

COMMUNITY

A Farming Community

By David Kline

My parents were married in January of 1929 and moved to this Holmes County Ohio neighborhood in February—a neighborhood that was largely French Catholic but also included some Protestant families, along with a scattering of Amish families. This diversity of religious beliefs did not hinder the families from working together. They needed each other. Not every art and skill needed for rural living was known by every person in the community. So the people who had a particular art or skill in their possession shared it with their neighbors.

Father died last winter. He was 87. For 64 years he was a part of this community. Father was one of those rare people who possessed many of the arts and skills needed in thriving rural communities. Besides being a farmer and husbandman, he was a thresherman (a title that also included silo filling, corn husking with the machine, fodder shredding, and clover hulling,) a sawyer, an orchardist, his own mechanic, a carpenter (he could design and build anything from kitchen cabinets to mortise and tenon frame buildings), for a short time his own blacksmith, plumber, and for a while he even whitewashed our milking stable using the orchard sprayer. His stiff lime-covered coat still hangs from a spike on the shop wall. These talents he freely shared with the neighbors.

Father kept a diary from 1941 through 1943 and then from 1949 to early 1959. From reading the diaries I was astonished at the number of days Father spent helping neighbors. For example, one week in November of 1943 showed him at a different neighbor's farm every day:

- Monday: Husked corn at John Rothacker's. (A Lutheran family)
- Tuesday: Helped Mrs. Miller. (Her husband was in a mental hospital)
- Wednesday: Helped Eli cut logs. (Amish)
- Thursday: Husked corn for Mrs. Dan Kaufman. (A widow)
- Friday: Husked corn for Clarence Besancon. (Catholic)
- Saturday: Husked corn for Levi Kuhns. (Conservative Men-

nonite)

Naturally, Father and the neighbors helping to do the work would eat the noon meal with the farm family where the work was done. He would often talk about the excellent cooks they encountered throughout the community. In the fall, once the sweet potatoes were ready, Pearl Stutz could prepare candied yams no one could match. It seemed every farm wife had one special dish she excelled in.

This all began to change soon after the Second World War when the mechanization of agriculture began to gain momentum. For awhile the Industrial Revolution may have helped to build a community, or at least didn't do a great deal to destroy it. For instance, the threshing machine and mechanical corn husker still needed the help of neighbors to operate efficiently. But as the war economy shifted to a peacetime economy, farmers were pressured to modernize and that meant buying bigger and more "efficient" tractors and machinery.

While the Amish resisted this pressure to change, and still do today, so did many of our other neighbors. One of the Catholic farmers, in the late 40's, sold his farm at auction rather than change to tractor farming. The Lutheran neighbor never cared for the "new" neighborless farming and still threshed through the late 1950's, until it simply became too unfashionable in his society to do so. With his leaving and art was lost; he had been one of the best straw stackers in the neighborhood.

I believe it is safe to say that the machine became the great destroyer of community. What was a gradual change up to about 1950 suddenly became an abrupt, almost brutal process. Unfortunately, the acquisition of labor-saving farm machines often had far-reaching effects. Even for the Plain communities. Greater than anyone anticipated, if anyone even was anticipating the harm that could result from the changeover.

As the neighboring farmers began the change to more modern agriculture, fewer of their sons and daughters returned to the farm or the community when they graduated from college, as most of them did. Many went on to successful careers elsewhere. Also, their interests changed. In

the past the holy days were always celebrated in the home or at the church with their neighbors and friends. Now there was a shift away to distant places. Likewise, for recreation the themes changed too.

The majority of Amish have attempted to preserve the working together of communities by restricting the use of certain machines on the farm. When the machine in question replaced the need for the help of neighbors, such as the grain combine instead of threshing or the forage chopper instead of silo filling, the church leasers said no, too much will be lost. Even the telephone in the home is rejected in favor of face to face communication. In other words, when the issue is between self and community, community is chosen.

Not all the Amish have the sharing community view. A small number, even from among the most conservative, have chosen not to be part of neighborhood threshing and silo filling. They can do it themselves and have become non-participants in the community.

Our community has a broad spectrum of Plain and formerly Plain churches—as many as twenty different denominations, from the ultra-conservative to the ultra liberal. It is interesting to observe the views of the different churches on the importance of neighboring or community as the pendulum swings from conservative to liberal. For the one, it is crucial to their Christian beliefs to work and share together. Self is given for community. For the other, plain living has been discarded and their idea of community is to support the local basketball team and the fire department (which the conservatives do, too) and maybe carpooling to the mall.

To illustrate these opposite views I would like to give the example of two farmers. The one made the remark, "We'll cut all our oats and bale it for hay so we won't have to help the neighbors thresh." The other had tears in his eyes when he told me that his neighbor had dropped out. Not because he couldn't get his crops harvested, but that the blessing of helping his neighbor was taken away.

David Kline farms and writes in Fredericksburg, Ohio. He is the author of two books, Great Possessions and Scratching the Woodchuck.



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