

*The rest of the haying story:*

As with the hay loader, the sling system, too, left room for trouble. There probably is no technique that is accident-proof. Human error was sometimes the problem with the slings. The back sling ropes were almost buried in hay, and the loads were so large that the top two slings were well above the back standard of the hay rack. If one were not careful to locate both of them, it was possible, and it did happen, that the front on one sling was hooked up with the back of another. When the pulleys met and the load came together, they started upward, but took no hay with them. They merely pulled loose two whole sets of slings, leaving the complete load of hay on the bottom slings. This meant that there was, as in the old days, plenty of hand labor in store for the crew.

It was not advisable to try to take up a whole load of hay at one time, even if the sling ropes had been long enough, so somebody had to pitch two-thirds of that load off onto the barn floor. The head of the crew was never too pleased by this development, even if he'd committed the error himself. They would pull the last sling load up, back out the wagon, and lay the slings on the barn floor. Then, they pitched hay back onto the slings and pulled it up again. If rain were threatening and there were several loads of dry hay lying in windrows, this was a very annoying development.

If the person who hooked up the slings had the misfortune to get one rope on the wrong side of the back standard, that necessary addition to the hay rack would start upward with the sling load of hay. This was one sure way to elicit loud shouts from the hay boss overhead, usually in the form of "Whoa!" repeated rapidly. He was usually able to stop the driver in time to avoid breaking the standard.

Sometimes, a sling rope broke. This could happen at any point. On occasion, luck prevailed and the hay dropped safely into the mow. At other times, it came straight back onto the load, and pitchforks were once again the tools of necessity.

Very infrequently, perhaps once every several years, the big hay rope broke. Although it received an inspection at the beginning of each season, weak places were not always evident. When this rope snapped, it, too, let the sling load of hay drop.

The rope was long and expensive, and it was not replaced at the first break. Instead, the rope was spliced to make a smooth joint that would pass easily through the pulleys. This was probably frustrating for farmers with lots of hay to haul, but it was fun for the kids to watch. My father always sat on a potato crate to splice rope. As he worked, he used a sharpened hardwood stick to open the tight strands, and his tongue helped him, protruding occasionally from the corner of his mouth. His face and shirt were sweaty and dirty, but he was never too tired to use the rope splicing interlude to tell stories or to joke with small onlookers.

We had a dog, old Duke, who rode every load of hay all season

long. Year after year, the collie jumped up onto the wagon for every trip to the hay fields. He was soon accustomed to the rhythm of loading hay, and he'd move back and forth at the front of the hay rack, staying on top of the load. He'd ride home high up on the fragrant loose hay. When the load arrived on the barn floor, he'd slide and skitter down the side of the load to the floor. Then, he'd go to the yard and lie in the shade until the crew was ready to go to the field again. He didn't consider the unloading process to be either interesting or any of his responsibility.

*After the loose hay/sling system came the Allis-Chalmers small round baler, then the more common "square" baler, and now, a round bale system again, but with bales weighing 500 pounds instead of 50.*

