

THE SUMMER OF 1930

Wm C Wilkinson, Jr.

[Editor's Note: this was first written by my father, WCWJr, in 2000, approximately 70 years after the events described. I once asked him about the details he'd included in another piece written many decades after the fact and he said, "I've always had a good memory for details." This tale is set in his home state, Indiana. WCWIII]

During the summer of 1930 I was 15 years of age, about 5 foot 2 inches tall, and weighed about 110-115 pounds. I had finished my second year of high school at North Judson and we had moved south to Oxford at the beginning of the summer. The move was made under a cloud of unpaid bills and charge accounts. My older brother remained in South Bend attending the South Bend Business College. I was the "oldest" son.

The year 1930 was one of the deeps of the Great Depression. After we unpacked at Oxford my father cast about for some source of income. I was part of the casting net! In addition to his own activities he found work for me. Each job was different, was new to me, was arduous to some extent, and brought me no cash. My father had not heard of allowances for children and the family needed money to live on! Because the work activity was quite new to me it left vivid memories that have not been erased either by time or stress.

One of the first was a painting job at the Oxford School. My two uncles, Frank and Will Maguire, had contracted to do all the exterior trim painting. It was a brick building so included was the window frames, doors and frames, and also the cornice trim that extended around the entire building just under the roof line. The doors and windows could be reached by ladders so Frank and Will had progressed through most of this without problems. However, they were reticent to take on the cornice as this involved working from a swinging scaffold. Neither of them was willing to risk his life on such an unstable footing!

My father offered to handle this part of the job. I was included in the offer, inasmuch as two persons were needed to pull the scaffold from the ground up to the roof area. The scaffold consisted of a ladder about 10 to 15 feet long covered with a couple of planks for the feet of the two workers. This was supported by ropes hanging from the roof, tied to two large iron hooks. These hooks extended over the cornice and were not supposed to slip. My father had had them made by the local blacksmith. The ropes reeved through pulleys and allowed the scaffold to be pulled up and lowered down by the two riders. As I had been broken into painting work at heights at the North Judson Catholic Church, I was not really bothered by painting from such an unstable platform at about 30 - 40 feet in the air.

The sequence consisted in pulling the scaffold with two workers, paint buckets and brushes, up to the roof top, tying off, then painting a stretch of the cornice trim. The scaffold was then lowered

to the ground, the hooks moved to another stretch of roof, and the process repeated. There was enough diversity that it was not monotonous and neither was it very difficult. Another diversion were two freshman girls who hung out the second floor windows to attract the attention of the new student in town! Gail Ellsworth and Evelyn Thompson were both nice looking. The painting was completed without incident.

As Oxford was a quite small town, merely an adjunct to the farming community of Benton County, most of the summer jobs were connected with agriculture. Eventually my father secured a construction job building a corn crib on a farm just outside of town, opposite the Old Academy Park. The farm was owned by a well-to-do farmer named Tom Donahue. He was a widower who lived on the farm with one son. The son was about 30 years of age and named Benny, for Bennett.

The first part of my activity on this project was to haul gravel for the concrete foundations. Benny introduced me to this process. It was completely new to me and not without interest. I used a team of mules to pull a light gravel-bed wagon. The source of gravel was a stream bed located about a mile or two from the farm. The gravel "pit" was adjacent to the road bridge and required the wagon to be driven off the road down an embankment along side the stream. Then the more or less leisurely process of shoveling gravel into the wagon bed took place. The mules were content to wait.

The wagon bed was about 8 by 4 by 1 1/2 feet in dimensions and made such that it could be taken apart to unload or dump the gravel. That is, the floor was merely loose 2 by 4's and the sides were staked into the frame. Each of the two ends was hinged in its middle so that it could be removed at the dump site. Thus, the two ends, then the two sides, then the loose floor boards could be jockeyed apart to allow the gravel to fall to the ground.

