

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXIV ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1943 No. 11

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First Iowa Husking Meets

Into the office of Henry A. Wallace, then editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*, strolled one day in 1922 an old friend of his, Frank Faltonson, a retired farmer. Frank was "good and mad", he told the editor: he was tired of reading about big corn-husking records made each fall. "Even if they are true," he told Wallace, "who knows how much corn they left behind in the field or how many husks they left on the ears? There ought to be some way to give credit for the best husking job, not just the bushels."

And thus began a series of discussions which eventually led to the birth of cornhusking contests in the Tall Corn State. Faltonson "wanted to debunk the hot stove league records." Wallace desired to give farmers the impetus to husk corn faster and enjoy their work. Because both of the men knew farming, they realized that cornhusking was the most time-consuming task performed by the farmer throughout the corn belt.

In the October 27, 1922, issue of *Wallaces' Farmer*, Editor Wallace announced the first corn-husking contest. "We are convinced that the average farmer in the corn belt might just as well husk ten or fifteen bushels of corn more a day than he is likely to do this year", he wrote in his editorial. "If the spirit of athletic contests could be applied to corn husking, it is probable that we should soon become much more efficient. Athletes tell us that as soon as a man breaks a record in an athletic contest, that all other men show prompt improvement. Part of the improvement is from watching just how he does it, and part comes from a new realization of what is possible for a human being to do.

"We want to see the farmers of Iowa take a great step forward in corn husking efficiency. They spend more time in husking corn than any other work on the farm, with the possible exception of corn cultivation. In spite of this fact, improvements in corn husking have come rather slowly. There is still a doubt in the minds of many men as to whether a peg or a hook is better."

And so *Wallaces' Farmer* offered a prize of \$50 to the Iowa man or boy who husked the most corn in a day. In order to engage in the contest the husker had to declare the number of bushels of corn husked during a day, the number of hours

spent in the field, and submit an affidavit from an official of a county farmers' organization vouching for the reliability of the contestant.

On the frosty morning of November 21, 1922, Louis Curley, a tenant farmer in Lee County, went into his field with his team of horses and husked corn for nine and one-half hours. That evening he casually announced to his nephew that he had husked 205 bushels. His nephew, who was visiting the Curley family and had heard of the husking contest, urged him to send in the record to *Wallaces' Farmer*. Mainly to please his nephew, Curley sent in a sworn statement of his feat and entirely forgot about the contest.

By getting up earlier in the morning than Curley, John E. Pederson, of Iowa County, went into the fields one November day and husked 225 bushels in ten hours and forty-five minutes. Though Pederson, who was not a farmer but a baseball umpire, husked more bushels in one day than Curley, he had husked at a slower rate per hour. The umpire's record was 20.9 bushels per hour; Curley's was 21.6 bushels. Another good record was set by nineteen-year-old Ben Grimmius of Grundy County. He submitted an entry of having husked 176 bushels in eight hours and forty-five minutes.

After examining the records of many entrants

who had participated in the first cornhusking contest, the magazine officials announced that Louis Curley was the winner of the first all-day corn husking contest.

Faltonson, after hearing that the Lee County farmer had been declared to be the prize-winning cornhusker of Iowa, expressed disapproval of the indecisive features of the contest. He said he wanted to know how clean a job of husking the men were doing and how much corn was left in the field. He therefore proposed that the huskers meet in the same field and husk corn under inspection for a certain period of time. In order to please Faltonson and partially to satisfy his own curiosity, Henry A. Wallace summoned the three top men — Curley, Pederson, and Grimmius — to come to Des Moines and husk in competition under the same conditions.

On December 8, 1922, with the mercury hovering at 16° above zero, the first truly competitive cornhusking contest in Iowa was held. The three huskers, numbed by cold, snow, and wind, husked for an hour in a selected field not far from the capital city. Plodding along behind young Grimmius was none other than Wallace, himself, who was the official "gleaner" for this husker. At the end of the hour, the three huskers' loads were taken to the scales and deductions were made for

missed corn and too large a percentage of husks left on the ears. After careful checking, the judges announced that Curley was undoubtedly the first cornhusking champion of Iowa! He had husked fifteen bushels (after deductions were made) in an hour under extremely unfavorable conditions. All used hooks instead of pegs. Curley left only forty-nine pounds of corn, but Grimmius was much the cleanest husker.

It was in the following year, however, that plans were drawn up by *Wallaces' Farmer* to launch a cornhusking contest with preliminary winners from each county or township competing at Des Moines for the State championship. The 1923 contest differed from the previous one in that huskers were to gather for a Farm Bureau picnic in each local area and husk corn for an hour and twenty minutes under the supervision of referees. The winners of each of these matches was acknowledged to be the township or county champion and became eligible to send applications to *Wallaces' Farmer* to compete in the State cornhusking contest. From these entries the contest officials were to select winners with unusually good records from the various cornhusking meets held at the Farm Bureau picnics.

