

# How Grandpa Got to Sleep In

A Story for my Grandchildren - by Bill Reimer

June 30, 2003

Your Great-Great-Grandfather never did like horses. He had to get up at least an hour early to feed and groom them before breakfast. Once out in the field, he always had to struggle to keep them under control so the swaths would be straight enough to please the boss. This all seemed like too much work.

The worst part was at night. After having spent a long day in the hot sun, breathing dust, straining against the traces, and tossing the sheaves into the thresher he couldn't just leave them in the barn. They had to be groomed and fed. That meant another hour's work before he could get to the comfort of the evening meal, and from there to bed.

Oxen were better. In the morning all he had to do was to call them in from the field where they were grazing, harness them up, and get to work. They weren't skittish like horses. All day they would plod along. Their relatively slow pace meant that he could keep the furrows straight and still have time to watch the birds fight for morsels in the freshly turned soil, or make plans for the winter voyage to B.C., or just dream. Under those conditions, the sun didn't seem like an enemy, but provided the warmth which made dreaming possible, while the dust carried the scent of the land and with it the promise of a full harvest.



**Figure 1:** Grandpa driving the oxen to the threshing machine (He wrote the caption.)

The best part was the evening. While the others were in the barn grooming the horses, Grandpa was already in the kitchen, having simply turned the oxen out to graze. It seemed the perfect setup.

This wasn't the way the farmers saw it, however. Horses were faster, they claimed. They could get more done in less time, and do it with only a little more fuss. "This is true", Grandpa would say, "but it's not enough to mean I should get to bed late." He secretly felt that the farmers preferred horses because they could drive faster when they went off to town, not because they were better in the fields.

He couldn't overcome the trend, however. Traveling from farm to farm, he found fewer and fewer oxen. It was only because the crew boss kept two oxen that Grandpa was spared the early mornings and late nights. But even these were to disappear when his boss sold them to pay for tractor gas.

Gasoline wasn't easy to come by in those days. There were only a few automobiles around, and most farmers only saw tractors in the fall, when the harvesting crews moved through their region. At first these tractors were the huge steam driven machines which were used to power the threshing machines. Each autumn the crews would arrive: the smoke from their tractor announcing their arrival long before the caravan drove into the yard.

By the time they arrived, everyone was ready, since preparations had been made days in

advance. Farmers from all over the region arrived with their families. With each arrival, the farm yard would once again fill up as the women interrupted the food preparation to greet the newcomers, more food was unloaded, the buckboards were prepared for hauling the grain, and the business of small talk had begun.

Grandpa was a master of small talk, particularly if it involved tall tales. He seemed to know how much the truth could be stretched before his audience would catch on and eventually break out in laughter. He was even able to come through on a sufficient number of his boasts that they were half willing to believe his claims. He found that there was much to be gained by this talent, if one took advantage of the opportunities that arose.

It was one such opportunity that led to the resolution of his problem with horses.



**Figure 2:** This is a threshing unit with a steam tractor, not the gasoline one that Grandpa operated in this story. The tractor is connected to the thresher by a long leather belt.

It was one fall near Herbert and they were well into the threshing season when the opportunity arose. Grandpa was on his way to the farmyard with a fresh load of sheaves ready for the threshing machine when he noticed that the steady growl of its driving tractor was interrupted by several coughs, sputters, and finally silence. By the time he reined his horses in beside the thresher, a small group of workers had already gathered around the tractor checking it both inside and out.

“We’re out of gas” announced Dick as Grandpa jumped down from the buckboard.

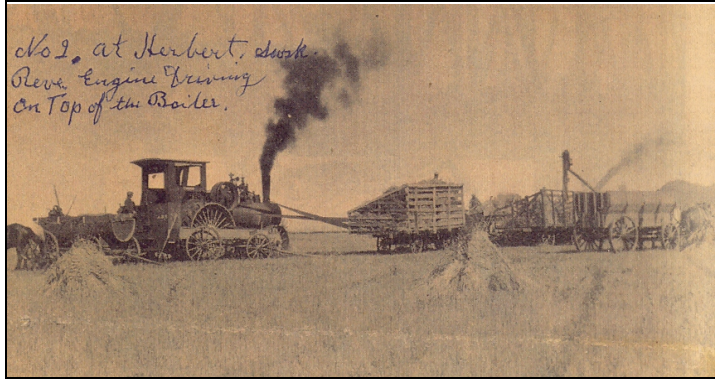
“This is a disaster!” exclaimed Henry. He had most to lose from an idle threshing machine at the peak of the season. “I’ve got to finish this farm today since I promised to be over at Jake’s place tomorrow - first thing.” The nearest place for more gas was at least 5 miles away, and even with the fastest horses, they wouldn’t be able to get the tractor running until the afternoon was gone.