The most difficult part of each trip was coaxing the mule team to pull the loaded wagon up the embankment. It taxed them and they needed to dig in and give it their all for a few moments. They knew what was coming and as I mounted to the wagon seat they generally looked around to see if I was really going to be serious. Getting serious meant slapping the reins on their backs while letting out a few loud "yeeahs". The secret was in not letting them stop during the pull out, or else we were done for! On one trip I needed to unload much of the gravel in order to pull out of a wet spot.

By and large the mules treated me kindly just as I did them. We moseyed along in each direction at their own pace and they had a good rest at each end of the trip. They were named Jack and Jennie as were all mule teams, I think. As they were smaller than horses I was able to harness them without difficulty at the start of the day. Benny gave me a few instructions and tips and at age 15 one learns rapidly. I never got kicked but neither did I tarry at their rears.

A task that Benny also allowed me to carry out is one that many persons might consider demeaning or even defiling. Although I approached it with some misgivings it turned out to be not

onerous at all and even brought on a sense of accomplishment. It must be that I was following in the footsteps of many of my yeoman ancestors. Manure spreading is a spring chore that must be done before plowing so that the spread ingredients will mix with and enrich the soil. The side benefit is that the large piles accumulated during the winter from cleaning the stables can be disposed of usefully.

I used a team of horses for pulling the spreader and much of the knowledge I had absorbed from my stint with the mules came into good play. They were a little more difficult to harness, however. Once the spreader was filled by use of a fork, it was driven to the field that was being enriched. A big lever available to the driver set in motion the spreader mechanism proper, located at the rear. As the wagon was driven, the contents slowly were fed into the mechanism. This machinery distributed the manure more-or-less uniformly to the rear and sides of the wagon. The term "more-or-less" is used advisedly as there would on occasion be a dollop thrown forward. This could have a shocking effect on the driver!

The only skill required was in making a circuit of the field without overlapping and without misses. If it were a sunny day, windless, and not too cold it could be a not unpleasant occupation. Although there was a certain pungency in the odor, it was not really disagreeable, at least in retrospect. (This same smell used to permeate the Princeton air during an east wind when the Walker Gordon processing was under way.) It amuses me sometimes to see the genteel people wearing designer blue jeans as formal wear. Seventy years ago I put on my blue jeans to go to the barn for less formal activity.

The Donahues also raised hogs like every other farmer in the corn belt. A yearly task was the emasculating of the young males that were to be fattened for market. This was out and out castration in its most fundamental method. It took three of us, Benny, my father and me. First the shoats were herded into an enclosure of maybe 20 foot square or less. Then the process began, accompanied by squealing from every pig in the enclosure plus some that weren't even part of the party. Benny would snare one of the patients by grabbing a leg. It was my task to fasten on to the two front legs and kneel on the head to immobilize the front end. My father fastened on to the two rear legs to do the same. Benny performed the operation using a sharpened pocketknife. It was a bit gory and the pigs did not like it so they put up a determined but futile resistance. The process was completed by smearing some grease, axel grease I think, on the empty sac and allowing the pig to cut and run. These pigs were not that small, maybe 20-25 pounds, and after processing the entire herd I was pretty well done in. The trauma of the pigs contributed significantly.

Another task on the Donahue farm was hoeing cocklebur. Benton county was and is an excellent corn producing area. While the growing corn is small the rows are plowed to keep the weeds down. In essence the ground is cultivated to discourage the weeds. However, as the corn grows it eventually gets too high to plow without damaging the stalks. Hopefully, the corn leaves would then furnish enough shadowing to prevent the weeds from germinating or growing enough to

disturb the stalks. However, there is a weed that is not discouraged, this is the common cocklebur. Webster calls it a rank weed, meaning "very vigorous and flourishing in growth". It would get waist high or better and produce many large burs that are a deterrent and nuisance to the hands and clothing of the corn pickers who harvested the ears in the fall.

