

# Threshing with Steam

## As I Remember It

by Charles P. Bennett

**I**T ALL BEGAN each year about the first week of July when I heard my father tell my mother that he supposed he had better get the threshing coal. He hitched the team to the old wagon — the one with the loose tires and the leaky box — and went to the elevator or the lumberyard in Tingley, Iowa (depending on which one had a car of coal on track). If farmers were hard up they bought Centerville coal and if they had money and wanted to make the operator of the threshing outfit happy, they purchased Illinois coal because it burned better and with fewer clinkers. We usually bought Centerville coal.

When my father arrived home he hauled the load of coal near where he planned to thresh the timothy. Meanwhile we continued "laying by" the corn (cultivating it for the third time) while watching as our field of timothy seed ripened.

Oats were the first crop threshed, so if farmers in the neighborhood had oats ready, we would help them thresh while finishing cultivating our corn and binding and shocking our timothy. There were about thirty-five farms on the threshing run, so it was a busy and worrisome time in the neighborhood, trying to get all the corn cultivated and everyone's oats and timothy threshed.

We threshed with several different outfits through the years from 1910 to 1920 but I especially remember the outfit we used around 1916, when I was ten. The owner of this particular outfit was a slender, wiry, dark-complected man named Billy McDowell. He ran the engine. The separator man was our neighbor Poe Johnston. They made a good team. Billy McDowell could get mad when things went wrong, but Poe was always good-natured and never became excited. The third member of the threshing crew was the water hauler,

sometimes referred to as the "water monkey." In this case the water monkey was the engineer's son, Clyde McDowell.

When the big day arrived and the outfit pulled onto our farm in Ringgold County, my father indicated where the machine was to be set. As separator man, Poe Johnston tossed some chaff in the air and watched it drift away. This helped him decide what direction the wind was coming from and where to set the machine in order that the dust and dirt would be blown away from those working around the machine. As engineer, Billy McDowell circled the outfit around until the separator was in the right position. Then the separator man started digging holes for the wheels to drop into. The test of a good separator man was his ability to dig these holes accurately so that the machine would be level without a second try. Any separator man worth his salt would claim perfection in this, but I well remember seeing Poe Johnston digging superstitiously under one wheel when the chaffers failed to clear properly.

Next the engine was uncoupled. With the help of the water monkey, McDowell made a half circle that turned the engine around and lined it up with the belt pulley of the separator. Now here was the test of the engineer. A good engineer never had to make a second attempt at lining up. Of course, both pulleys were crowned and the belts would run okay even if the pulleys were out of line a few inches, but at ten years old I didn't really know that.

In the meantime the separator man had raised the blower up and turned it around, unfolded the feeder, and was unreeling the drive belt. With the engineer up on the engine drive wheel, together they wrestled the heavy belt onto the giant drive pulley. With the separator man holding the belt, often 75 to 125 feet long, the engineer placed the engine gently in



A threshing ring at the J. F. Duncan farm, Oakville, Iowa, around 1910.

reverse. The belt flapped and flopped like a living thing as it was tightened. Then the water monkey threw wooden blocks in front of the drive wheels of the engine.

Grain haulers started backing wagon boxes up to the grain spout, and bundle wagons were maneuvered up to the feeder. The water monkey hauled the water wagon up to the left side of the engine, then hitched his team to the load of coal and pulled it up to the other side.

Meanwhile the separator man was busy turning down grease cups (the old-time version of grease guns) and oiling and adjusting the machine. Then he stood up and nodded to the engineer. The engineer opened the throttle. The wheels began to turn, slowly perhaps for thirty seconds while the separator man checked to see that everything was working properly. Once the engineer opened up the throttle to normal operating speed, we were ready to thresh.

**T**HERE WAS SOMETHING fascinating about the steam engine. The combined odor of coal, water, steam, heat, and oil produced a fragrance hard to forget. The engine seemed to be

alive and breathing. The ratcheting of the oiler, the governor with its tiny belt, and the push and pull of the cylinder built a beautiful picture in the memory. Its power was quiet and uniform.

