The Hay Crew

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Summers on the farm were hot and slow. We rarely left the farm in Southwest Indiana, except for the weekly five-mile trip to Greencastle for Sunday mass. The requirements of livestock kept us from ever taking a family vacation (at least that is what we were told…). As summer drew to a close, one activity was a highlight: the arrival of hay season and the hay crew.

In August, fields of alfalfa hay were baled into square bales of about 40 pounds, tied with twine, and left in the field in neat rows for pickup. The hay was baled by an older man named Tom who lived in a woods with his adult alcoholic sons. Going to his place to arrange the baling was like a scene out of the movie Deliverance. Scary but entertaining.

The hay crew was composed of an assortment of my younger brother Pat's high school friends. The hay had to be collected and put in the barn before a rain, so anyone who was available on short notice showed up. In a rural area with few summer job opportunities, putting up hay was a way to earn fifteen or twenty dollars in a day. The guys on the crew were paid two cents a bale. On a really good day, we could put 1,000 bales in the barn.

My role was being the hay truck driver and accountant. I remember my first summer driving. I was hanging out in the yard and my Dad approached me and told me I was now the hay truck driver. I pointed out that I did not know how to drive, let alone know how to drive a one-and-a-half-ton flatbed truck. He smiled and said, no problem, you will learn. I think he gave me a quick lesson, and I was in the truck behind the wheel before I knew it.

The hay truck was a well-used, red, 1949 stick shift flatbed. I could not see over the steering wheel nor reach the pedals. A pillow solved the visibility issue, but the pedals were a nightmare for me. If we stopped on a hill and the engine died, I had to restart it by reaching a gas pedal, a clutch, a brake, and a starter. It needed to be a very gradual start or the load could shift, split, and throw my dad (the stacker) off the truck. Early on, I took a lot of grief for some rough starts and split loads. My Dad nicknamed me Parnelli Jane after the Indy 500 racer.

The hay crew was composed of Pat's friends, usually three or four at a time. Pat and I are only eleven months apart in age, so we shared many friends, including the guys on the hay crew. My Dad stood on the bed of the slow-moving truck while the crew walked

along sides and lifted and heaved the bales onto the truck. He carefully stacked them so that a bed of 100 bales held together for the trip to the barn. Sometimes, Tom would try to be overly helpful and set the weight of the bales to 100 pounds, well beyond the capacity of the crew. They caught that quickly.

This was a very slow process so after a while I added my Dachshund, Otto, as my co-pilot. Otto had a tense relationship with several of the crew, having attacked some of them as they repeatedly tormented him. They took turns popping up and making faces in the cab windows. Otto spent most of the time in a frenzy barking and jumping from window to window. That may have been the excitement of the day, unless Tom baled a snake and it was left exposed, hanging in the twine. It was always fun to watch someone position one of those bales so that it was visible only as it was lifted to face level by the unsuspecting crew member.

Part of my job was keeping track of the number of bales we loaded, as that determined everyone's pay. After we had 100 bales on the truck, we drove it from the field to the barn where it was unloaded, bale by bale. It was hard work, but the crew was always talking and laughing. I would go to the house and return with popsicles for the crew and a beer for Dad.

After the last load, my Dad and I went to the house and did the accounting and check writing. The now sweaty hay crew headed to one of our small ponds and went skinny dipping. I still remember the laughter echoing from what was dubbed Bare Butt Beach.

A tradition for any hay crew was the expectation of a big meal at the end of the day. My Mom prepared a traditional picnic meal of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, baked beans, corn on the cob, and ice cream. After that big meal and a day of lifting hundreds of bales, everyone admitted how tired they were. That did not last long, as someone always suggested a "quick" basketball game that went well into the evening under our night light.

At the last hay baling of the summer, another event occurred. All the guys on the crew played high school football. It was the mid 1960's and they all grew their hair out when school ended in the spring. It was my job to give them their short football haircuts. I remember that I had to stand on the steps of the back porch to reach their heads. I also remember the brutal criticism of my haircuts. I ran into one of the guys 50 years later and he was still complaining about his bad (all be it, free) haircuts.

Today, technology has changed how hay is baled. One person bales the alfalfa into round bales weighing between 600 and 1,500 pounds. Bales are left in the field or moved by tractor to the edge of the field, allowing a second cutting. One person does it all. Like

many technological advances in agriculture, equipment replaces people and provides a faster, less expensive process.

The hay crew is one of my favorite memories of life on the farm. As the guys on the crew have aged and some have died, I will always remember them as hard-working teenagers on our hay crew. I know that if they pass by a field of large round bales, they will tell anyone who will listen, how on a really good day, the hay crew put up 1,000 square bales.