My assignment was to ride up and down the rows of corn and spot a cocklebur, whereupon I dismounted and hacked it down with a hoe. Benny helped me saddle the old mare and showed me how to mount without the aid of a stump. He also introduced me to a couple of sample cockleburs. I was immediately a full-fledged cocklebur destroyer. It was not a mind-boggling task. Neither were the target plants that numerous. One could almost fall asleep between sightings. Also, the saddle became uncomfortable before I was half way down the first row. I changed positions often but there was no best way, only a different chafing: normal astride, side-saddle right, side-saddle left, stand in the stirrups. As the old plow horse knew better than to step on the corn, I could even ride backwards. Each day finally passed. I never forgot the appearance of a cocklebur and I never became interested in horseback riding.

At some point my father took me out to another field which needed plowing. He showed me the tractor seat, the shift lever, and told me not to overturn it. He rode the tractor for a hundred feet or so while I became a plowboy. Then he left me. The tractor pulled a two-gang plow, that is, it had two shares or blades. The tractor was small in comparison to modern machines but was big for me. Also, it was weighted and balanced so that when the plow hit a tough spot, the tractor would rear up with the front end headed for the sky. I was not supposed to overturn the machine! In addition, if it did I would surely be underneath. After the first such buck I rode with one foot on the clutch and the other on a solid surface suitable for launching a jump. The field was not large and I was able to ride it out without needing to jump.

A somewhat similar short-term farm stint was as a bundle wagon driver. He was one element of a grain-threshing crew. The bundle wagons hauled the bundles of grain from the fields up to the threshing machine where the driver then pitched the wagon load of bundles into the machine to be threshed. I received a similar set of five-minute-long instructions about stacking the load and pitching the bundles properly into the machine. I already knew about driving a team although it was now horses rather than mules.

The bundle wagons were driven from grain shock to grain shock where the ground crew, using pitchforks, threw the bundles of grain onto the wagon. Skill was needed to take each bundle and put in the proper place on the growing load. This meant aligning the bundles in a neat fashion so that during rapid unloading they did not interfere with each other. A driver could be his own executioner. Most of the pitchers were somewhat humane and were able to recognize a green kid quite easily. With a little kindness they could throw each bundle in the best spot for stacking as the load became higher and wider. Walking on, standing on, and moving the heavy grain bundles was quite tiring.

When the wagon was loaded it was driven to one side of the thresher for unloading. There was an unloading wagon on each side of the thresher and they generally alternated their bundles. Each bundle needed to be thrown so that it landed on the moving belt lengthwise with the heads of grain in the correct direction. Also, for efficiency there were to be no gaps on the belt! Else the boss thresher would take a few unkindly looks at the bundle wagon drivers. At the start of an unloading you were throwing the bundles down to the belt but at the end you were throwing them up to the belt. In between you might be standing on the bundle that you were trying to break free to throw!

My assignment was for only one day, thank god. There was a nice break at noon for a very good threshing dinner. Also, the field was not large so that it was completed somewhat after mid-afternoon. However, I was dead tired by that time. (The Indiana Historical Society published a set of photographs taken in rural Indiana during the depression. Among them is one of a loaded bundle wagon driven by a young man. It could have been me.)

I guess most of my time that summer was spent working on the corn crib but it was less interesting as I had already been introduced to construction during our years at North Judson. What I do remember was a row between my father and Tom Donahue about the crib design and the time spent building it. My father was all for building a sound, long lasting structure. Tom had ideas about the overall cost. The conflict between these mutually conflicting goals brought out some harsh words towards the end of the project. However, Benny and I became casual friends. He was one of the loners that seemed to drift into my life.

With the end of summer I enrolled at the high school as a junior and started to become an Oxfordite and I graduated just thirty years after my mother had from the same school. That was the last summer that I worked with my father. The following four were spent working for Earl Bartindale at the Twin Swimming Pools and delivering ice to the residents of Oxford. He paid me at the end of each week and I began to store funds for my eventual break away from Oxford and home.

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