

HIRED MEN

Iowa's Unsung Farm Resource

by Gordon Marshall

AS I WRITE of their hard life fifty years later, the hired men of my youth still have my admiration for their skills and stamina. They could drive a skittish team of horses up to a roaring threshing machine, repair a grain binder in a broiling harvest field, or husk corn with rhythm and speed down endless rows of cornstalks.

I grew up on a farm—"Marshall Fields," we called it—in western Iowa in the 1930s and 1940s. On our 320-acre-farm in Woodbury County, we fed beef cattle and raised corn and hogs. We usually hired two men and occasionally three. My dad, William Marshall, was the boss; he seldom worked in the fields except at peak periods. My older brother, Stan, and I were school boys during the 1930s and were mainly extra labor. Not until later, when I was employed as a hired man myself, did I really understand the nature of a hired man's job.

Although the history of midwestern farming has often been researched and recorded, the role of the hired man has been little noted. By hired men, I mean year-round or crop-year



Author (left) and brother Stanley bundle oats, 1938—a hot summer job for farm kids and hired men alike.



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Cattle shed and feed lot on the Marshall farm ("Marshall Fields") in Woodbury County.

workers on the farm, and not temporary or seasonal employees. Hired men were common on many Iowa farms. Numbers are hard to compare, however, because of the inconsistent definitions and counting methods in various censuses and agricultural reports. According to the 1925 Iowa Census (which reported county totals of hired men) about 13 percent of Iowa's 208,789 farms had year-round hired men. Of this 13 percent, 88 percent hired one man; 10 percent hired two; the remaining hired three or more. Other farmers called on family members, neighbors, and seasonal hired labor to meet extensive labor needs.

The role of the hired man is threatened to fade from memory, as do the earlier ways of farm life. Writers perhaps have been more interested in the hired man than have historians. Fiction has often presented the hired man as an uneducated bumpkin. However, no less an author than Willa Cather in *My Antonia* treated her fictional Nebraska farm hands with empathy and respect.

One of my earliest memories about hired

men is of a Saturday night in nearby Battle Creek during the early 1930s—the depth of the Great Depression. Our family was in town that night, and a stranger had gotten the okay from my mother to take me into a store. There he bought me a sack of Baby Ruth and Butterfingers penny candy bars. Then he asked me to deliver a message: "Tell your Dad I want a job." Dad was amused to hear of this approach, and Martin Nielsen was hired.

Martin's brother was already working for us. Like many hired men, Martin and Fred sometimes seemed like members of the family. They took my brother and me to several events, including a free movie sponsored by local merchants and, on one cold winter night, a sledding party at a hill at the edge of town. (Whenever Fred's girlfriend was along, we boys certainly noticed some petting techniques.) The winter that my parents and my brother and I got scarlet fever, Fred pitched in. I remember he made the lumpiest Cream of Wheat that we ever tried to eat.

A capable hired man was a respected mem-



Hired man Vernon Fowler on a 1929 Farmall with grain drill (April 1929). Both tractors and work horses were used on the Marshall farm through the 1930s. Nationally, as farm mechanization increased, the need for hired men decreased.

ber of the community and a valued employee of the farm family. Many successful farmers had been hired men themselves for varying periods of time. My father shared the philosophy of many others—that a farmer should work for awhile as a hired man because hiring oneself out to a good farmer gave one a broader view of farming practices. Most of our men had grade-school educations; only a few had made it through high school. But make no mistake, field work and especially livestock feeding required intelligent and experienced men.

Our hired men were local, farm-raised, single

men in their twenties. A farm family with several sons was always a potential source of hired labor (unless the family expanded operations and needed more hands). For instance, seven of the men we hired over the years were from two related, second-generation Danish families named Nielsen. In the early 1900s, western Iowa had benefited from a substantial immigration from Denmark, renowned in Europe as an agricultural and livestock center. As with many ethnic groups, Danish immigrants and the first and second generations sometimes started out as hired men. Yet Danes in particular assimilated rapidly into American life; they were more fluent in English and less associated with a national church or national organizations.

In western Iowa during the 1930-1942 period, monthly wages during the crop season ranged from \$25 to \$50 plus room and board for single men. Married hired men lived in separate dwellings (often a smaller home on the farmstead) and received housing and farm produce—meat, milk, eggs, and garden space typically—besides a monthly salary. On the last Saturday night of each month, Dad would sit at his rolltop desk in the living room and pay our hired men by check.

