

# THE TRACTOR

By John S. Halbert

*"---A farmer is a man who is truly outstanding in his field."*

*---Early American Saying*

*August, 1955:*

It was late summer, just before I would start the fifth grade, and my parents had decided it was time for me to continue a family tradition by becoming a temporary farm hand. Up to now, my closest connection to nature had been the occasional visit back to the old country homestead at Grassy, in northeastern Lauderdale County, where my Uncle Neil and his family now lived. Sometimes, my uncle would let me ride with him on his red Farmall tractor, and we'd go bouncing around in the fields while I sat in his lap, see-sawing the steering wheel and pretending to guide the machine. I had heard all about how my mother, when she was a kid, had worked in the fields with her brothers and her sister, tilling crops, hoeing cotton and doing all the other chores that people did who lived on a family farm. Now, it looked as if they wanted *me* to be a farm boy while I still had some childhood left.

On a hot August Sunday afternoon, Uncle Neil drove me up to his place. The first night I was there, while getting ready for bed, I wondered where the bathroom was. My uncle jerked his thumb toward the front porch. "Don't hit the flowers by the steps!" he grinned. Since it was either that, or a long, dark trip to the "little house out back," I chose to not hit the flowers.

Bright and early the next morning, after a hearty country breakfast, and all dressed out in a flannel shirt, a stiff pair of new denim overalls, and with a red bandanna tied around my neck, I arrived down at the barn for my first barnyard lesson---milking cows. "Meet our milk cows!" My Aunt Doris handed me a three-legged stool and a galvanized metal pail. "This is Molly, and over there is Millie," she said. "You'll be milking both this morning."

Molly and Millie swung their heads around and gave me a long (skeptical, I thought) look as if they could be thinking:

*("Good morning . . .")*

*("We hope you know what you're doing . . .")*

*("We went to a lot of trouble to make this milk, and we don't want any of it wasted . . .")*

I took a deep breath and settled onto the stool alongside Molly's flank, next to an ungainly-looking, bulging, bag-like object that was slung between the cow's hind legs. The bag---or sack---whatever it was---was criss-crossed with big blue veins and had several thumb-shaped objects hanging down from the bottom of it. Fascinated, I touched the sack---it felt surprisingly warm and firm---and pulled back my hand in a hurry, almost expecting it to burst.

"That's the 'udder." Aunt Doris noticed the unsure look on my face. "And those things on the bottom of the udder are the 'teats.'" I flexed my fingers, reached out and wrapped my fingers around what looked to me like a pair of drooping, fleshy handlebar grips. "Hands on a pair of

teats----" my aunt directed. "Squeeze them firmly, and at the same time pull downward, one at a time."

I took a good hold on the floppy grips and gave a couple of pulls. Nothing happened. The bucket underneath was still dry. Molly turned her head and gazed at me with liquid brown eyes.

"Pull a little harder and it's okay to squeeze tighter," my aunt went on, "it's actually pretty easy, once you get the hang of it."

Still unsure of myself, I tugged and squeezed and pulled until a stream of milk suddenly shot out into the bottom of the galvanized gallon bucket with a metallic splash. Molly, seeming to be satisfied that everything was going to be all right down there, turned back with an approving nod of her head that brought forth a brassy "*CLANG!*" from her cowbell. Then, she went on to solemnly chewing her cud. After a few minutes, I became coordinated enough to squirt the frothy white liquid directly into my mouth---my first drink ever of really *fresh* milk straight from the cow!

Pretty soon I was finished with Molly, and, with my newly-found confidence, it was much easier to properly put the squeeze on Millie.

With milking out of the way for the morning (cows, I found out, had to be milked *twice* a day---*every* day), the next lesson in my farming education was about to begin on the other side of the barn.

"Baling hay", I learned, meant I would get to drive a tractor! Since I had never driven a real vehicle in my entire life---certainly not a fully-grown International Harvester Farmall---I was a little nervous, but anxious to learn.

"Up into the seat, there, and get a good hold on the steering wheel!" Uncle Neil directed. "Pull out the choke, set the throttle and the spark lever and pull that metal ring."

