

HARVESTING IN KANSAS DURING THE EARLY DECADES OF THIS CENTURY:

A Reminiscence

by Solomon L. Loewen

THE MENNONITES IN SOUTHERN RUSSIA were accustomed to raise hard red Turkey winter wheat as their main crop on the rich black soil of the Ukraine. When they emigrated to America in the 1870s and 1880s they brought with them some of the fine wheat as seed.¹ They found that it thrived just as well in the good Kansas soil. That was the beginning of making this state the breadbasket of America. Harvesting and threshing the grain in Russia was rather primitive at the time they left the country. In America new inventions of harvesting and threshing machinery were being introduced constantly. This revolutionized this area of farming implements. I want to share what wheat cutting and threshing were like immediately following this era of the new farming machinery. I well remember the older persons talking about how farming machines changed rapidly during this period, from the mid-1870s to the end of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the new century the farm

machinery had been quite well stabilized and any changes were more minor.

My father came over at the age of eighteen in 1874 with his parents² who were among the first German immigrants from Russia to settle in Marion County, Kansas. He was well acquainted with harvesting methods in the old country, using such tools as the scythe for cutting and the flail and threshing stone for threshing. The flail, the tool that separated the grain from the straw, was an ancient tool. The threshing stone utilized by the Mennonites at the time of the exodus from Russia to America was a heavy stone rounded somewhat with seven ridges and grooves alternating and pulled by horses or oxen over a smooth floor on which the wheat straw had been spread. This would "thresh" the grain out of the hull in the straw. Some mechanical threshing machines had already been introduced to the farmers when the Germans came to America. Some of the Mennonites had brought threshing stones with them when they came to America, and some had them made when they got here, but after a year or two they were discarded in favor of the early threshing machines invented by American ingenuity.

The first threshing separators were driven by a four-team horsepower. The next invention was the stationary steam engine which had to be moved from place to place by horsepower. The self-propelled steam engine soon made its appearance, but the separator had to be fed by hand and the straw was carried away by an elevator. My brother Henry shared with me how he had served as a "separator feeder" on his uncle's machine. It was a very dusty and dangerous job, standing just in front of the open rotating cylinder feeding the bundles into the machine by hand after he had cut the twine

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1. There is no doubt that the Mennonites from Russia brought hard winter wheat into Kansas, but there has been controversy over who was the first to introduce the seed into the state. Bernard Warkentin, a Mennonite who came to Kansas in 1872, has been credited, as has the Gnadenau settlement of 1874 in Marion County. Generally, however, it is agreed that many individual families and settlements brought some of the seed with them from Russia, with no one person or group credited with its initial introduction. For examples see Richard L. Douglas, "A History of Manufacturers in the Kansas District," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1909-1910* 11 (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1910): 151n; Alberta Pantle, "Settlement of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren at Gnadenau, Marion County," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 13 (February 1945): 269n.

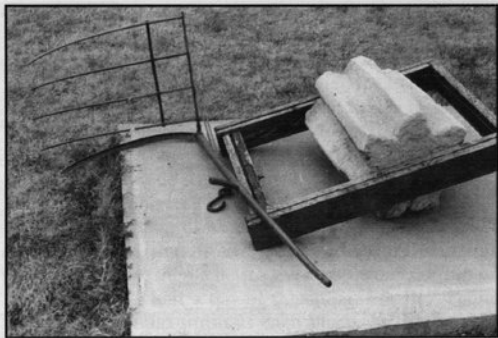
2. Jacob Loewen arrived with his parents Jacob and Anna Penner Loewen.

with a sharp knife. Fortunately the self-feeder and the power straw-blower soon made their appearances. These improvements came rapidly during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