Grandpa immediately saw his chance. “Henry!”, he cried, “What would you give me if I got your tractor going again - right now?”

“Watch it, Pete”, Ed whispered, “Henry is in no mood for one of your jokes right now. He’s liable to fire you on the spot if you start teasing him.”

"I'm not joking.", answered Grandpa – loud enough to attract the attention of everyone around the tractor. "I can get your tractor going."

"What have you got in mind, Pete?", asked Henry, careful to avoid being the butt of another of Grandpa's jokes, but desperate enough to explore all possibilities.



**Figure 3:** The long belt is partly covered by a wagon with sheaves for the threshing machine.

"Here's what I propose. If I keep your tractor going 'til we get more gasoline, I want someone to look after my horses for the rest of the season. Here's the deal: I get to sleep in 'til breakfast is ready in the morning, someone else prepares my horses, then calls me when they are ready to go. At night, I turn over the reins to someone else, then they worry about feeding and grooming them so that I can get my dinner and head off to bed without the bother. Is it a deal?"

"How are you going to do that, Pete?" taunted Dick – "Do you think you can crank it over all by yourself?"

"I bet he's going to get the horses to do it." quipped Ed, and the whole crew began suggesting more outrageous ways that Grandpa would keep the threshing going without gasoline.

It didn't take long for them to fall silent when Henry finally spoke, however.

"I'm not ready for one of your tricks, Pete", he said, "but if you are able to pull it off, I would be happy to groom those horses myself!"

"Dick", Grandpa said, "run into the house and get me a teaspoon." "Ed, go get me a pail of water."

"Are you going to run it on water?" teased Ed, and the others broke into laughter.

"Go, make yourselves useful." Grandpa ordered. "Go and get that drum of kerosine I saw out by the barn."

The laughter subsided as the work crew considered what Grandpa's plan might have been.

"You can't run the tractor on kerosine." warned Ed, "It burns too hot and you'll crack the pistons."

"Don't worry," replied Grandpa, "I'll keep it under control – I've managed this before quite nicely."

"OK" he said, "you guys get to your work, 'cause we'll need that grain in no time."

While the others went for the spoon, water, and kerosene, Grandpa climbed up on the tractor, removed the air filter from the carburetor, and adjusted the shade to make sure he avoided the bright sun, before settling in comfortably.



“Fill up the tank with that kerosene.” he ordered when the crew returned with the drum. “Pass me up that bucket and spoon.”

Once everything was in order, Grandpa called for some action on the crank, and after a few minutes of hard work, the tractor sputtered into action and the thresher belt began its characteristic hiss. The whole crew stood around in disbelief that it would keep going.

Their fears were realized when they began to hear the ‘ping’, ‘ping’, ‘ping’ of the pistons once the tractor engine got heated up, but Grandpa was ready for it. At the first sound, he dipped out a teaspoonful of water and slowly poured it into the open carburetor. As if by magic, the ‘ping’ disappeared and the engine kept running like a finely tuned machine.

In spite of their wish to see Pete make a fool of himself, they all cheered.

“What are you guys gawking at?” yelled Grandpa from his station atop the tractor. “Can’t you see that the machine is going to need more sheaves?”

Shaking their heads in amazement, the crew turned back to their tasks with the sound of the tractor at their backs.

Every so often during the day, they would hear the ‘ping’ begin, then quickly fade out as Grandpa added the cooling water from his perch. They could easily imagine the smile on his face as he sat there under the shade while they were out in the field heaving the grain in the hot sun.

That evening, Grandpa was no-where to be seen in the barn. Even after the gasoline had arrived, he could only be found in the house – most often teasing the women as they were preparing the meal. Instead, it was Henry who was busy at work rubbing down the animals and feeding them their evening oats.

But it was the mornings that Grandpa particularly enjoyed. He would partially awake as he heard the others get up and grumble their way out to the barn. He would lie in bed listening to the sounds of the kitchen and only get up once he heard the clang of the dinner bell calling the crew to breakfast.

It was his favorite season of threshing.

