



The History Page

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Entering the Wage Earner World

On January 20, 1944 I entered my 14th year and became eligible for that all important work permit I'd need to find a paying summer job. The choice I faced was limited, if not daunting. Nearby farms and estates were the only options, the fabled earnings said to be garnered caddying at the golf course were beyond my geographic reach and skill (how does one caddy?) and all sewn up by the village kids anyway.

So it would be farming, if anything. Within reach for me in West Wenham were several small (12-18 milking cows) dairy farms, one large chicken farm (over 1,000 I was told) and one really large market gardener (farming and renting many local tillable acres). I already knew about the latter (lotsa city kids imported to do the weeding) as they rented large garden acreage right next door to us and the chicken farm was served adequately by the owners' extended family members.

My choice was resolved when my mother obtained a job for me from the mother of a local young farmer who was exempt from the military draft due to growing food for public consumption. I was to work 40 hours a week (extra at haying time if needed) and be paid \$1 a day (for 8 hours, you figure it out). Don't laugh, when a dime was valued and a quarter almost impossible to acquire as an unemployed youth, this looked to be windfall.

First job right off was cleaning out the chicken houses (the new crop of pullets, young chickens, were out on summer ranges), something I was way too familiar with at home, but here on a much larger scale, two floors in maybe a 50' long house four or more times my father's layout. One plus was getting to drive the John Deere Model L tractor hauling the tipcart full of cleanings to the fields to spread as manure. So I became quite expert at operating a motor vehicle (albeit a small 2-cylinder tractor) two years before I could get out on the highway. Other chicken chores were the familiar feeding and watering chores.

I didn't have much to do with the cows (I cannot recall how big the herd was, but it was smallish) until haying time, not long after school let out for summer. My boss rented some 25 acres of inactive farmland with barn for his haying and I got to do some horse farming. This was a lot more mechanized than my dad's small scale herd could afford (as described in the previous "Chickens & Cows" installment of this series).

The mechanization did not extend to the little John Deere tractor, it was all horse powered, using

horse drawn implements. My boss cut the hay with that deadly looking sickle bar cutter (4' swath, cut off a finger or toe, even a chunk of your foot if you got in its path). He also "tossed" the hay to dry it out (cure) in the hot sun with a tedder, a set of miniature hayforks on a row of cranks activated again by a gear connecting it to the implement's revolving wheels.

I did get to do the hay raking, controlling the horse with the reins while dumping the cured hay scooped up in the rake at regular intervals into rows by kicking a foot treadle that hooked up between wheel and rake. I also got to drive the horse drawn wagon down between the rows while the bigger guys (including my boss) tossed the hay onto it to be hauled to the barn hayloft.

Then my fun began. The wagon was parked in the barn under an overhead opening into the hayloft. A seemingly (to me) complex mechanism including a track along the barn ridgepole with a big hayfork (a set of pointed prongs operating much like a clamshell bucket does) traveling along it and dropping down onto the wagon load to pick up a clump of hay to lift into the loft, was operated by the horse pulling a long rope away from the barn. I had to stop and start the horse (walking alongside it holding its bridle when signaled by the boss who controlled dumping it where he wanted it. Timing was REAL IMPORTANT!

The toughest part was that my path away from the barn with the horse each pass of the fork led up to the porch of the farm's owner, an elderly widow lady, who had two elderly sisters living with her. It was Sunday, the Lord's Day (you made hay when the sun shined) and these ladies heaped scorn upon me (as nearest representative of this bunch of heretics. I suffered in silence, what could I say, an awkward 14 year old youth, to appease these grandmothers?

The job ended with summer and it appeared I'd be out of work (and pocket change) for a long long school session. But out of the blue an opportunity fell into my lap to take on an after school and Saturday (as well as school holidays) job on a nearby estate helping out the caretaker. A major task through the oncoming fall and winter months would be logging! Right, logging. Cutting down and to length swamp maples and hauling them out of the woods to the woodshed for sawing up for fireplace logs for the mansion's huge fireplace. All handwork in the woods with a two-man saw and a buzz saw driven off a truck rear wheel hub at the woodshed cutting to fireplace length. There'd be a lot to learn.