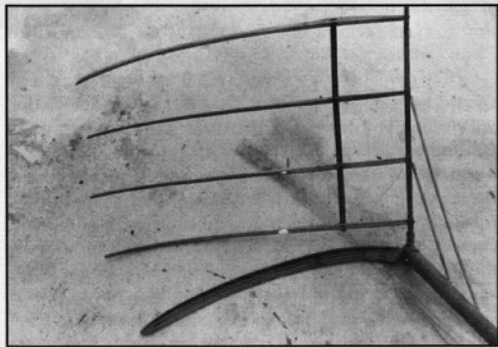
In 1904, Kansas had a very rainy spring and summer which gave farmers great difficulty in getting into the fields with their binders. The weather records show that Marion County had 8.15 inches of rain in May; 11.7 inches in June; and 8.39 inches in July.³ I well remember how father taught the big boys (we were nine boys in the family, I being the youngest) how to cut wheat with a scythe and cradle (two or three iron bars that would catch the wheat stalks when cut and carry them to the end of the swath and lay them down in a pile). These piles were then tied with a few stalks into a bundle. Three of the older boys would cut the wheat with scythes while father with some of the younger boys would follow and tie up the bundles and put them into a shock. By the time they could get into the field with the binder they had cut quite a patch with the scythes. Father said that this was the way they had cut their wheat in Russia.

Cyrus Hall McCormick invented and built the first binders between 1875 and 1883.⁴ The first self-binder used wire instead of twine to tie the bundles. Twine was first used in 1881. This made cutting much faster and with less manpower; this was important, especially at threshing time. The first binder father bought was a Minnie; later he bought two six-foot Milwaukeees, with which I became very familiar. These binders were pulled by four horses. The seven-foot Deering,⁵ which he bought later, was pulled by five horses, three hitched by the tongue of the binder and two in front. For a couple of years it was my duty to ride the front two horses, which gave direction to the binder. The last binder he bought was a six-foot John Deere, which was lighter in weight than the others and pulled easier.

After "graduating" from riding the horses in front of the Deering, I moved to shocking wheat bundles. The older boys taught me how this was done quickly and efficiently. Grab two bundles lying close together just below the twine; grab one with each hand, lift them up with the wheat heads pointing forwards, then set them down firmly on the butt end of the stalks, about six inches apart, and then press the top end of the bundles



A Mennonite threshing stone and scythe with cradle. The scythe, with a four-tined cradle, is like the one used by the author's father, Jacob Loewen, in 1904.



together. Two more bundles are set up in a similar manner, one pair on either side of the first pair. Finally two more pairs are set up, one pair on each side of the other six bundles. As a person repeats this process hundreds of times a day, he soon becomes quite proficient in shocking wheat. This is at first very tiring, to bend over and straighten up and walk, then bend over again and again, especially at the beginning of the season and when the weather is hot and windy. After the third day a person begins to get used to it, so that by the end of a week it becomes natural. The person operating the binder can be helpful if he will drop the bundles in a straight row, then they can be set up in straight rows. This makes it easier later when they are picked up with a hayrack. Horses soon learn as they pull the rack to walk along the rows without any guiding; all they need to do is to respond to "giddap" and "whoa" of the person walking alongside the rack tossing bundles up into it.

Before I was old enough to ride the horses I remember going with one of my sisters to bring lunch

3. USDA Weather Bureau, *Monthly Weather Review and Annual Summary* 32 (1904):239, 337.

4. J. J. Hildebrand, *Chronologische Zeittafel* (North Kildonan, Manitoba: J. Regehr, 1945), 252, 255, 260, 262, 263.

5. Minneapolis (referred to as the Minnie), Milwaukee, and Deering were brand names of manufactured farm implements. By 1909 International Harvester had acquired control of several implement manufacturing and distributing companies, but retained such brand names as McCormick, Deering, and Milwaukee, among others. See Stewart H. Holbrook, *Machines of Plenty: Pioneering in American Agriculture* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1955), 174-75.