Because we only hired single men, they always lived with us, in our massive house built in 1924 of hollow tile. There were some separate facilities for the men. In the basement, the toilet, sink, and shower were for the hired men. On the second floor, their bedroom was large enough for both a double bed and a single bed and other furniture. They furnished their own work clothes except for long sheepskin coats and rubber raincoats. The men were expected to have their laundry done through their own families.

Nevertheless my mother, Mabel Marshall, had plenty to do to uphold our family's end of the work arrangement. There were very few days when she didn't have to cook for hungry hired men besides the family. The men were awakened by Dad at 5:30 A.M. in summer. We ate breakfast early, by 6 or 6:30, and had dinner at noon sharp. In the dining room, where we ate our typically ample, meat-and-potatoes meals, the men sat at Dad's right. After the meal all of us carried our dishes out to the kitchen. Before the men went back to work at 1

P.M., they lounged in the living room, napping or listening to pop or country music on the radio. Only during hay making, threshing, and silo filling did we also have a hearty afternoon lunch of sandwiches, cake, and coffee at the work site. Otherwise field work stopped in time to do chores before our 6 o'clock supper, another large meal.

The hired men's work ran the full range of corn and livestock farming. To feed the beef cattle, they stacked brome-alfalfa hay in the field (certified brome grass seed was a big specialty crop for us). They cut corn silage for one or two big silos, and shocked corn fodder in the field. Although we milked only four cows, mainly for home consumption, livestock chores were also time-consuming.

When husking corn, the men did no chores except caring for their horses. For a few years we used an old one-row, tank-top mechanical picker, a McCormick-Deering oddity. But most of these years, the hired men picked and husked our corn by hand, throwing the corn into a horse-drawn wagon outfitted with high bangboards to deflect the ears. This monotonous, grueling work, a strain on back, wrists, and hands, went from daylight to dark. The men were paid a bushel rate, five cents some years.

Despite the monotony of the corn harvest, one sunny October day turned into a memorable event. Howard Nielsen, our long-term hired man, was the fastest corn husker in our area and was exceedingly proud of the honor. In 1940 we had a very good corn crop, and twenty-five-year-old Howard was boasting how much he could pick in a day. Dad set up the challenge: just how much could he pick?

Usually the husker had to unload, but this time Dad offered to haul in Howard's loads from the fields, weigh them on our Fairbanks-Morse wagon scales, and then unload them into the crib. Howard took off at 6 A.M. He husked his way along the quarter-mile rows of our best bottomland cornfield at the rate of fifty to fifty-five large ears a minute. He worked for eleven hours, interrupted by an hour off at noon. He husked furiously while ears of corn flew through the air. Unfortunately, his total for the day, 247 bushels, received only county-wide attention, although 100 or 130 bushels was considered good. A later



On the fiftieth anniversary of Howard Nielsen's corn-husking feat, his family threw a surprise party for him at a local supper club, and the *Ida Grove Pioneer Record* published his picture—recognition due anyone who once husked fifty ears of corn a minute.

try by Howard's family for the *Guinness Book of Records* was unsuccessful, but he's held the record in my book.

In some ways the hired men were part of the family. My folks entertained occasionally with evening dinners, and the men, of course, ate with us, usually after a change of clothing. More often we entertained at Sunday noon dinner, but our men were almost never around during the day on Sunday. They did morning chores and then were off. Most of them owned their own Ford or Chevy coupe, parked in our old wooden corncrib (Dad was adamant about not letting them borrow our cars for going to town). One man would return for Sunday evening chores, occasionally bringing a friend to help him. There was no large meal to miss



Hired man Howard Nielsen and Stanley and Gordon Marshall fry steaks in the horse pasture, 1939.

on Sunday evenings; supper was usually casual as my family and I stood around eating meat sandwiches in our narrow kitchen.

By tagging along with the hired men as they worked, I learned how they spent their spare time. I heard uncensored, explicit stories of their activities. Women were high priority, met and entertained at dance halls, roller rinks, and beer taverns. Card playing at the local pool hall drew some of the men. Repairing their own or their relatives' autos was a hobby for a couple of men who were natural mechanics. The Thirties softball craze was in full swing in our neighborhood, and a few of our men played on diamonds laid out in local pastures. Although this was the Golden Age of the movies, going to movies did not rate high with them.

