
Short Stories

Making Hay While the Sun Shines by Lillian Smith Sherrer

Hay making methods have changed throughout the years. At one point in time hay was cut manually with a scythe. Pitched together with a fork and carried in on ox-carts. But, I'm not that ancient. My childhood memories of haying involved horses and horse drawn equipment.

We arose to a bright, sunny, summer morning. Dad, announcing it was a good day to start haying, left immediately to ascertain the sharpness of the sections on the cutting bar of the mowing machine. They were dull and nicked as he must have struck a stone at the end of last season. "Who is going to turn the grindstone for me?" he asked. No response from the boys. Dad looked about and saw they were busy with their usual farm chores. He motioned for me to come. Slowly, I trudged out to turn the handle. As I rotated the stone, Dad held the section bar firmly against it to sharpen the edges. Sparks resembling little dancing fire flies few about. "Pour a dipper of water on the stone" Dad said, "then the sections will have a smoother edge!" (Later Dad improved this procedure by nailing a half car tire near the base of the stand. Filled with water it wet the stone as it rotated.) At last Dad stated that the sections were sharp enough.

The horses were hitched to the mowing machine. Dad sat upon the metal seat and drove around and around the field until all the hay lay in neat five feet swaths. Luckily, the wooden pitman rod didn't break as it did last year. That really upset Dad, as he has to hue out a new one. Now he has a spare hanging in the tool shed. I watched as he came back and took his scythe to mow around the edges of

the fence and in the corners, so brush wouldn't take over.

Sister called out "dinner is ready." We all scrambled into the house. Mother was steaming in the hot kitchen, along with the hearty meal. The wood cook stove seemed to heat more in the summer. We children ate quickly as we planned to dam the ditch to make a place to swim, actually paddle in the water as it had rained the night before. The afternoon flicked by at high speed.

It was beautiful and sunny the following morning. The hay had dried on the top side. Hastily, the men set about turning the hay over, and fluffing it up, so the wind would dry it more quickly. Of course, being a tom boy I was close behind, walking barefoot on the fresh mown stubbles of hay, gingerly trying to follow in their footsteps. Their's was a tedious job, but mine, much more painful.

We enjoyed an early dinner which we ate outside. Mother had prepared one of her delicious thickened potato soups. It was served cold, along with hunks of homemade bread.

One horse was then hitched to the rake and Dad started the raking the sweet smelling hay into wind rows. Everyone including sister, who was big enough to handle a fork joined in tumbling the hay. I helped a bit but proved to be a pest. So I was sent to play in the shade of the pine trees or climb with brother Ross on a huge rock which had fascinating crevices and plateaus. (Now I look at the same stone and it has diminished greatly in size to what my young eyes implanted in my memory.) Soon the field looked superb with tumbles of hay all about.

The hay wagon, pulled by the team of horses, headed for the field. We sat lined up on the edge of the hayrack like a flock of swallows on a wire, eager to commence what would later become drudgery as the season wore on.

I was chosen to drive the horses. Robert on one side and Dad on the other, pitched the hay onto the wagon with their forks. Ross was on the load placing the tumbles. Once the horses stopped abruptly, sending him to his knees. Later, while daydreaming, the reins seemed to slip through my finger and the horses meandered, passing over tumbles of hay. "If you can't drive, get off and let someone who can!" was the comment from my brothers. This smartened me up, because I wanted to be one of the guys. Girls as yet, didn't wear slacks, so my legs itched and were scratched, by the hay being piled all about me. But who cares, I'm still on the load! We brought the hay to the barn and the men pitched it off into the mows.

I ran to the house to see what there was to drink. Sometimes Mom had ginger water, other times oatmeal water, and occasionally lemonade. Everyone was drier than a cork leg. "What's to drink, Mom?" I asked. "Oh no! We were busy and didn't expect you so soon!" she replied. Gramma said, "Scurry down cellar and find a jar of apple jelly." She swiftly stirred this into cold water, making a delectable apple drink. Gramma filled the large aluminium pitcher to the brim and in seconds of the men's arrival, it was down to the small lumps of undissolved jelly at the bottom. What a life saver!

It was real late afternoon by now, but the men were afraid it might rain, so decided to get another load of hay. Dad said "you younger ones stay here." We were a bit disappointed, but soon were swinging on the rope swings, hung from the trees by the driveway. We waited patiently until we saw the hay load coming up the road. Then, quickly we got our swings in motion, swinging higher and higher, until we were the height of the load. Dad stopped the horses and we sailed up and let go of the swing ropes. Whee! We flew onto the soft load of hay, of course, Dad was then to grasp our hands to make sure we didn't fall.

Dad said the boys stayed in the field to stook the remaining hay -- to better shed the rain. He let us ride into the barn on the load and we jumped down into the sweetness of the hay mow.

It rained the next day, as predicted. So, while Dad repaired machinery, the boys mowed back the load of hay from the night before. Now we had a great place to play. We climbed upon the barn beams and jumped into the hay, so soft and deep, almost smothering. Who could climb the highest and dare to jump was challenging. The hay was scratchy but we didn't even notice as we were having so much fun.

Later, while Dad cut more hay, Mom took the old mare and raked scatterings of hay left when picking up the tumbles. My sister and one of the boys took turns raking with a wooden hand rake, to get in all the corners. Not a bit of hay was left to waste.

A few years later we were still haying as a family, but we were slightly more modern. Dad cut the hay as usual, but raked with a side delivery rake. I still was the tom boy, so drove the horses, but now, had a hay loader in tow behind the hay wagon. "You still don't know how to drive" said brother. "Oh ya! Well you try to stay straddled the wind rows and turn and not miss the hay at the end." He just laughed and kept on loading. "You don't do too badly for a girl." That comment made me really concentrate and by sheer luck, I didn't miss as I turned onto another row of hay. "Slow down, the rakings are big and I can't handle ail the hay as it comes up the loader" brother shouted. "Ah ha! got you" I replied.

We banter on, but when we get to the barn we do our jobs as usual. There is now a hay fork for unloading. A rope threaded through a pulley, which was anchored to a beam, had a huge horse shoe shaped fork attached to one end and a horse at the other. It's my job to

lead the horse on the hay fork. One of the boys jabs the fork into the hay and yells ready. Out we go. They trip the cord on the hay fork, releasing the hay, which falls into the mow. In we go. Back and forth.

Dad decides to buy a tractor. Everybody else seemed to be using them and they were faster than horses. We all agreed to this. Then Dad got a hay tedder and it was as if nothing would stand still ever again, when Dad bought a hay baler and a second tractor.

The hay baler age found me out of the fields and working at a bank in town. Too bad, maybe I could have run over a few bales with the tractor!