*Cornelius L. Loewen cutting
wheat with a John Deere binder
about 1915.*



to the harvesters, both in the morning and in the afternoon. The horse hitched to the topbuggy⁶ would take us out into the field where the shocker would be working and those on the binders would stop the horses for a twenty minute rest. This was always a great event for me, for the cooks had an extra sandwich and some cookies for me as well. Father did not need to work in the field anymore, because he had the boys, but when it came to harvesttime he would usually drive a binder. Since he was a "country doctor," people would come for help even during harvesttime. A neighbor boy one day came over with a very sore tooth and stopped father out in the field and asked for relief. He had no dental tools with him, but he took a pliers out of the tool box, cleaned them off the best he could, reached into his mouth and pulled the aching tooth. The boy went home minus an aching tooth, and happy.

The summer of 1914 was another very wet year when it kept raining seemingly without end. Farmers were getting impatient, so some built a wooden rim that would go over the binder with the driving-wheel running within the rim. It seemed to work at first, but finally the mud would roll over the edge of the rim and clog up the machine so that even five or six horses could not pull the machine in the mud. Eventually it dried enough for the farmers to cut most of their wheat rather late into summer. We had a twenty-acre field that had very heavy heads and was completely bedded down

because of the heavy rains. In late summer we finally could get in with a grass mower, then raked it together into windrows, like hay. It was then swept together with a go-devil⁷ and stacked. The ground was all red with wheat kernels. Later it was threshed and still produced over twenty bushels per acre. It was estimated that over half was left in the field on the ground.

After my folks retired and moved to town,⁸ I would work several summers for one of my brothers, shocking wheat or driving the binder and during threshing time run a rack for him. One day while working for my brother Corneil we were cutting a field of wheat surrounded by a row of large hedge trees when it was very hot and no breeze. About mid-afternoon he stopped the binder near where I was shocking. He offered to exchange with me, for which I was very happy. He must have noticed that I was slowing down a great deal, for the heat was getting to me. After making a few rounds with the binder I noticed that one of the horses in the middle was beginning to sway. I stopped at once and told my brother about it. We unhitched the horses and drove them onto the yard where we unharnessed them at once. That beautiful bay mare stayed right there in the yard while the other horses went to the tank for water, and then into the barn. We

6. The topbuggy was a light four-wheeled carriage with one seat and usually with a top that could be folded back or raised up, which then would protect the occupants from the rain or hot sun. It was generally drawn by one horse, but two horses could be hitched to it by replacing the one-horse shaft with a tongue.

7. The go-devil was a rake-like farm instrument about twelve feet wide with two small wheels in back and a number of wooden tines about eight feet long extending forward and pointed. In back, just in front of the wheels, was a rail guard to stop the hay as it was pushed together. It was pulled by two horses, one at each end of the rake. The driver would sit on a plank extending back of the rake, driving along a windrow picking up the hay until the rake was filled. He would then bring the hay to a place where it could be stacked.

8. Hillsboro, Kansas.

doused this mare with cold water out of the tank to cool her. She soon laid down and rolled and groaned, which went on into the evening and late into the night. It was most pitiful and saddening, for there was nothing we could do for her. She was dying of a heatstroke. I was trying to sleep by an open window, but I couldn't, for I heard her groaning and moaning until sometime after midnight when it became quiet in the yard. In the morning we disposed of her body, got another horse and went back to work cutting wheat. My brother took it very hard, for it was his favorite mare; he had gotten her as a foal from father several years earlier. She was a beautiful bay mare with a white forehead and a white spot on her right flank. Later as I was thinking about it, I might have suffered that heatstroke, for I was beginning to slow down very much before my brother relieved me. A few years later Corneil suffered from too much heat; even though it was not fatal, he suffered the consequence for a number of years. More than twenty years later I likewise suffered from too much heat while pitching bundles for my nephew while threshing. Farming is a hazardous occupation, but driving air-conditioned combines with a television or radio bringing in inspiring music is quite a change from what it was a generation or two ago.

When I made my appearance at the beginning of this century, I was always impressed when a threshing outfit would come down the road puffing black smoke out of the smokestack and the engineer would ever so often pull the whistle string; it sent shivers down my back.

