

Lancaster County Historical Society
Oral History Project

Interviewee: Wilmer Eshelman

Interviewer: Mike Frey

Place:

Date:

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N: Wilmer Eshelman on farming. Interviewer, Mike Frey. Ok, Mr. Eshelman, would you like to start by describing about the Grain operations?

E: Well of course the object of farming has been to feed the population always. Agriculture has always been exceedingly important as we know and both dairy and grain and the threshing of grain and the improvement of the dairy business are good examples of a modern trend in agriculture.

I think it has always been of interest the romance of the threshing. Now we read even to go back in biblical times when the flail and the few men were used to thresh the grain out on the ground and that was done for thousands of years, even here in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Our early settlers used the flail but not for long.

The "groundhog thresher" came into being and it might sound strange to say a "groundhog thresher" and someone may wonder why it's called a "groundhog." Well the "groundhog thresher" was merely a cylinder with spikes and concaves that knock the grain out of the heads of wheat rather than the flail. It was powered by a horse, who walked in a tread-power with a little belt and as the grain was threshed, out of the heads, then it was carried over to what was known as a windmill. It was put in the windmill by hand. The man turned a large crank which caused the fan to revolve and blew all the chaff out of the wheat. Then of course it was taken to the mill and the man had enough of wheat for himself and his family and maybe a neighbor. He might have had in those days he might have had 5 to 10 bushels which is a fair crop but it wasn't long until somebody suggested: Why not put the windmill under the "groundhog thresher?" And here we have the evolution of the thresh machine.

Because the wheat went into the cylinder of the "groundhog thresher" instead of being carried over to the windmill it went right down through the thresher across the sieve of the windmill and the straw went out the one part of the back and the grain came out the side.

But still, power was a great item to be considered because then, what was called the horse-power was used, where a large... the horse-power was constructed in such a manner that there was a large pinion or a large "bull gear", I should say ran into a pinion. And there was four tongues on it and a horse hooked to each tongue and they went round and round and round and the pinion there was a shaft went off and a pulley wheel on the end of the shaft and that shaft drove the thresher. It was satisfactory but as the population again increased again we can see the increase in the threshing machine and in the ability to produce more grain. But the power, [motive] power was still the item.

Now in 1769 James Watt an Englishman had patented the steam engine but that was a rocker-arm-engine and it moved very, very slowly and still was not satisfactory for belt power. The steam engine with belt power was developed here right in America. Then in 1876 Nicholas Otto, a German, perfected the internal combustion engine in 1876. Then we had steam and gasoline both. It wasn't long until the American farmer then was able to put motor power on the belt power of the thresh machine instead of the horses and of course the result was that the thresh machine became bigger and more improved and became a self-feeder.

The first steam engines however were pulled by horses. They were called portable engines. Horses pulled the engines from farm to farm and also the thresher from farm to farm and pretty soon they thought: Well, why not let this engine pull itself? So they put a sprocket chain from the engine, the power wheel of the engine, to the drive wheel at the back but they still had the horses to steer the engine. They hitched the horses to the front to a tongue and the horses steered the engine but it runs on its own power. That didn't last long. They said: Let's let the engine run on its own power.

Now you must remember that there were no automobiles yet and this was quite an invention, quite an innovation, for the steam engine to power itself and the man stand back and he could steer it so it wasn't long that they gave up the horse and they put the thresh machine behind the steam engine and the steam engine could go from farm to farm on his run and pull his own thresher and also just put it in the barn in Lancaster County that is and thresh. The engine was left out in what we term the "barn bridge" at the back of the barn and the belt went in and run the thresher and it wasn't long until the farmers decided they'd like to have the straw bailed so bailers were designed around 1900 or perhaps a little before which we know as a bailer as a "hand-fed" bailer.

