

*It is haying season here on Coe Creek. The round bales are handled by a tractor these days, and there isn't much hand work involved in haying, but that was not always the case. Evolutions in technology and availability of labor over the 145 years since my great grandparents homesteaded here have made for great change.*

*Several years ago, I wrote a book about our area and how it has developed over the decades. Following is a reprint of the section about haying. This will appear as the "newsletter" on our web site over the next several weeks. This book came out at a time when the small "square" bales were standard on most area farms.*

Farmers here sometimes curse the old gambrel-roofed barns that are still standard buildings on many farms. While the workers are sweating, fighting hay bales into the upper reaches of those mows which are only accessible by long, noisy elevators, they might wonder what had possessed their ancestors when they built these barns. Were they trying to create monuments reaching to the sky? Were they attempting to outdo their neighbors? Most farmers don't really waste their time speculating. Either they can remember how loose hay was handled, or they have heard plenty about it.

Just as big, low, open pole barns are gradually replacing these high, usually red structures that constitute the American symbol for the farm, the older barns, too, were once quite revolutionary in design. The first farmers usually had low log barns, suitable for frontier homesteading with a couple of cows and a team of horses. As they cleared land, however, they could raise more hay, and their livestock numbers grew. The hard-working settlers were tired of cramming hay up under the low eaves. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, many of the old barns were replaced by new, high buildings.

In the meantime, improvements in haymaking developed. These were radical departures from the old days. After years of shocking hay into miniature hay stacks all over the meadows, pitching every shock up onto the load of hay, and pitching the hay back off again in the barn or at the hay stack, most farmers welcomed the improvements. The hay loader became popular. With this machine, a tractor or team of horses pulled the hay rack with the loader hooked on behind, down each windrow of raked loose hay—there was no longer any need for shocking. The long fingers of the hay loader pushed that hay right up over the back of the wagon. One person (although sometimes two shared the job) could fork the hay evenly over the rack, building a large and stable load. The hay loader turned out to be a great labor saving device.

There could be problems, of course, as with any other tool humans have devised over the years. If the windrows were too big, or if the hay was *tough*, either from dampness or from incomplete curing, the hay loader could become plugged with hay. It was sometimes a real job to crawl under the machine and clean it out. The sweat and hay chaff mingled, making backs itch and eyes redden.

The other main difficulty with the hay loader had at least two possible causes. Sometimes, after the hay loader was unhooked to be left in the field for the next load, the hitch caught on something under the wagon, and the loader came right along to the barn without anyone realizing what had happened. At other times, the person responsible for unhooking the loader just plain forgot. The hay loader was not as high as a full load of hay, and if there were no riders on the load, no one would notice that the machine was still behind the wagon. Either situation was a recipe for trouble.

A load of loose hay could just squeeze through the barn doorway. A wooden slat on the hay loader does not squeeze. The result of pulling the loader into the barn behind the hay was always the same—one or more broken slats. Then, time was lost while the offending parts were removed, repaired, and installed again.

The hay loader, of course, had no influence on barn-building. It worked equally well to load hay for the old log barns. It was really the method for removing the hay from the wagons that changed people's minds about constructing these farm buildings. Some people had grapple forks to help with the unloading. They were a big improvement over pitching off every last forkful by hand, but they could not equal the system which quickly became popular in our area.

More next week. *The picture below shows my father and one of his nephews loading hay in the 1920s. My grandfather had sent this picture to relatives in Sweden, and they allowed me to scan it and other family snapshots we did not have here.*

