

Barn Work  
George Hagglund  
May 2010

Back in the Thirties, local families eked out a living by a father working in town, owning a few cows (anywhere from three to twelve), and a garden where we grew vegetables. Kids were an economic asset that helped families get through hard times. Usually around the age of eight, we were told, —now that you are big, you can help with barn work. It was a part of every farm kid's life to some extent, although chores were not always divided out equally. We squabbled among ourselves over who did what, but our contribution was essential.

There was no running water, so we started out at the outdoor pump and toted the buckets to the barn. Cows develop a powerful thirst from eating dry hay, so it was no small task for an 8-year old to work the pump handle, carry the pail into the barn, and then place it in front of each cow. A big cow might need six 12-quart buckets, so it was a strenuous chore for a little kid.

Once the cows were watered, we went up into the hay mow, threw down fodder, and forked it into the manger of each cow and heifer. We had to know how much hay to put in front of each animal. Climbing up and down into the haymow inevitably meant an occasional tumble down the ladder onto the floor if we weren't careful; we survived in spite of it.

From watering livestock, we graduated to cleaning the barn, our least favorite task. We got out the shovel, and worked our way down the gutter, filling the wheelbarrow and then taking the manure to the pile in back of the barn. It was a daily part of our schedule. Then we put down bedding in each stall.

Next came milking. In those days milking machines were unheard of. Usually each kid had an assigned number of cows to milk, and we got to know them well. Some were crabby and would kick if they didn't like what we were doing. Some were placid and gave no trouble. Some were sneaky and would gradually pin the unwary kid to the wall of the stall. We gave them a whack if they misbehaved. The milk had to be separated next, and this meant cranking the handle of the cream separator. If the herd was small, there wasn't enough to justify sending milk to the creamery, and besides, we needed skimmed milk to feed the calves. We then had to feed the calves, sometimes adding formula. We had to train the calves how to drink out of a bucket; they were eager drinkers so we had to be aware of them butting and tipping over the pail. There were cats to be fed, which were numerous and always waiting for their share of milk when we'd finished milking.

There were plenty of other chores, including trips to the pasture to bring the cows home, putting feed out, separating the milk, a chore that involved cranking the handle of the cream separator and pouring milk or cream into cans for transportation to the creamery. When chores were done, it was back to the house, to eat breakfast, wash our hands, and change into our school clothes. Chores took a good bit of time, so we were driven out of bed around 5:30 in the morning.

The same process went on in the evening, so we were kept busy. We were never kept after school because our parent's wrath would land on the school principal if their unpaid labor was not home on time. It was hard for some kids to participate in activities after school because they were needed at home. Many of us carried the barn aroma with us to school. We didn't know it was part of our being, the teachers were used to it; it was all part of farm life. I never realized how powerful the aroma was until I attended a high school graduation some 12 years after leaving school, while working in the city.

Chores dictated how far we could get from home every day, when we could be away, and when we had to return home. The needs of the livestock superseded all else. They were the boss, parents were next in the pecking order, and

kids were last, except perhaps for the dog and cats. Overnight trips to visit relatives were impossible. We knew we were important, though, because when the kids moved away the parents sold the cows.

Looking back, most of us are happy that it's history. Those subsistence farms are mostly gone now, except for a few hobby operations run by city folks. The Township is no longer populated by farm folk; instead we now have suburbanites working in town and professionals who want to live close to the earth. Yes, the place has changed, but for the better?