A few years before World War I my brother Abe bought his first threshing outfit, a Minneapolis return-flu engine and a 32-inch separator, also Minneapolis. The next year he traded the engine for a direct-flu Nichols & Shepard engine, which seemed to have more power than the return-flu type had. He also added swinging side-wings for the feeder of the separator. This made it easier for the pitchers to get the bundles into the feeder, especially when they threshed wheat that had been stacked.

My first job at threshing time was to haul the wheat home on a fifty-bushel wagon to be unloaded at the granary. My brother-in-law very often helped with unloading the wheat with a big scoop shovel. Our granary had a drive-through where the unloaders were in the shade, and when a light breeze would blow through, it was not too bad for the men. They usually had a wagon empty when I came with a load, so I could return to the machine immediately and be ready for the next load. Later father purchased a movable elevator operated by a one or two-horse horsepower. This was a big improvement for unloading the wheat; the grain just needed to be pushed to the back of the wagon and would not need to be shoveled by hand. The horsepower was later replaced by the Model T Ford

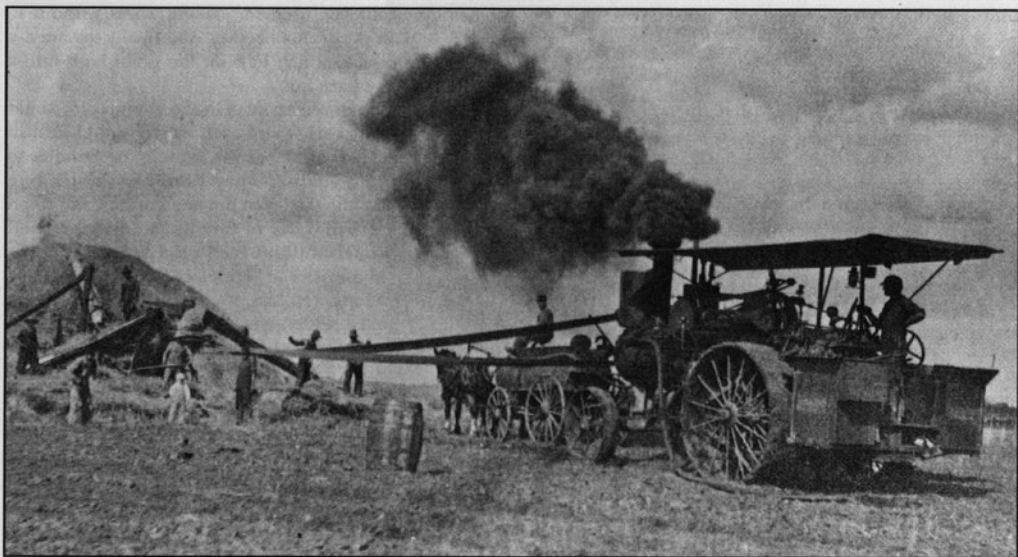
engine empowering the elevator. Then came the gas engine to replace the Ford, thus there was ever an improvement in the machinery the farmer used. Thus taller bins could be used for storing wheat without so much human effort. My brother Abe finally invented a wheat blower with which to blow the grain high into a bin or onto the barn loft.

About half a dozen farmers in the community would form a threshing ring where each farmer would furnish a rack with a team of horses for hauling the bundles to the threshing machine. They would start with one farmer one day, then a day to the next farmer, and so on until each one had a day of threshing. For the second round they would finish at each place. At the end the families would all meet at one place and have a picnic with watermelons, crullers, and ice cream. The men would also make settlement where necessary and plan for the coming year, and thanked the Heavenly Father for his bountiful blessings and protection during the busy season just finished. It was always the crowning event at the close of a good threshing season, and a great social event.

Farmers who did not get into a threshing ring would put their wheat bundles into stacks. Often two neighbors would go together and help each other out. These stacks were put up in such a way that the weather would not affect them much, and the wheat would remain dry for quite a while and be threshed when they could get a thresher. In the meantime the farmers would start plowing their stubble fields and get them ready for fall planting. If it didn't rain much during the summer, the ground would get very hard and become difficult to plow if they waited too long.

