

Unstuck · *Elmer Suderman*

IN THE SUMMER OF 1939, we didn't have self-propelled combines. We had to pull them with a tractor. I drove the tractor and my older brother ran the combine. Every grain of wheat was precious, even at 58 cents a bushel, and every hour was money because at any time it might rain, or worse, hail and destroy the crop. And in 1939 it rained a lot in Oklahoma.

I had to be careful to maneuver the tractor so the combine would cut a full ten foot swath and yet not leave little uncut rows standing in the field. They were unsightly as well as costly. Only poor farmers left strips uncut because of a careless tractor driver. Any strips of wheat were evidence of my failure. Fortunately we usually plowed them under after harvest, but during a long hot summer when it was too dry to plow they would embarrass me through June, July, and late August. My journal, then, was written on the wheat fields of Northwest Oklahoma, and anyone who drove past could read my mistakes clearly enough.

Anytime I didn't cut a full swath or left some wheat standing, I could hear my brother with a loud voice interrupt any daydream I might have. But what was even worse was to get stuck in any of the mud puddles left by buffalo wallows in the long-ago broken sod. My instructions were clear. Carefully test the ground each round nearing the mud puddle; get every possible head of wheat, but never go so far as to get stuck. Getting stuck always meant unhitching the combine from the tractor, driving the tractor away from the wet ground to dry ground, attaching the log chain and pulling the combine back on to ground that was solid.

But sometimes, no matter how careful I tried to be, I'd get beyond the point where we could drag the combine across the mud, and I'd get stuck. Then came the ritual. My brother disengaged the combine so the tractor, the header, the shakers and the straw spreader stopped, and then cut back on the throttle of the combine motor. I cut back the throttle on the tractor, and we could hear one another. I'd turn my seat on the old Rock Island Tractor so I faced my brother standing about three or four feet above me on the platform of the combine and prepared myself for the speech that followed.

Sometimes I'd squint to keep the sun out of my eyes; always I'd squint

to keep the chaff out. But no matter how hard the wheat chaff itched, I wouldn't scratch. I needed to study once more the full measure of his art, so effective, and yet so untutored. I was always hot and his speech made it a little hotter, especially for me.

As he spoke, though I was hot and thirsty, I wouldn't have dared to get a drink. I didn't even wipe the sweat from my brow. His speech was a necessary ritual. I doubt if we could have become unstuck without it.

I remember more about the style than the content of those speeches. They were eloquent. They were pithy. They did not require swearing, or, if I had gotten stuck more than once during the day, perhaps some small swearing that was judicious. They always seemed to me to be in good taste.

He was totally involved. He kept his audience in mind and spoke directly to its condition. Because our condition was not his fault, he could speak from a superior position both in height and in rank and knowledge. Had he been driving the tractor, he wouldn't have gotten stuck, at least not in this mudhole, though, if pressed, he'd admit that he too on occasion ventured too far into the muddy land.

I couldn't begin to quote any noteworthy passages, but it seems to me that he uttered some memorable phrases. His speech had a clear and unmistakable thesis, and he elaborated on it just enough to make it effective but not so much that the point was lost. The point was simple: we're stuck, you should know better. We can't afford to get stuck. It takes valuable time. You knew the last round that you had gone as far as you could go. A good tractor driver feels such things.

And he spoke with Biblical economy. If elaboration were needed, and it rarely was, that could wait until evening when we would discuss the day's work over fried chicken and potatoes.

It's a shame there was no one else besides wind and wheat stubble and me to hear his words. But they weren't wasted. I may not remember exactly what he said but I still get goose bumps remembering the rapt look on his face as he told me with more eloquence than any of the preachers we ever heard not to get stuck. It makes life simpler if you don't get mired in the mud.

If I had a chance, I'd drive a tractor for him again, and I'd get stuck, and I wouldn't do it on purpose either. It would just happen naturally. Then I'd listen, more carefully now and with more appreciation that I did forty-

five years ago. And after he had finished I'd say again: "OK, now that you've got that out of your system — and it was a good speech — let's do what both of us have had to do often: let's unhitch the tractor, get out the log chain, pull the combine onto dryer ground, and then, unstuck, get on with the work before evening comes."

And he would nod and we'd get unstuck.