Following his directions, I was rewarded with a roar from the engine, a bone-jarring jerk, a blast of black smoke from the top-mounted exhaust pipe---then silence.

Uncle Neil, coughing, told me between gasps to push down the left pedal with my foot. "That'll disengage the clutch." I wasn't sure what he meant, but when I tried again---this time the engine kept running. "All right!" my relative shouted, not noticing my wide-eyed expression of combined fear and amazement.

Off we went, lurching down the lane toward the hay meadow. On the way, we stopped at a shed and attached the hay baler to the rear of the tractor. My relative aimed the machine back onto the rutted byway. Up to now, he had been holding onto the steering wheel with me and operating the pedals. He gave me a side glance. "Want to drive the tractor?" he yelled over noise of the clattering engine.

"Sure thing!" I shouted back, clasping my fingers around the steering wheel. Uncle Neil gave the throttle more gas and the tractor lunged forward with increased speed. For some seconds everything seemed under control as the Farmall rumbled over the lane at a good clip with me steering and the big baling machine tugging along behind us.

"Okay," my uncle casually called out to me, "Pull over there and stop." In a sudden panic I realized that *he hadn't told me where was the brake pedal!* And we were pounding full-tilt toward an open water-filled ditch at the edge of the field! The heavy hay baler began jerking back and forth, as if trying to break loose. My uncle elbowed me aside, grabbed the wheel, and stabbed at the brakes. With a squealing shudder the whole careening contraption slithered to a stop in a shower of mud at the very edge of the gaping ravine. The engine backfired and stopped running. For long seconds we just sat there. My uncle gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles and stared open-mouthed at the ditch into which we had almost fallen. A thin trail of

gray vapor drifted upward from the exhaust pipe. Wet mud dripped off the bottom of the tractor onto the soggy ground with audible "*Plops!*"

"Guess you'll have to practice on your brakes," Uncle Neil said, lifting his foot off the brake pedal. Still shaking, I dropped off the tractor and sloshed through the mud toward solid footing. My relative stood alongside the machine, shaking his head.

"Are you all right?" panted a huffing chorus of voices. A trio of farmhands who had seen what happened were running across the nearby field in our direction. There appeared to be no damage except to our dignity. Uncle Neil took a stick and scraped at chunks of mud still stuck to the tractor's underside.

Regaining his composure, he pointed at a nearby field where he wanted us start cutting the hay. We five, pulling together, hauled the machines back onto dry ground. With the baler in position behind the tractor, we were now ready for business. "Your job," my relative looked at me, ". . . is to pick up any stray hay that falls off the baler and bring it back to the front." With those instructions, I positioned myself at the rear of the procession with my pitchfork. As we moved slowly down the rows, I had plenty of opportunity to rescue renegade hay the machine was unable to digest on the first round. Up one row and down the next we went all morning, "mowing the lawn" across the field. The tractor's mowing attachment cut the hay and dropped it ahead of the baler. As the hustling, sweating helpers tossed the hay with their pitchforks into a chute at the front of the baler, a madly thrusting compactor that looked to me like a steel forearm with a clenched fist flailed back-and-forth, much as a boxer throwing angry punches, shoving the hay into a rectangular metal chamber. All the while, we had to be sure to keep a respectful distance from the arm and a wide, whirring belt that whipped dangerously close to our hands whenever we pitched a load of hay into the front of the baler. On the back end, as each bale of hay dropped off the compactor, a farmhand grabbed it and wrapped it in baling wire to hold it in its proper shape. On we went, hour-after-hour in the merciless hot summer sun, pitching and bundling my uncle's hay.

At noon, summoned by the dinner bell, we knocked-off for "dinner," which was what they called "lunch" back in those days on the farm. In the late afternoon, near sunset, we hauled the day's hay harvest to the barn in a wagon pulled by my uncle's truck. Groaning and sweating, it took all of us to winch it up into the hayloft with a block and tackle.