And so the with the bigger steam engine first came the bailer because it was the heaviest piece of equipment and behind that came the thresher and then they had a train of three and of course behind that came the water tank if it happened to be a steam rig but the large gasoline tractors started to come in at the same time and the "Oil Pull Rumely" was quite an engine that run on fuel. It was large like a steam engine and powerful and so both the steam and the gasoline rigs in the fall of the year after the harvest was in traveled over the country and each one had his run. He carried his men with him and they would pull into the barn back the bailer in the barn first and the thresher and there was a belt run from the cylinder shaft of the thresher to the bailer and then another belt was run from the thresher a large belt they generally would use about a 200' belt which when I say 200' that means 100' away from the engine it would be double length at 200' and the engine then was powered to the thresher and of course it didn't take long to thresh in those days.

Now perhaps I'd better explain something here about threshing in the barn. Now as you know the Lancaster County Barns are large not only in Lancaster County but in this section of the country. The barns are very large and the wheat was always cut by the binder and put in the barn. It was said it had to go through a sweat and then the thresher would pull in and thresh the wheat.

Now further west and in the far South they laugh at us in this part of the country and say: Who ever heard of threshing upstairs? But that was the typical German Lancaster County Bank Barn and it's served its purpose and in many cases is used today. Our Amish people still use that type of barn. However they thresh in the field today and that cuts down a lot of dust and so fourth.

So the great problem came then when the macadam roads came by. The large threshing rigs as the threshermen pulled them over the road would tear up the highway and of course the threshermen got in trouble then with the State. Well there was an organization formed and neither the threshermen were happy or neither the state was happy with it. It was called the Pennsylvania Threshermen's Association and they thought they could both live with it.

Still some of the highways got tore up when an engine with cleats would pull a large rig over a hill. It cut through but invention again came along and in the 1930's the Allis Chalmers Company developed a small combine which every farmer could own for himself and in the early 1930s the Minneapolis Moline Company advertised that they would put a tractor on rubber tires which was unheard of and a lot of farmers shook their head and said: This can't work.

Then the farmer had his tractor on rubber and he had his combine on rubber and a few years later the New Holland Machine Company came along with the automatic bailer and so that finished off the threshing rig as we know it and then instead of one thresherman going around to maybe thirty or forty farms to thresh every farmer could buy his own equipment and thresh for himself and maybe his neighbor or two and that finished off the threshing rig.

Now I started to say something earlier about the dairy business which is also very interesting because when I was a young man on the farm I grew up on a farm an average farmer had a herd of cattle of maybe a dozen and maybe some had up to twenty-five or thirty he was considered a pretty big dairyman. Of course all those cows were milked by hand in most cases some few had milking machines that were not very satisfactory but again the invention is the mother, necessity is the mother of invention and more milkers came and again we must look to the increase in population. Population increased we had to have more milk and the different milking machine companies they increased their machines for the production of milk to buy their machines. It wasn't long until the farmer had fifty head and one hundred head and now we know some that has five-hundred head and more. In the days when I was a boy, if a man and his wife milked a dozen cows morning and evening, why that was a real big chore. Today it has advanced so far that I know of one milking farm today where they can milk ninety cows in sixty minutes. It's a wheel barn. The cow goes on the wheel and as the wheel turns around another one follows until the wheel gets around to the other side the cow's milked and walks off and it doesn't take long to do it. The threshing and the dairy I think those are important points. I might say this: the plow was also a very important tool and we record, it is recorded that that Daniel Webster developed an enormous plow for up in New England where the stumps are a hindrance but the first, what we know as one of the most successful, was developed by John Deere and John Deere developed the all-steel plow I believe in the year of 1837; and from that day on we could plow the ground and again as the population increased we had to thresh as I said earlier we had to reap the grain and that was a back-breaking task with sickles and cradles. In 1832, Cyrus McCormick of Virginia perfected the reaper; and then in 1848, Peter Geyser of Maryland, is given the credit of the first successful grain thrasher; and in Waynesboro, again George Frick built a steam engine in 1856; and he developed the traction engine in 1875-80. So in this part of the country especially the German [allomen] was very inventive and much credit is given to them, which they deserve, for developing the modern trends in agriculture.