Some farmers stacked the straw, some didn't. Before 1910 thresher separators had been equipped with traveling carriers that gently lifted the straw into the stack. The work was hard and a little dirty. After 1910 the blower came into vogue, and straw stacking became a very hard, disagreeable, and dirty job. Timothy and oat straw were important parts of the diet of the beef cattle herd of that day, and the farmer wanted the straw preserved in the best possible way. But many farmers were unable or unwilling to pay the price, in sweat and dust and dirt, so more and more the straw was blown into a pile.

The threshing separators of that day were huge machines. They seemed almost unlimited in capacity and were noisy and dirty. We were supposed to feed the bundles in the machine head first, but the feeder was so big no one paid much attention unless the dividing board was in.

The engine whistle was an important part of the outfit. Each outfit had a set of signals. One



signal might say, "Wake up, separator man. Something is going wrong." Another signal would say, "Hurry up, grain haulers." Still another one would warn, "Hurry up, bundle haulers." And then there was the blast that told the water monkey that he must get water to the engine as soon as possible.

The water monkey worked under pressure because the engine could not be allowed to run dry. Sometimes he had to go several miles after water. Most water monkeys spent considerable time trying to "con" someone into going with them to fetch water. Few people went along more than once because hauling water was difficult work. The tank held about ten barrels of water and sat on top of a heavy-duty set of running gears. On top of the tank was a double-action pump. The water monkey ran twenty feet of suction hose into a well, then filled the tank pumping with the long wooden handle of the double-action pump. It was customary to make fun of the water monkey because he could take a nap and loaf a little after he had brought the engine its vital water supply, but in truth he was one of the hardest working members of the crew.

**T**HE THRESHERS' DINNER required hours of hard work and planning. The crew might include as many as thirty people and two or more tables to seat them. My mother usually worked with her sister and my grandmother or some neighbor lady. There was friendly competition among the women of the community to see who could serve the best meal. The food could be, and usually was, out of this world, both in quality and quantity.

Cleaning up for dinner involved washing in cold water out in the yard and drying face and hands on a towel that soon revealed that those who had washed before had not done a very good job of it. The men also combed their hair in front of an old mirror hanging from a tree. The men operating the machine always ate at the first table. There was a lot of fun while eating, but as a ten-year-old boy I did not get to share in it because I had to wait and eat at the third table with the women. I always wondered

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Threshers wash up for another legendary threshing dinner at the August Stille farm, near Nashua.

if there would be any food left for me.

Under the influence of so much good food the crew was often slow getting back to work. In that case the engineer would give the engine whistle a couple of toots as if to say, "Get on the ball, we're ready to start."

**O**NE YEAR our timothy was the last crop threshed in the neighborhood, so the run finished on our farm. It was nearly dark that September day when the bundle haulers cleaned up around the machine and went home. Our wagons were piled high with the white sacks of timothy seed. Poe Johnston said to me, "Sonny, run to the house and see if your mother will let me have her broom." Flushed with importance, I raced to the house, got the broom, and was back in a jiffy. The powerful machine was silent. Poe carefully swept every bit of chaff and dirt off the machine. Then he started up the separator and blew out all the dirt that had fallen out of the cylinder. He turned it off, folded up the blower and feeder, coupled the engine onto the separator, and pulled it away from the stack.

The engineer looked at Poe, happy that the run was over. Poe grinned and nodded back at McDowell, who reached for the leather thong that controlled the whistle.

I knew what was coming — the finishing whistle, a long, long, long blast that told the world the run was over. I was determined not to be a sissy and hold my hands over my ears as girls nearly always did.

The engineer pulled the whistle valve open. A wail like a thousand banshees broke over our valley. On and on it went. My ears began to throb and then ache. I decided it wasn't such a bad idea to be a sissy after all and covered my ears with my hands.

Still the mighty whistle roared on. The sound must have gone west across Walnut Creek Valley past Wishard Chapel to Crooked Creek and beyond. To the east it echoed and re-echoed across Gooseberry Creek and East Grand River Valley over to and beyond Old High Point Church. And the men and women and children of the neighborhood listened and looked at each other and said, "It sounds like Billy McDowell has finished his run." □