As the hired men and our family worked and lived together, we got to know each other well. Howard Nielsen, the champion corn husker, was a reddish-blond, athletic extrovert—a great dancer and ladies' man. He came from a large family and fought with his father. He had dropped out of high school after one week and

took on the hard life of a hired man. He loved livestock and horses and was the best man to drive our friskiest young team, Dude and May.

That skill with horses came in handy when the Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940 caught us with a herd of feeder cattle in the picked cornfields far from the farmstead. At daylight we took a team and high-wheeled wagon out into the roaring, breath-sucking storm. My brother and I crouched down in the wagon out of the wind, but Howard and my father faced the storm. While Dad was the lookout, Howard, in his sheepskin coat, drove the team against the wind. We eventually found the herd in the wide creek bed, snow-drifted over, and we drove them home.

Hans Schumacher came from a nearby farm family of German descent. Short and dark, quiet and unassuming, he liked machinery and worked on cars as a hobby. His schooling had ended at about the fifth grade.

Hans earned my gratitude one day when we were preparing to fill our silo. Dad sent me to the top to wire the blower pipe to the side of

the silo. I scooted a quarter-way around the empty silo, straddling the masonry blocks. Then I looked down—from forty feet up. Since I was holding on with now-tense hands, where was the third hand to wire the pipe? Dad hollered. I froze. In a couple of minutes Hans was beside me. He wired the pipe and saw me safely down.

Quiet Hans made a memorable stir once. Our closest neighbor was careless about keeping his cows at home. They strayed into our pasture often and that really annoyed Hans. One day Hans brought a frequent stray into our cow barn, milked her, and then peppered her with a shotgun shell loaded with salt to send her home. About supper time an angry neighbor called my folks and charged: "You've shot my cow so bad she won't give any milk." We were eating, and my folks were very upset; feuding with neighbors was NOT DONE in our family. Knowing that Hans was behind it, I laughed so hard that for the only time in my life I was sent away without supper.

Wilfred Nielsen, slim and talkative, was the oldest in a Danish family of eight children, including five rambunctious brothers. A high school graduate, he was more of a reader than most of our hired men. Once he typed my presentation for a country-school debate. He enjoyed repairing autos and talking about cars.

Wilfred appeared in one memorable scene in our none-too-clean four-stanchion cow barn on a fall evening. It was in 1935, the middle of the depression. Dad was sitting on his milking stool when he abruptly told Wilfred that he couldn't afford to hire him for the winter. Wilfred was crushed; he badly needed the job. Dad relented and arranged the terms—room, board, and \$5 a month. At Christmas, Wilfred bought presents for our family from his meager salary. That winter, Wilfred was invaluable. Despite the record cold and snow, he kept the waterworks thawed so the livestock could have water, and he managed to reach the haystacks in the outlying fields, which seemed about as accessible as the North Pole.

Wilfred's career as our hired man ended dramatically one hot July day the next year. The drought had brought grasshoppers that summer, and Wilfred had taken my brother and me in his Model A Ford with the rumble seat to



Hired man Wilfred Nielsen in his Sunday best.

nearby Anthon to pick up sacks of poison bran to kill the grasshoppers. Coming home on a graded gravel road, Wilfred inexplicably ran off the road, and we overturned in a deep ditch. Wilfred was trapped under the car. I raced to a nearby farm for help, while Stan tried to free him with a jack. Eventually he was freed, but he suffered a broken jaw. After recovering, he worked in town as an auto mechanic and later as a self-employed electrician.

Just as we got to know the hired men who worked for us, we also got to know—indirectly—other farm families for whom hired men had worked. Hired men liked to gossip about the eccentricities of some farm families. One hired man enjoyed imitating a former boss,

washing his face in a basin and snorting like a thirsty workhorse. We heard about the farm woman who made the men take off their shoes to protect her hardwood floors. Some farmers were harsh taskmasters who worked their help relentlessly. One farmer insisted the hired man load the manure spreader by pitchfork as fast as the son could drive the spreader out to the field and unload it.

Hired men also liked to gossip about each other. There was the hired man who was fired because he would not get up in the morning when called. Some envy surfaced about the heavy-drinking hired man who worked for the area's biggest cattle feeder and was paid top wages. There were often discussions of the hired man and hired girl caught in bed when the farm woman returned home unexpectedly.

