

**From the Cradle to the Combine
Via the Flail, the Reaper and the Threshing Machine
by Verna Blaisdell Matz**

I found an old Bill of Sale among my mother's things after she passed away in 1948. Note the date on the sale bill. This gives you an idea what life was like at that time. Please note 1500 ten foot fence rails. I have seen the remnants of those rail fences that were put together without nails or screw. There were no notches of any kind. We never had them in Minnesota, but in Ohio they were still there.

1840 Bill of Sale

“Having sold my farm and leaving for the Oregon Territory by ox team, I will offer on March 1, 1840, my personal property, to wit:

“All ox teams except two teams, Buck and Ben and Tom and Jerry, two milk cows; one gray mare and colt; one pair of oxen and yoke; one baby yoke; two ox carts; one iron plow with wood mold board; 800 feet of poplar weather boards to 1,000 three foot clapboards; 1500 ten foot fence rails; one 60 gallon soap kettle; 85 sugar troughs made of white ash;

“10 gallons maple syrup; two spinning wheels; 30 pounds of mutton tallow; one large loom made by Jerry Wilson; 300 poles; 100 split hoops; 100 empty barrels; one 32 gallon barrel of Johnson Miller whiskey, seven years old; 20 gallons of apple brandy; one 40 gallon copper still of oak tanned leather; one dozen real hooks; two handle hooks; three scythes and cradles; one dozen wooden pitchforks; one half interest in tan yard;

“One 32 calibre rifle, bullet mold and powder horn; rifle made by Ben Miller; 50 gallons of soft soap; hams, bacon, and lard; 40 gallons of sorghum molasses; six head of fox hounds, all soft mouthed except one.

“At the same time I will sell my six Negro slaves – two men 35 and 50 years old, two boys 12 and 18 years old; two mulatto wenches 40 and 30 years old. Will sell all together to the same party as will not separate them.

“Terms of sale, cash in hand or note to draw 4 percent interest with Bob McConnell as surety. My home is two miles south of Versailles, Kentucky, on the McCouns Ferry Pike. Sale begins at 8 a.m. Plenty to drink and eat. J. I. Moore”

The Flail

I never saw anyone use the cradles, but when we moved from Fairbault to Pemberton, Minnesota, there was one on that farm and also a wooden rake. My daddy showed me how it was used. The scythes were attached to the cradles that were a shallow basket. The blade on the scythe was very sharp.

A few good swings with it and there would be enough grain in the basket to make a bundle, which would be tied around the middle by hand. When they had eight bundles it would be put into a shock, plus one to put on the top to keep the birds out of it. When it had dried well, they took it to the barn, if they had one, and used the flail to flail it out. [Flail: a tool for threshing grain by hand.]

The only time I remember using the flail was when we raised navy beans. Dad would cut them, let them get nice and dry, put a big canvass on the barn floor and flail them out. We would have a lot of beans but also a lot of leaves and some stems. We would put them on a sheet on the big dining room table and sort beans in the evenings. No TV or computers to take up our evenings.

The flail was made of two oak poles. They were put together with hardware of some sort so that the smaller one, which was about 20 inches long, would swivel and you just flailed them out.

The Reaper

Now we come to the reaper, invented by Cyrus McCormick. I have a medal that looks like copper. The medal could be copper. The Indian Head pennies we used in 1931 were pure copper. It was put out by the International Harvester Company. It was made in celebration of the centennial of the invention of the reaper – 1831-1931.

Cyrus McCormick was born in 1809 and died in 1884. The picture on the back of the medal has the original reaper as he made it. It is being pulled by a man on horseback. Another man is walking behind the reaper. It does not resemble the binder we used. Ours took five horses to pull it.

The Threshing Machine

The grain is in the shocks in the field. It has to be loaded and hauled to a place close to the barn. It has to be stacked. My father could build those stacks really well. When he got to the top he would need the longest extension ladder we had to get off the stack. He would build the stack up to a peak. The stacks would be in rows. They had to have space between the rows for the separator of the thresher.

The week before threshing started a man would come in and leave a pile of coal to fire the engine. The engine had to be a long distance from the separator to avoid a fire.

At this time our railroad trains were also coal fired. The train had a coal car just behind the engine. On a train we had an engineer, a fireman, a conductor and a brakeman. There was a caboose on the tail end of the train where the crews could sleep and eat. The passenger trains had a dining car. This all changed when diesel fuel was available. I suspect that was also when the threshing machines changed too.

A thrashing crew

In order for the threshing machine engine to be away from the straw, there was a very long, wide belt between the stacks and the threshing machine. It took four men to put it on and take it off. There was a wing on each side that went to the stacks. These could be raised and lowered since the stacks were up to a peak. Only one man could start feeding in the bundles.

When the stack got wider two men worked. The straw stack blew the oat straw onto the straw shed, like a pole barn. This was where the cattle, young and old, stayed in the winter. The wheat straw was put in a pile outside the barn yard. The grain was bagged and taken to the granary to be emptied. That process took a couple of men on each side.

Someone had to run the straw stack to lower, raise or redirect it. The wheat was later shoveled up into a box atop a wagon and hauled to market with horses. In Minnesota we planted wheat in the spring. In Ohio it was planted in the fall. Spring wheat is the best for bread flour; that's the reason Minneapolis is the largest flour milling city in the United States.

To feed the men we had an oak table with seven leaves, covering the length of the dining room. All the men could be crowded around it. You never saw so much food disappear in so short a time. Mama, Grandma and I worked all forenoon to prepare it, and it took less than fifteen minutes for the food to disappear. My job was to peel the potatoes and help make pies. I learned to bake pies and cakes early on.

The men that traveled with the machine brought a trailer; it was more like a big box on wheels. They slept in it. If they got to our place late, we fed them supper. The neighbors all traded help. The men that "slept over" came to the house to wash and eat breakfast. You never knew what time anything would happen; you prepared for everything.

It looks as though the job was almost complete. The pole in the photo was brought, put up and taken down when finished. According to the photo, the threshing job was almost finished. We kids had a straw tick on our beds. Grandma, mother and dad had feather ticks – no mattresses. [Tick: The fabric case of a mattress or pillow.]

When the threshing was finished, we had to empty the ticks of the old straw and refill them with the new wheat straw. My sister, Evelyn, and I had one for a double bed. My brother, Luemun, had a single bed. Evelyn and I worked hard to keep ours clean on the outside. We would stuff them really full, and it was difficult to get into bed for a couple of weeks, but it was a lot of fun trying.

The first combine I remember cut the grain and left the straw in the field. It pulled a wagon behind it, and the grain was put into the wagon. One modification was really big.

The man driving it looked like a bird in a big tree. He drove it like an automobile with rubber tires. The combine cut, threshed and stored the grain. He drove from the field directly to the elevator to be sold. The straw was left on the field or raked and baled.

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Verna Angeline (Blaisdell) Matz, 15 January 1908 in Fairbault, MN, died 17 October 2007 at the age of 99 in Ft. Wayne, IN. For many years before her death she volunteered at the Boys and Girls Club, Fort Wayne, Allen, IN, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons. Her volunteer work was recognized by President Bill Clinton and the Indianapolis Colts. She was Associate Editor, *Blaisdell Papers*, from 1975-2006.