**A Lifetime in Farming**

My earliest recollection of Farming goes right back to the early 1940s when my Father used to take me, aged 4, out all day on the Tractor to give my Mum a break. Was I that much of a nuisance even then? There were a lot of Horses working on the farms in those days and I always remember the problems in trying to get the horses in first thing in the morning as the carters got them harnessed ready for the day’s work.

One of my first jobs at that time was to crawl through a hole in the centre of a Hayrick to collect the eggs the Hens would lay in there. These holes were created to allow the hay to breath and not overheat. You’ve no doubt read stories of children being used to go up chimneys to clean them; well we were used to collect eggs, a lot more enjoyable.

We came to Weald Farm in Bampton during 1943 and my first memories here were watching Wilcox and Frosts of Witney arrive with their Steam Traction Engine and the Threshing Machine to thresh the Ricks of corn; this operation would need at least 10 men to function. I say men, when in actual fact there would be several women involved including members of the Women’s Land Army. The worst job of this whole operation was clearing the ‘kevins’ this was the trash that was neither straw, chaff or grain, it was in the most dusty and dirty position of the Threshing Machine and the job was always given to the young boys to earn a bit of pocket money. I did this job, aged eight for six pence an hour (two and a half pence in today’s money)

I can name fifteen people, which includes one Land Army Girl and two German Prisoners of war who were billeted with us that worked on Weald Farm at this time; there were probably more but I can’t name them. The farm was not quite as big then as it is now and it is run now with just one man and a mass of equipment.

There was a feeling of great satisfaction in the farming community at this time. There was no television to show what was going on in the big wide world and the main forms of transport were train, bus and bike. At the end of the war, when the soldiers returned from abroad with stories to tell and the mass-produced affordable motor car arrived, everything changed. Factories were being converted from the War effort to producing cars and all that goes with them offering Farm Workers more money for a week’s work than they were getting for a month.

So, the demise of Farming began, more tractors were bought which brought an end to the Carter’s job. In the mid 1950s after food rationing there was a great demand for food production, especially in rural areas as this time saw the introduction of Myxomatosis in the wild Rabbits depriving them of a natural resource. Milk, Pork, Lamb and Beef production was on the increase, local markets at all our nearest towns were thriving as was the farming community.

With the increase in the cost of farm machinery and the loss of the workforce to industry, many small farmers could not make enough money to stay in business, in fact many of them left their land to join the masses in the factories. This meant that small farms disappeared and larger farms got even larger, a trend that is still happening to this day.

With Farms getting bigger and the workforce getting smaller, tractors and their implements got bigger. In 1956 we bought our first 40+ horsepower tractor, quite big and powerful at the time, yet when compared with today’s 300 horsepower monsters they were just little toys.

In the 1960s most farmers had their own Combines to harvest the corn when they wanted to, giving them a feeling of independence in not having to wait for a contractor to turn up at the first sign of a dry spell. Now with the cost of these machines being more than the cost of a new house, very few farmers can afford such luxury and have to rely upon the whims of contractors once again.

New large milking parlours were built, piggeries holding thousands of pigs were built all with money and the encouragement of the EEC. This was all followed in the 1970s by the EEC realising that we were producing too much food and the introduction of Quotas began with its accompanying need for restrictions and masses of paperwork.

All this led to a mass exodus from farming at the turn of the century. In the 1940s there were 14 Farms in Bampton, 13 were producing milk, now there are none producing milk. All the farms had animals on them. Now there is only one.

HOW SAD.

Don Rouse

*September 2011*