I think it's rather important that we might mention our local thresher manufacturers. In what is now Leola but that part of the town was formerly called Mechanicsburg, over north of Lancaster, was the [Andes] Manufacturing Company. They built thresher and Jacob C. Weaver, who happened to be my grandfather, learned his trade there and he established a shop in Strasburg Township and built the Weaver thresher. There's two on display down at the "Rough N' Tumble" Engineers' Historical Association and Ellis Keystone in Pottstown built a very successful thresher and then there was a Doylestown thresher also in the area. And of course, with the industrial revolution, we couldn't forget the New Holland Engine which was made by the New Holland Machine Company which later developed into the present large division of the Sperry Rand Corporation.

N: Ok fine. Alright Mr. Eshelman if you could just sort of give me as much as you can remember about your boyhood days on the farm.

E: Well I can remember I grew up in the South of Bunker Hill, Strasburg Township, and as a small boy I lived beside the shop where the thresh machines were being made by my grandfather and his shop was powered by a large eight horse Springfield stationary gasoline engine and run the turning legs and the planers and the forge and of course the shafting which was then [vogue] in all shops. And as a small boy when that big engine run and the exhaust came out through the wall I was scared and I kept my distance from it because I thought it made quite a heavy explosion when the exhaust went off. Then we later moved on down the road and my father worked for Enos Miller, until he bought his own farm which at that time was known as the Henry Trout Mill Farm. Today it happens to be the home of John Hartman and we moved there in 1920. And I as a boy went to Sandstone Public School.

And I remember when I was ten years old my father took me out with two horses and a plow and he made a round in the field and he said: Alright now you take it around and I'll watch you so I had two horses and the plow and I plowed the second [fur] and he said: I'll see you at dinner time. So at ten years old I plowed the field and of course from then on I worked in the farm every day with my father. I do not mean to say that I was abused but that was characteristic of all boys. It was considered that work never hurt anybody and if you didn't learn to work when you were young you certainly wouldn't learn to work when you become older and I think today this policy has pretty well borne fruit and proven itself as we see what happens over the country today. We were taught responsibility. We were taught danger. We didn't stick our hands into gearing and shafting and things of that kind although we certainly did have machinery that did run and ran fast and sometimes someone did get fast in it and the old fodder shredder was one of the worst ones. A man would in the winter time wear gloves and the cylinder would sometimes catch his glove and pull his arm in that happened several times but everyone was always taught to be careful. In fact Jacob C. Weaver built a Fodder shredder and after one man's hand was pulled in he developed that the man had to stand way back behind and feed out of reach that he couldn't get his hand in which was very beneficial. (19:55 needs checked) Well then, it was a big day when the tractor came on the farm.

N: So you had used a horse?

E: Oh yes. Up until this time we had used horses. One day when I came home from school, my father was running a [Fordsen] tractor. And my but was he happy. And I thought this was a great thing. But he didn't think I was qualified to run it. I guess because he liked to play with it too. So that year I didn't do any plowing; he done all the plowing with it. But it wasn't long until I was pulling the tractor, too--to plow, plowed the ground with the tractor and of course cultivated it and [dissed] it, planted it and ready for harvest time.

I can always remember every farmer, would look at the other one's, at their rows. When you went down the road and site out the row and say "well, he sure makes straight rows". And then sometimes, some farmers were not as adept at making straight rows as others. If you were on a hillside, your planter or the grain drill, whatever it might be, might slide down the hill a little, but sometimes you could calculate for that. So the men that had the rows that weren't so straight, he used to say: "well, you can make, you get more crops out of a crooked row then you do a straight one". Well, basically you might get a couple stalks more, of course that was a joke that passed around the country. But that was the way we farmed in those days.

In the winter time, of course we'd get snowed in for a week, but we always had plenty of food. Of course in the fall, why we would butcher about two or three hogs, and always the beef; which my mother would can the meat and put it up, and smoked the hams and always had plenty to eat.