At sundown, tired, but happy, I returned to the farmhouse with my uncle, ready to do it again on the morrow.

Day-after-day, we gathered hay in the blisteringly-hot fields. Not only did I learn a lot about farm work, but gained a new appreciation for my mother, who had once toiled in these same hay-meadows---perhaps with the very same pitchfork I was using.

At midweek, we moved our harvesting operation to my Uncle Millard's farm up the road, and continued pitching and baling hay in the far fields, then hauling the finished bales to his barn loft.

When Friday afternoon arrived, which was to be my last day on the farm, we were still out in a field with plenty of hay yet to be cut and baled. Racing the clock, we revved-up the machines to their highest pitch and all of us tossed the fresh hay faster and faster, as my uncle wanted us to get as much into the barn as we could while all of us were still working together. But in the mid-afternoon, about an hour after returning from our dinner break, we surprised a nest of Yellow Jackets, and the angry insects swarmed at us. Everyone dropped his pitchfork and We scattered in every direction. Since I was the youngest and slowest, the buzzing squadron caught up with me, stinging me several times on the backside of my right knee. Soon, the entire

leg swelled and I began to feel weak and feverish. Somehow, I managed to keep going until we finished in the late afternoon. When Dad finally arrived to take me home, I was staggering about flushed with fever.

By the time we arrived back at our home, my knee's condition had become worse, and that night my parents called the doctor, who came to our house. He took one look and ordered me to the hospital. According to the diagnosis, I was having a major allergic reaction to the Yellow Jacket stings. (I later found out that the doctors had at first suspected that I had polio and placed me in an isolation unit.) Later, I learned that at one point, the doctors had held a conference in the hallway, outside of earshot, deciding whether or not to amputate my leg!

While all this was going on, a grinning orderly came in with a strange-looking apparatus. "Enema," he smirked, unpacking some black tubing, a red rubber bag and a white porcelain bedpan.

Grabbing the call button, I summoned a nurse, who hailed one of the doctors from the hallway. "What in the world does an *enema* have to do with a fever?" I croaked. Even in my pain and suffering I shuddered at the prospect of such a thing in a hospital ward full of people who could see and hear every detail of my agony. The very thought raised my ten-year-old hackles. "Anything else that'll work on a fever besides an *ENEMA*?"

"Well, sometimes we put patients in ice---maybe that'd bring down your fever," he suggested. As far as I was concerned, *ANYTHING* was preferable to an enema in a ward jammed with a dozen other patients. As a result of my loud complaints, and after consulting with the doctor, the orderly and a couple of nurses packed me in ice from head to toe. Fortunately for me (and the other people in the room), the treatment worked, and I was spared the indignity of a public enema.

Before long, the fever broke and the doctor said I was on the road to recovery. His decision to ice me down had perhaps saved my leg.

After the insect episode up on the farm, it was obvious that bug bites were a real threat to me, so from that time onward, I avoided Yellow Jackets and their kin as much as possible. As an added measure, I ended all involvement with hay and pitchforks. And to top everything off, I made an interesting discovery: I was allergic to hay.

Many years later, I went back to the farm for a visit, and while there, I asked Uncle Neil, now retired, if he still had the tractor I had learned to drive when I was ten years old. "Go and see for yourself!" he winked, jerking his thumb toward the barn. I walked down to the weather-beaten building, and, sure enough, the old 1939 Farmall was there---still parked in the same hay-strewn stall where as a youngster I had climbed up onto the seat and started it on that day so long ago. Although its paint had faded---it was now a sort of dark-brown instead of the bright red it had been the last time I had seen it---the tractor looked to be in pretty solid shape. There was still that pungent varnish smell of old gasoline and motor oil from the earlier days. I caressed the venerable machine in fond remembrance of good times long past, not noticing my uncle had eased into the stall behind me.

"We still use it around the farm," he said, "you want to start it?"

"I was hoping you'd say that!" I hopped up onto the seat and pulled the ring just like that first day we had gone out baling hay. This time, I remembered to push down the clutch pedal and, yes, the ancient engine fired right up. Some things had never changed,