Meals were very important to these hard workers. In their eyes it was a sin for meals to be served late (we heard about an aunt of mine who was known for not serving meals on time). Worse sins, though rare, were bad cooking or skimpy servings (and again, at least one family in our area did serve poor meals.) Knowing how much food meant to these men, Mother enjoyed playing good-natured tricks on them on April Fool's Day—such as serving a thin layer of scalloped corn over cotton.

During the field-work season we often hired one unmarried "hired girl." She lived with us, staying in the guest bedroom. She helped with the housework and canning, but did no outside work other than perhaps picking vegetables in the garden. My mother was protective of these local women, who were usually about twenty or younger, but she had little occasion to worry about their involvement with our hired men. Generally the relationship between our hired men and the hired girl was quite casual without much fraternizing.

Despite the abundance of labor during the Great Depression, the steady mechanization of agriculture reduced the demand for hired men. In 1930, 29 percent of Iowa's farmers owned tractors; in 1940, 55 percent did. Nor could farmers pay hired men as well. Nationally, monthly wages with room and board dropped from \$37.50 in 1930 to \$27.50 in 1940 (the low point was 1935, when the average wage was \$22.00). For men who were furnished a house

rather than room and board (generally married men), wages fell from \$48.00 to \$37.50. In the depth of the depression, some farmers served eggs instead of meat to feed their heavy-eating corn pickers, and cut winter wages completely, providing only room, board, and work mittens.

Then the start of World War II affected the labor supply because of war-related employment and the draft. Farm laborers were now attracted to non-farm jobs because of the shorter hours, apparently higher wages, and less-confined employer-employee relationship. According to a 1943 Gallup Poll, 77 percent of American farmers considered "shortage of labor" to be the biggest problem facing them. Over a third of them advocated that farm hands be deferred from the draft. Indeed, World War II arrived at our farm when we realized that



Hans Schumacher, who found an effective way to rid the farm of a stray cow, was drafted during the war.



Howard Nielsen, who helped save livestock in an Iowa blizzard, fought in Panama during the war.

our hired men would be drafted. Surprising to me, a naive high school freshman, was how much these hard-working men dreaded "The Army." Nevertheless, Howard and Hans were drafted.

After the war, both Hans and Howard farmed successfully. In fact, nine of the twenty hired men who had worked for us made the transition from hired men to farmers. But not all nine prospered. I remember one day during the war. It was March 1—traditionally moving day in rural areas. On our county gravel road Dad and I met one of our former hired men, red-faced, whiskery, in the shabbiest of sheepskin overcoats. Driving a team and wagon and

towing a hay wagon filled with old farm equipment, he was moving from one rented farm to yet another. His image still comes to mind when I recall the hard times of some of our men. None of the other men who had worked for us became career hired men. Several operated small businesses, and others held mainly small-town jobs, in truck lines or feed mills, for example.

In 1942 Mom and Dad, only in their forties, sold the equipment and livestock, found a renter to farm the land, and moved to nearby Battle Creek. Now I became an occasional hired man, during high school. Although I lived with my family in town, I worked out by the day, \$2 per day, for a go-getting farmer named Fred Burow a couple miles north of town. Even though I had grown up on a farm, my farming and field work experience was very limited. On the Burows' farm I had my first experiences cultivating corn, bucking hay with horses, and running a tractor mower.

In the summer of 1943 Dad arranged for me to work for Fred "Fritz" Brueck, the renter on our farm, perhaps because Fritz's hired man had gone into the service. I was tickled to go out to the farm where I had grown up and to live with the Bruecks. I hadn't been comfortable eating a big breakfast at home in town, driving out each day to do a long day's work in the country, and then driving back into town. I preferred living out on the farm and being more involved with farm and stock operations. I worked for Fritz half the summer of 1943, a lot of Saturdays through my senior year of high school, and then from May 1944 until the end of the year, when I joined the navy.

Sometimes Fritz had another hired man besides me. The summer of 1943, Bob Brock helped some. Bob was not only a crony of mine but an ego booster: he was a town boy, and he naturally knew less about farming than I did. From the Sioux City employment office came Gene Lundgren, a young guy who talked a good game about farming, women, whatever—a typical braggart. Gene's claim to fame came when he forgot to drain the water out of the old John Deere tractor in early winter, cracking the block. He never got the nerve to tell Fritz about it.

In the winter my main job for Fritz was feed-