the field—pumping and carrying drinking water to the thirsty, sweating threshing crews—to cleaning the one common hair comb that was used by all to "tidy up" before appearing at the dinner table. (The "lavatory" was usually set up outside under a shade tree in the yard. The normal set-up included the comb, a dishpan, a bar of soap, and a linen hand towel that gradually turned gray and grayer as the crew lined up and performed their pre-dinner ablutions.)

What a feast those women provided! The food was served family style—giant serving dishes overflowing with fresh-cooked, fresh-baked, fresh-fried food. Beef, pork, chicken, potatoes, vegetables—all home-grown in the farm family gardens. Milk, fresh that morning from the family cow herd and cooled in the stock tank. The women and girls continuously replenished the serving dishes for "seconds"—and "thirds".

And then there were the desserts! Mostly, there were pies. All kinds of pies—apple, cherry, mince meat, pumpkin—each farm wife contributing her own special favorite. Chocolate and white cakes were also on the menu. And, of course, coffee was always served. (Iced tea—at least on the threshing run—was considered a "lady's" or "sissy's" drink. Perhaps it also had something to do with the limited supply of ice!)

The threshing crew also had a male "pecking order". The lowest on the totem pole were the errand boys like me—usually also the youngest. The next step on the pecking order ladder was the grain wagon. (This entailed driving a horse-drawn wagon back and forth all day from the threshing machine to the storage bins—monotonous and lonely work.) The epitome of exalted positions for the young male was a place in the straw stack. This status symbol involved thee spreading and shaping of the straw as it was blown from the threshing machine spout. The tool used to do this was a three-tined pitchfork. The goal was to shape the stack as it constantly grew in height so that it would shed water. A good stack, when used later for bedding, always provided dry straw under the outside layer, even under rainy or snowy weather conditions.

The additional thrill in the straw-stacking role was that, as a straw-stacker, you really were "up in the world". As the stack grew in height (eventually 20-30 feet tall) the straw-stacker also was elevated. Soon, he was above the other workers, and then even above the threshing machine itself. And—over the flat Iowa countryside—the view was terrific. In a rural area where the tallest structure was a 2-story house, the "kingly" view from the top of a strawstack was indeed a rarity!

Finally, in my fourth summer on the threshing run—after repeated requests to Dad—I was promoted to straw-stacker. Dad—as a farm manager—had several different threshing runs and crews to monitor during the short oats harvesting season. "Our" threshing run included the White Crib Farm (where Mom and Dad began their married life, the original 160 acres having been a gift from Grandpa Wiegman), Sunnybrook Farm (Uncle Art and Aunt Lena Vaughn's homeplace, also their wedding gift from Grandpa) and Beaver Creek Farm (named for the creek that ran through it, and used mainly as a livestock unit) as well as several other family farms in the area.

Dad dropped me off at Aunt Lena's (Uncle Art had died the year before). It was six o'clock in the morning and the sun was just peaking over the cornfields. I was equipped with a brand new pitchfork and brand new rubber-soled leather work shoes. I was ready to work.

Dad told me before leaving that he would pick me up later that day after checking the other threshing runs—and certainly no later than noon. It looked like it was going to be a hot day, and he—and I—were concerned about the heat, especially in the unprotected environs of the stack.

Knowing that I would be picked up by noon, I paced myself accordingly. I was the star—the exemplary worker that would make Dad proud, pitching two forkfuls for every one that the other stackers pitched! Noon came. The normal big dinner was served. No Dad. I was pooped. I had "shot my wad" in the morning, and now I faced the heat of the afternoon. Two o'clock—no Dad. Three o'clock, 4:00…5:00…At 5:30 I saw the long trail of dust coming down the road. Dad was finally here!

When I arrived home that night, Mom asked, "What happened to your shoe?" On closer inspection, I discovered that I had evidently leaned on my pitchfork, pierced my shoe and my foot, which had bloodied my sock. I was so tired, I hadn't even noticed!