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THE RED RIVER SPECIAL

The slow method of harvesting wheat with a sickle and later with a scythe and cradle, was superseded in 1831 by the wonderful reaping machine invented by young Cyrus McCormick. The marvelous invention made it possible to plant and harvest large crops.

Fifty years later the reaper had been modified into a self-binder which not only cut the grain but cleverly knotted twine around bundles or sheaves of wheat. When the binder cut swaths through the fields, rabbits which were nesting in the waving grain, scampered aimlessly for safety. Close behind were laborers hoping to pounce on one or more of the shy creatures to take home for supper. The workers were not there to chase rabbits, however, but to arrange the sheaves in low shocks piled in such a manner that in the event of rain, they would drain.

Winter wheat ripened and was cut in June each year. Threshing followed within a few weeks but was somtimes delayed till August. To the onlooker, threshing appeared to be one of the hottest, grimiest, itchiest jobs a farmer and his hired hands got into each summer--about on the same level as hauling in hay to the barn. A worker usually had a bandanna handkerchief knotted at his neck to shut out chaff, dust, and straw.

Around the turn of the century many farmers owned binders but relied on XXX independent crews to thresh and bag the grain.

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In 1889 when he was only ~~seventeen~~ years old, Luther

Bryars was bold enough to buy and take on the responsibility of a steam-operated sawmill. He eventually acquired a XXXXXXXXX threshing machine to use with the steam engine during wheat harvest. Around the last of June each year he called a halt to sawmilling and with his crew of workers moved through the Oakton-Oakwood farming area harvesting wheat with his Red River Special. His slow rural procession included not only the steam engine and thresher but a cook wagon and a water wagon. The crew left home on Monday mornings and stayed for a week at a time--bathing in farm ponds and sleeping out in the open at night on pallets made of quilts and fresh straw. Among the operators of the steam engine were Lindsey Crumble and Boone Rash.

When work ceased at mealtime, the hub of the encampment was the cook wagon. The equivalent of the western chuck wagon, the horsedrawn cook wagon was a small frame house set on iron wheels with spokes. About eight by sixteen feet in size, the kitchen was equipped with a wood cookstove, food supplies, and shelves and racks filled with pots, skillets, tin cups and plates. On the sides were XXXXXXXXXXXXX 18-inch hinged sections which unfolded to ventilate the kitchen and to form tables which allowed the cook to serve workers directly from the stove. Crew members ~~either~~ stood at the tables and ate or found a seat under a shade tree.

Bryar's daughter, Lucille Owings, recalls that one of the delights of her childhood was to search out the cook wagon if it

was anywhere in the neighborhood. "We walked through blistering hot dust just to get some of Uncle George Allison's delicious green beans--so heavily peppered that they were black. At breakfast, she said, Allison served up scrambled eggs, slab bacon, biscuits, sorghum molasses and lots of coffee. [illegible]

In 1942 Luther Bryars contributed his last steam engine, a 1928 model, to the World War II scrap metal drive. It took two caterpillar tractors to drag the 18,700 pound monster to a collection point.

Before moving threshing machinery from one farm to another, workmen went ahead to check and brace bridges for safe passage of the heavy equipment. Once the thresher was positioned, sheaves of wheat were hauled by the wagonload so that the grains could be separated from the stalks. Edward Kimbell said the first money he ever made was a quarter a day opening and shutting a gate for his grandfather as wagons passed through with loads of wheat.

Besides providing water for drinking and cooking, the water wagon nourished the boiler of the steam engine, often replenishing its supply from ponds on the farm. As the process got underway, the woodburning boiler turned water into powerful steam. The

machine hissed, black smoke belched forth, and belts whirled. Martin Williams said his job xaxaxpanngxmanxwkhknanxnx for a couple of summers with another crew was to stand on a scaffold at the side of the thresher cutting binding twine from the sheaves and pushing them into the machine while others caught the garnered grain in burlap sacks. Meanwhile, straw blew from a blow pipe to form a growing pile. "Kids loved to play on the clean heap and that's where we got fresh straw for bedticks," Edna Humphreys explained.

When Alben Barkley, a future vice-president of the nation, lived east of Clinton in the 1890s, he often worked with Calvin and XKXMAXX Ernest Hilliard during wheat harvest.

At first a water boy, Alben said he worked up to bind cutter. "I think I must have helped thresh wheat on every farm within a radius of 10 miles of Clinton," he wrote. Ernest Hilliard, a classmate of Barkley's at Clinton's Marvin College, reminisced about the cook wagon and said "Alben could eat more biscuits, bacon, and potatoes than anyone in the crew."

There was a fellowship that went with the wheat harvest which transcended its discomforts. Barkley XXXXXXX referred to it as a "hardworking but delightful experience."

Perhaps it was the sharing of work by farmers in the community or the big dinners. Even today a bountiful meal is described as "enough to feed a threshing crew." Some workers carried their lunches if it was inconvenient to eat in a farm home or from a cook wagon. But in many cases the women toiled in a hot kitchen most of the morning preparing vegetables and

meats, cobblers and cornbread for the tired and hungry farmers. The men and boys washed up outdoors at the pump or in basins set on the porch. Buckets and dippers of water were within XXXX easy reach.

The steam-powered thresher was commonplace in the XXXXX late 1800s and early decades of the 1900s but became obsolete after gasoline-driven tractors furnished power. Today the whole process of reaping and threshing has been automated and combined into a single operation. It is a beautiful sight to watch a self-propelled combine move through waves of golden grain but some of the romance has gone.