Another way to become eligible for the magazine's State contest was devised for huskers who

did not belong to county organizations and for those who did not compete in local meets. Under this plan farmers were to work nine hours in the field, husk their corn, and drive their own wagons to unload the corn. In filing this type of entry, the contestant was obliged to declare how many wagon loads he husked, the number of bushels in each load, and the total number of bushels. The six men submitting the best records were to become eligible for the State meet, scheduled for late November on a farm near Des Moines.

Throughout the Hawkeye State that autumn, cornhuskers tried to improve their skill. Many farmers unconsciously speeded up their work in the fields in an attempt to "get in shape" for the local meets which had been planned by their county Farm Bureaus. Many country boys, upon their return from a day at school, headed not for their football, but rather for their husking hooks. They went to the cornfields to join their fathers and practice husking, perhaps with the hope that some day they, too, could compete in the corn-husking contests.

The primary purpose of *Wallaces' Farmer* in promoting the State contest was, as Editor Henry A. Wallace said in the September 21, 1923, issue, "to inspire more rapid husking, with the result that the average corn husker in Iowa this year should

average ten bushels more per day than heretofore. And, best of all, more corn huskers will get more real joy out of corn husking than heretofore." Undoubtedly this aim was accomplished.

At the picnics the main event on the program was the cornhusking contest with an action-crammed one hour and twenty minutes of husking by the contestants. In some communities the banks and merchants offered cash prizes, merchandise, and occasionally turkeys to the winners and runners-up.

The long-awaited day of the State contest finally arrived. An autumn tang was in the air that day — Saturday, November 24, 1923. Eleven champion huskers from nine counties had come to Des Moines to participate in this new type of field meet, and approximately a thousand persons from many parts of the State arrived to back their candidates. The contest was held on the J. J. Newlin farm at Johnston Station, nine miles northwest of Des Moines. A prize of \$100 was offered for the champion husker. For second place, the award was \$50; third place, \$25; fourth place, \$10; and for fifth, sixth, and seventh places, \$5 each.

Judges from Iowa State College were appointed to supervise the weighing of the corn, deducting husks left on the ears, and seeing that there were

no infractions of the rules. Besides the judges there were two gleaners for each husker. It was their duty to gather all the ears missed by the huskers. For each pound of corn left in the field by a contestant, two pounds were to be deducted from the weight of the corn thrown into the wagon box.

As the time for the contest approached, the wagons were lined up at the end of the husking field. The horses, sensing the spirit of competition, pranced and pawed, eager to begin. The men were scarcely less nervous. Exactly at 1:30, on that bright Saturday afternoon, the first gun went off! Immediately the first husker started throwing ear after ear into the wagon beside him. Ten minutes passed and the gun was fired again, sending the second husker into the field. At the end of another interval, the two huskers were far into the field and only the regular thump, thump of ears hitting the bangboard could be heard. The third husker was sent on his way at 1:50, and so on — each husker started at ten minute intervals and husked for one hour and twenty minutes. By the time all the contestants were in the field the thud of the ears against the high sideboards of the wagons sounded like a bombardment. A gallery of spectators followed each husker to cheer him on. Champion Louis Curley had a crowd of a

hundred enthusiasts on his heels throughout the gruelling period, a circumstance which intensified his nervous tension and made him over-anxious.

At the start Curley was throwing forty-two ears per minute, but he was closely pressed by John Rickelman, a twenty-eight-year-old bachelor who lived across the road from the champion down in Lee County. Rickelman was "clocked" at the rate of forty ears a minute. Ben Grimmius, Jr., one of the three contestants in the 1922 event and the youngest man entered, had commenced slowly but increased his pace as the time passed.

Never had veteran farmers of Iowa, present at the meet, seen such "goings-on". Eleven "husky" men were exerting all their energy to husk the greatest amount of corn in a given time. Taking one row at a time, the huskers picked the ears from the stalk and hurried to the next one without "batting an eye" or making a false motion. They kept their eyes on the stalks, with never a glance at the wagon or the other contestants. Each had a rhythm peculiar to his style of husking.

Giving the three leaders an exciting race were John Thorson of Story County and Charles Fries of Greene County. Tension mounted as the huskers neared the "final stretch" and started throwing at an even faster pace than previously. It seemed to the crowd that Champion Curley had husked

the most ears, but, then, there were Rickelman and Grimmius to reckon with. Finally, at 2:50, the gun sounded, signifying the finish of the first wagon which started the contest. Every ten minutes thereafter, the report of the gun announced the end of the one-hour-and-twenty-minute time limit. Slowly the wagons with driver and husker on top of the corn came to the scales.

It was an anxious moment, indeed, as each wagon was weighed with its precious load of corn. At the scales, Curley's load tipped the beam at 2410 pounds, Rickelman's 2300, and Grimmius's 2302. For a moment the gallery thought that Curley had retained his crown for another year, but the judges declared that deductions had not yet been made.

The minutes passed slowly as the officials deducted weights of corn missed by the huskers and brought in by the gleaners. They also penalized some of the huskers for too many husks left on the ears. Rickelman was the cleanest picker. He left only fourteen pounds of corn in the field and had only 105 husks per hundred ears. Grimmius was almost as good, but Curley left 157.5 pounds of corn in the field and threw in 224 husks per hundred ears. Deductions hurt him more than the others.

