

## 31. FARMING WITH FATHER

My reference to the *Cherry Factory* and *hippie potters* in Chapter 28 apparently let the genie out of the bottle and now has some readers demanding the sordid details.

Actually, as a prelude, this is a good excuse to keep my promise in Chapter 2 to recall growing up in Larimer County after World War II and helping my father on the farm.

On my father's 320-acre farm south of Wellington we grew alfalfa, barley, certified grass seed, corn, oats, shelling peas, *pickles* (cucumbers), pinto beans, sugar beets, sunflowers and sweet corn.

Agriculture in the Fort Collins area was much more diversified – and the population was about 1/10 what it is now.<sup>1</sup> Sheep were a big deal – witness the Colorado A&M Rams and the Fort Collins High School *Lambkins*. The hospital was flanked by a pea shellery on the south at Prospect Road and a cheese factory on the north at Riverside. A large pickle factory occupied the corner of Mulberry and Riverside. The sugar factory on East Vine Drive was a gigantic seasonal enterprise. Depending on the time of year, the odors of fermenting pickles and beet pulp vied for attention. A large hog farm at the corner of Shields and Prospect chipped in its two bits.

Like a number of farmers in those days, we lived in Fort Collins and commuted to the farm (nine miles away). Heading out of town north of the river on College Avenue under a double bower of big old cottonwoods was my favorite part of the drive. In our immediate neighborhood were several active and retired farmers and ranchers (including Thorwald Sackett, whom we met in Chapters 26 and 27).<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, we had a variety of livestock – beef cattle, hogs and a dairy. I'm just old enough to remember draft horses, too.

At the age of nine, my father handed me a hoe, a file (to keep the hoe sharp), a pair of new leather gloves, a straw hat, a quart of water in a Mason jar

and sent me out to thin sugar beets with the *nationals* (men imported from Mexico under the *Bracero Program*<sup>3</sup>).

The seeds of whatever humility I possess (not much, according to some) were sprouted then. Those Mexicans knew the ways and cadence of manual labor – a human art form, now largely forgotten to our culture. I'm still impressed.

As the years went by, I moved up the ladder to picking pickles, irrigating, *shocking*<sup>4</sup> barley, stacking hay and straw, cultivating corn, pinto beans, and sugar beets, farrowing sows, forking silage and hauling livestock to the old Denver Stockyards in a 1941 International truck (that long grade south of the Little Thompson on the old Washington Highway was a doozy).

My father embraced physical work – doing things by hand. There was nothing he couldn't move with a pinch bar and a roller. He told of days gone by when a good man with a scythe and a pocket stone could cut up to three acres of grain or hay a day (I challenge anyone to try even 1% of that sometime!).

He observed that new-fangled combines<sup>5</sup> wasted grain, so we continued to use an old McCormick Reaper-Binder and a threshing machine (plus lots of elbow grease) long after everyone else in the county had consigned theirs to the junk yard.

He used a seed cleaner for processing his own farm-raised seed and was particularly irritated that the hybrid seed companies were conspiring to make *open pollinated* seed corn a relic of the past.

Although I recognize him now as having been quite progressive, I didn't then. He was skeptical of modern for the sake of modern and embraced traditional ways until convinced otherwise, but once convinced, he was all in.

My father had a penchant for *organic methods* when organic was still the province of the lunatic fringe. He made a deal with the City of Fort Collins to dump leaf waste gathered from city streets on land that is

now Martinez Park. He seeded the piles of leaves with earthworms<sup>6</sup> and after a decent interval, we hauled the resulting compost (100s of tons) to the farm and spread it on sugar beet ground.

Well... in the mid-50s there was stuff other than leaves that populated the gutters of Fort Collins. The most memorable included license plates, beer and sardine cans, and an occasional condom. I'd have to stop frequently and climb under the tractor to pull the danged stuff off the beet cultivator's bull tongues – all the while hoping the neighbors weren't watching.

As I grew older, my father's old-fashioned ways and unconventional methods caused me increasing discomfort – mostly my embarrassment about what the neighbors thought – I'm sure they thought plenty...

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<sup>1</sup> ~14,000 plus 3,000 students at the college.

<sup>2</sup> When I was between five and seven, I used to join Mr. Sackett (then the Larimer County Surveyor) on his early morning walks with his bulldog, *Tuffy*.

<sup>3</sup> A guest worker program for Mexican 'nationals' that dated back to 1942. In our case, the Great Western Sugar Company arranged for these men. Almost every farm had a 'beet house' equipped with beds, mattresses, blankets and a wood or coal cook stove per specifications of the 'sugar company'.

<sup>4</sup> If I'm not the last man standing in Larimer County who remembers *shocking* grain, I soon will be. If it gets too close to ripe, grain has a tendency to *shatter* (shell out on the ground). Traditionally grain was cut before fully ripe, bound, and the resulting *sheaves* grouped together in *shocks* of 6-8 bundles with the grain heads sticking up to fully ripen (*sweat*) for a week or so, after which the *sheaves* were pitchforked onto a wagon to be taken to a threshing machine.

<sup>5</sup> The term *combine* describes a machine that combines the functions of the *reaper* and the *threshing machine*.

<sup>6</sup> '*African Red Wigglers*' bought mail order from The Carter Worm Ranch in Plains, Georgia (the future President Jimmy Carter's cousin was the proprietor).

