

54. ASPEN HAYLAGE

The Kamikaze Bros. - A couple of guys stopped to inquire about fishing, and that's how we met Paul and Norm (*Stormin' Norman*) Staley aka *the Kamikaze Bros.*, a fearless duo in their mid-20s.

They lived in the Cobb Lake area near Loveland and did custom field work for farmers in that neighborhood. One of the services they provided was *field chopping*.¹

Haylage - We were short on cash and looking for any way to economize that made sense. I had thought that putting up our grass and/or alfalfa as *haylage* might be worth trying.² Paul said that our haying schedule (June 20 - July 10) would fit in well between their first and second cuttings around Cobb Lake, so as a trial, I hired Paul and Norm in the summer of 1981 to green-chop some grass hay at Rabbit Creek. There was a pit silo on our place that Bill Tibbits had used.³ We packed it full of the chopped green grass. When we fed it out that winter, it made excellent feed. Our trial worked well enough that we had a trench silo dug at Rabbit Creek the next spring.

We could not have justified the expense of the equipment for harvesting haylage, but having the chance to hire a custom operator crazy enough to come up to Livermore was an opportunity too good to pass up. As it turned out, putting up our first cutting as haylage allowed us to cut back on our hay equipment needs and enabled us an opportunity to partially automate feeding by using a feed truck that conveyed the haylage into the feedbunks that Kent and I had built at the Tibbits Place, Rabbit Creek and the Ferree Place.

Paul and Norm operated on a chewing gum and baling wire shoestring with appallingly worn machinery. Their field chopper or *forage harvester* was a self-propelled diesel monster which they used in the summer to chop *sorghum-sudan grass* and green alfalfa to provide lush feed for dairy cows. In the fall

they used the field chopper to harvest corn for silage (Chapter 52).

Their elderly behemoth harvester was attended by two heavy, dilapidated twin-screw diesel trucks (cab-over MACs) with side-dump boxes for hauling the *green-chop* from the field. This motley outfit was accessorized by an overloaded service truck with a crane, generator, electric welder, cutting torch, air compressor, bumper vise and all the other fixins'. Needless to say, Paul and Norm were, of necessity, talented, make-do mechanics and we had a really good shop facility on the ranch that they could use as a backup.

By 1983, we had dug two more pits at Rabbit Creek (Chapter 20) and one at the Ferree Place and were putting up almost all of our 800 acre first cutting as haylage with the help of the Kamikaze Bros. (so named because they charged into our hay meadows as if on a suicide mission). Both attired in tee shirts, jeans and baseball caps, Paul was tall and lean while Stormin' Norman favored the burly side with glasses as thick as Coke bottle bottoms. They emerged sweaty, covered with mud and grease and dust, but cheerful from sixteen-hour days punctuated by untold breakdowns and axel-deep mirings - all of which were overcome by their boundless energy and ingenious, quirky fixes. These guys were good.

Aspen Chips - As we were getting to know the Kamakaze Bros., I continued on the lookout for cheap feed. As I drove by the Forks Lumber on the way to town, I kept looking at the pile of sawdust and wondering if that could be fed to cows. The scant information (pre-internet) I could find suggested that, in addition to low palatability, toxicity problems were associated with the terpenes in evergreen sap. Also, pregnant cows that browse on pine needles can abort. So, scratch that. But I did run on to an academic paper discussing the palatability and digestibility of aspen wood for cattle.⁴

It turned out that there was an aspen chipboard mill at Kremling in Middle Park that flaked aspen.

The finer aspen flakes were discarded and available for the cost of hauling.

We had a lot of aspen chips hauled over, which we mixed with our green-chop as we packed the mix in the silos. This was especially useful with our new stands of alfalfa, as the aspen chips were dry enough to bring down the alfalfa's moisture content to a level that allowed us to direct chop the standing crop without needing to windrow first.

Our aspen haylage made a low-cost, well-balanced feed that we used for several years. Unfortunately, it came to an abrupt end when a load of chips was delivered contaminated with a bunch of gravel accidentally scooped up by a front-end loader in Kremling (imagine cows biting down on that!). We had to scrape off and discard a layer of haylage. I blew a gasket and raised a big fuss with the trucking company and the chipboard mill and that turned out to be the end of that.

I wonder if anyone is feeding aspen these days? If so, where and how?

¹ Cutting green plants (corn, grass, alfalfa) direct in the field. The finely chopped material is propelled by a blower into a truck running along side

² My father was a fan of *haylage*, silage made from green grass or alfalfa. This can be an excellent feed, but trickier to make than corn silage - very sensitive to moisture content, especially alfalfa, which usually needs to be windrowed to wilt for a few hours before chopping, so as to reduce moisture content.

³ Silage pits vary considerably in size, but a typical mid-century pit might be 10' deep, 25' wide and 100' long. Until the 1970s, Livermore produced a wider range of irrigated crops than just hay, including corn. Bill Tibbits raised corn for silage, which he put up in a pit silo. The Williams also had a silage pit at Rabbit Creek, and there were old-fashioned upright silos built in the Virginia Dale area.

⁴ *Utilization of Aspen Trees as Ruminant Feed*, L. D. Kamstra. South Dakota State University. 1977



Mixing aspen chips (right) and green-chop (left) at the Rabbit Creek pits - 1985