I would usually help one of my brothers and run a rack for him while threshing in the ring. After that I would hire out to a thresher who would then thresh stacks as a pitcher of bundles. They paid the magnificent sum of one dollar per day. Pitching bundles all day was a good body conditioner. I have also helped stacking wheat. One day I got a promotion and became a straw-buck, one who would set a straw stack as it came out of the blower behind the separator. It meant treading in loose straw all day with the straw and dust blowing into your face at times, but it meant a half dollar more per day. A straw stack set properly would shed the rain and keep the straw dry for bedding the cattle in the barn during the winter. Oat straw was often used also for feeding the cattle; it seemed to be more tender and the cattle liked it better. To set a straw stack the center had to be compacted by treading and the loose straw pushed to the edge which would then settle to the outside and thus shed the rain.

The following year I took a more responsible job, that of separator tender; which meant that I had to see that the separator was working properly at all times. The machine had to be set level, the belts running well and



Abraham L. Loewen threshing wheat: Lunchtime for the threshing crew (ca. 1915) on a Loewen farm shows the author's brother Abe (in center facing camera) and father Jacob (standing at right).



the bearings all well oiled. The pay started at two dollars; later inflation set in and my salary jumped to five dollars, and finally I got ten dollars per day, an unheard of raise. It also meant longer hours. Usually the machine operated well and without trouble, but when bundles were wet they were prone to clog the cylinder and stop the machine suddenly. This meant that the separator had to be opened up in front, the concaves lowered (this was a set of bars with teeth that curved partly around the threshing cylinder), and the wet straw had to be picked out from the cylinder teeth. At times the shakers inside the separator would also clog and you had to get into the machine and clean it out. On one occasion a grain of wheat had gotten into the oil line to the main bearing of the cylinder. Soon the bearing got hot, melted the babbit, and the rotating cylinder dropped down onto the concave teeth, brrrrr! everything stopped. The main belt from the engine then flipped off the driving wheel. It happened in the middle of the afternoon; the pitchers were dismissed for the rest of the day. The separator tender, the engineer, the water boy, and the boss then got busy and lined up the main shaft of the separator cylinder, put a pack around the bearings, melted some babbit, and then poured it into the enclosed bearing. This was done after the bearing had been cooled in the first place, so we could work with it. After the babbit had cooled and the engineer had placed the main belt onto the pulley and the concaves were checked to see whether any of the teeth had been bent and had to be replaced, everything was ready to give it a try. It was now midnight and we could go home and get a few hours of sleep. In the morning we could continue with the threshing.

My work as a separator tender was halted one day when we were rained out and I was at home enjoying a

day off. In the afternoon I suffered a sudden pain in the side. The result was an appendectomy which incapacitated me for the rest of the summer. After that I worked a few more summers for my brothers and again twenty years later, during World War II, when manpower was scarce and I helped out a friend one summer. I had become a schoolman, and not a farmer.

Eventually the big steam engine threshing outfit was replaced by smaller threshing machines where the farmer could use his own tractor, the same he used for plowing his fields. It reduced needed manpower considerably. This was about in the middle of the third decade of this century. The Great Depression hit in the early thirties, as did the dry years and the dust bowl days. This was also the time when the combines made their appearance on the farm. This introduced an entirely new life-style on the farm. Harvesting became an individual family affair, not the enlarged family and community activity it used to be. The change was evident in the kitchen as well as in the field, a type of emancipation.

The farmer now sits in an air-conditioned dust-free cab with enjoyable music piped in and cuts and threshes his wheat which shells out twice or more bushels than his father or grandfather could produce. Besides an increased yield he farms twice, three times, or four times the acreage his forebears did. His young son, daughter, or wife hauls the load of three hundred bushels or more on a truck to the large elevator in town where it is dumped into big bins until the farmer decides to sell. He does all of this by himself and his small family, in contrast to the large families of two generations ago. He is even completely independent of his neighbor. The old has definitely given over to the new! KH