N: You did your own butchering then?

E: Admittedly we didn't have much money, but in those days, but we had plenty to eat. When we decided to butcher, well we always had to count your butcher to come early in the morning. In fact, he would come yet when it was dark. And that morning was my morning to get up too, as a boy because I had to make the fire under the kettle, and I had to have hot, scalding water under two big, iron cauldrons until day light. We had a pile of wood outside we used to cut for that purpose. We had what was then known as a "farmer's friend furnace". Which was about two foot off the floor, with two big places to put these cauldrons and also we used to put cooper kettle in there and boil applebutter in fall also. Then, the butcher would come and we'd shoot the hog, and stick him. It bled out and by daylight, why we were down in the scalding trough and took the bristles off of him, and hung him up, hung him up to a limb a walnut tree and what was known as a "gambling stick" and then we would cut the hog in two. And a man would take a half of him and carry him in the butcher house where the fire and hot water was and lay him on a table, and we was cut up and we made the pudding, and the sausage, and the hams. I cured the hams, we didn't use the real smoke, we didn't have a smoke house, some people did, but we didn't. We used what was called [paton] smoke, put it on with a paintbrush. They were pretty good, the ham was pretty good, and they always kept. And it was my job; we had a gasoline engine out in the barn, a domestic by the way, and a meat grinder. And it was my job to take the meat out there and grind it, for the sausage and the pudding, and bring it back again.

But all those things we done, and enjoyed it. It was the only way we knew how to live. But we didn't say, "there was nothing to do", nobody, there was plenty to do, we

didn't say, "There was nothing to do so we'll get into devilment; and there's no entertainment because there's no parks and there's no swimming pools and there's no playgrounds". We had plenty to do. We were always kept busy, in fact, when Sunday come, we were kind of glad there wasn't so much to do. So we lived. And we look back on it now; I look back on it with pleasure. I don't feel I was abused. But I feel it was the beginning of my education.

N: I have a few questions I would like to ask you. Concerning the length of your father's working day now, was he from sunrise to sunset?

E: Well, that depended on the season. In the winter, of course we had to get up pretty good time to milk. My father and my mother went to the barn and done the milking and I went along and done the feeding. Fed all the animals and got the feed ready, and so forth. I'd in the winter we got up about, maybe 6:30. Of course, we stripped tobacco then in the daytime, we farmed tobacco, and we were generally done and in the house about 6:00. But then in the summer, well we got up then, maybe 5:30 or 6:00. And of course when the day was done, why, we used to raise a lot of sweet potatoes up along the woods. It was good, sandy ground and then we all went up and planted sweet potatoes and hoed sweet potatoes until it was dark. This wasn't the steady diet. If wanted to go someplace, why, we went someplace. I mean we didn't have to ask somebody if you could be off. In the winter we used to go to sales and things like that. I thought it was rather an enjoyable life.

N: I have another question now. As far as your crop production, how did you market it? Did you do it yourself, or what?

E: Well, we marketed the wheat and tobacco for cash crops, the most every farmer in those days, and sometimes potatoes. But the Lancaster County farmer, in those days, thought that he had to put everything through the stable. Now he would buy steers, what we call [stockers], at the stock yards, which would be shipped in from the west, they were very poor and skinning, and lot of the corn was fed to the cattle and the hogs, they were fattened. And you sold the hogs, and especially the steers and the milk because every farmer wanted that manure for fertilizer. In the old, days they used to judge a farmer by the pile of manure he had in front of the barn in the spring. If he didn't have much manure in front of the barn, why, they kind of just shake their head and say, "he won't last long". But if he had a big pile of manure in front of the barn and a big stable of steers and cows and hogs, he was considered a successful farmer.

N: You wouldn't happen to know anything about what we was getting for his produce?
(27:42 stopped)

E: Sometimes we sold potatoes for as low as 60¢