At last the judges arrived at a decision. John

Rickelman had won the \$100 and the title of "Iowa Champion Cornhusker"! His final record was 31.49 bushels of corn husked during the hour-and-twenty-minute period, or 23.62 bushels per hour after penalties were subtracted. Curley, who husked more corn than any other contestant, was seventh in the event.

Second place prize was awarded to Grimmius, and Charles Fries captured third. John Sharkey of Calhoun County took fourth and John A. Thorson of Story County ranked fifth. Another Calhoun County husker, Bob Ihrke, had the sixth best record. The remaining huskers, who won no prizes, were: A. R. Swift, Marshall County, eighth; Carl Hoover, Mahaska County, ninth; John L. Johnson, Poweshiek County, tenth; and Walter J. Graham, Lee County, eleventh.

All the men expressed dissatisfaction with their records. They were partially handicapped because of the great amount of "down" corn which had been bent by a strong wind earlier in the week. But the huskers left the field late that afternoon with a knowledge that they had participated in the first decisive State cornhusking contest in Iowa. The crowd, too, realized that the event had been a success and looked forward to the 1924 contest.

After winning the State meet, Rickelman was

asked by the *Wallaces' Farmer* editors to meet Dallas Paul of Ipava, Illinois, champion corn husker of Illinois, in the first interstate husking contest to be held in the United States. He gladly accepted the challenge to defend his laurels in the November 27th contest.

The day arrived, and the two champions met at the Newlin farm which three days before had been the scene of the State meet. A cold, raw wind swept up the rows of corn as Rickelman and Paul, only twenty-two years of age, went into the field to begin husking the corn.

They were to husk an hour and twenty minutes in the morning and an hour in the afternoon. It was a nip and tuck race in the forenoon with Rickelman setting the pace, but with the Illinois man piling up what appeared to be the bigger load. Returning to the waving cornstalks after lunch, the contestants increased their speed. The tempo of the tattoo of ears pounding against the sideboards increased as the contest continued. Iowa's champion was throwing forty-five ears a minute, and the Illinois youth was right behind him. Toward the end, however, Rickelman ran into some poor, down corn, and Paul forged ahead.

Though both men used thumb hooks, their style of husking was totally different. Paul had a

free, rhythmical swing which lent speed to the standard hook method he used. Rickelman, however, took advantage of his strong wrists to seize the ear firmly at the butt with his left hand and brush the husks aside, grasp the ear, and twist it off with his right hand. This pinch-and-twist style was particularly effective in good corn, but it required great strength.

At the end of the allotted time, the wagons were drawn to the scales. According to gross weight, Rickelman picked 28.16 bushels in the morning and 22.29 bushels in the afternoon, while Paul picked 25.03 bushels in the morning and 22.60 bushels in the afternoon. Both men left about the same amount of corn in the field in the morning, but Paul missed sixty-two pounds in the afternoon while Rickelman left only twenty-two pounds. The increase of speed in the afternoon resulted in both men leaving more husks on the ears. After Umpire L. D. Burnett of Iowa State College had deducted for the various penalties, he found that Rickelman had husked 44.59 bushels and Paul, 40.53 bushels. Rickelman was declared "Champion of Iowa and Illinois".

In the years since 1924, when the first national meet was held at Des Moines, Iowa has produced three champion huskers who have won the national cornhusking contest six times. Fred Stanek

won the title in 1924, 1926, 1927, and 1930. Elmer Carlson husked his way to the national title in 1935, and in doing so he set a new world's record of 41.52 bushels in eighty minutes. The following year his brother, Carl Carlson, walked off with the honors.

The national champions have not always won their State meets, as in the case of Fred Stanek in 1924 and 1930. Only three men have won the Iowa husking championship more than once — Fred Stanek in 1926 and 1927, Clyde Tague in 1929 and 1930, and Lee Stodgell in 1934 and 1937. The complete list follows:

1922	Louis Curley	Lee County
1923	John Rickelman	Lee County
1924	Ben Grimmius, Jr.	Grundy County
1925	Leo Rettler	Keokuk County
1926	Fred Stanek	Webster County
1927	Fred Stanek	Webster County
1928	Reul Harmon	Mills County
1929	Clyde Tague	Guthrie County
1930	Clyde Tague	Guthrie County
1931	Lee Carey	Marshall County
1932	Orville Wicks	Wright County
1933	Clarence Bockes	Grundy County
1934	Lee Stodgell	Louisa County
1935	Elmer Carlson	Audubon County
1936	Carl Carlson	Audubon County

1937	Lee Stodgell	Louisa County
1938	Henry Peterson	Webster County
1939	Alvin Roberts	Muscatine County
1940	Marion Link	Story County
1941	Ivyl Carlson	Polk County

From the humble beginning on that bleak December day in 1922, cornhusking contests developed, from the standpoint of attendance, into the major sports event in the United States. The number of spectators grew by leaps and bounds. In 1940, a hundred thousand Iowans witnessed the county and district cornhusking meets. Twenty-five thousand fans attended the State meet that year, while attendance at the national cornhusking contests have reached a peak of 125,000. Since the United States entered the war, however, the State and national meets have been discontinued for the duration.

REEVES HALL