

# Looking back on the

Clarence Bilson has written the following article on farming to fill readers in on a part of farming life that ended approximately 25 years ago in this area and changed to more modern methods.

In the accompanying photo, the reader will see an old time hay press which was used to bale hay or straw out of the barns of this area up to approximately 1950.

This week the old press, which is still in operating condition, was donated to the Ontario Agricultural Museum at Milton, Ontario by the Clarence Bilson family of Foresters Falls. At the museum, it will be completely restored and put on display with the owners name and other related data regarding the press.

In discussion with E. W. Carbert, General Manager of Ontario Agricultural Museum, who was guest speaker at the Renfrew County Seed Fair at Opeongo High School, it was indicated by Mr. Carbert that the museum did not have a hay press in its collection.

Mr. Carbert was quite familiar with the hay press, having operated one while a young man working on the family farm. He had spent many a hard day forking hay out to one of these machines.

Many of the people who read this paper will remember the old time method of pressing baled hay while some of the younger readers may not be aware of this method used in the good old days.

Today, as you drive along the highways, you will see the present day hay baler that picks the hay from the windrow and then is tied automatically on top and bottom with baler twine. It then comes out the back of the baler where a man may pile the bales on a wagon or it may be stooked manually or automatically on a stoker.

Another method, which is a real labour saver, is a bale thrower which automatically throws the bales into a wagon which is pulled behind the baler without ever having to put your hands on the bales.

In front of the baler, acting as the mode of power, is one of the newer methods of power, namely the modern day tractor, some with all the modern conveniences of an automatic such as power steering, insulated cab, air conditioning and radio.

Before 1950, haying was done in a very different method without the ease and convenience of modern farm machinery. Baled hay in the 1930's, '40's and '50's was a cash crop for the farmer. The hay was either loaded on box cars and sent to the lumber camps or shipped to the stockyards to feed the carloads of cattle coming from western Canada.

Baled hay was also transported by team on sleighs in winter across the Ottawa River to some of the neighbouring towns in Quebec where farmers would come and meet the sleighs to buy the hay.

Portaging hay by team and sleigh to the lumber camps was a very necessary and rewarding job in those days as vast amounts of hay was consumed by horses working in the lumber camps.

One thing that should be kept in mind was that during these years, horses were the only source of power until near the end of the era when tractors took their place. Hay at this time was mostly timothy which was considered best for horse feed although clover was grown for cattle feed.

Hay was cut in the field by a hay mower drawn by a team of horses and the cutting bar on a lot of these machines was about only five feet wide which made for a lot of trips around the field.

The hay was then raked by a dump rake and in later years by a side rake into a windrow. If it was in the era when hay was coiled, then you gathered up a sufficient strip of hay from the windrow and pulled the hay into a pile which would be piled layer on layer to turn the rain and your pile or coil would probably be three or four feet wide at the bottom and about the same height.

After this had cured



Clarence Bilson stands on a hay press used in the Foresters Falls area during the 1930's and 40's. The Bilson family recently donated the press

sufficiently, it was loaded forkful by hand onto a wagon and drawn to the barn where it was stored loose in the mow of the barn. A later method of loading loose hay onto the wagon was by the hay loader which was drawn behind the wagon and lifted the loose hay from the windrow by means of forks on a drum. It was then taken up on ropes and slats onto the wagon where the hay was "tailed" away from the hay loader and spread on the wagon.

Sometimes two men would be on the wagon, one to tail the hayloader and the other

to drive the team of horses and also to build the front of the wagon load.

The hay was stored loose in the barn and if the barn became full the farmer had to build stacks outside as a method of storing this surplus in a good year.

"When you drew the loose hay into the barn you had to use a series of ropes, pulleys, hay fork and car to get the hay up into the mow off the wagon."

The method of power for pulling up the fork load of hay was an old, quiet horse

# The old hay press



to the Ontario Agricultural Museum at Markham, Ontario.

on a single whiffletree and probably driven by one of the younger members of the family and quite often by the mother along with all her other duties of raising the children and getting the meals.

With haying over, threshing came next with all the threshing bees or a group of neighbours who traded help with one another to get the work done.

After threshing came the hay pressing and for the men who owned the custom hay press it would be a job that

would last from early fall until the next spring almost every day unless the weather was unbearable.

For this job, 10 or 12 men formed a pressing bee or gang to get the job done. It was a hard and sometimes dusty job and at times, severely cold in the winter.

"I think the best part of all was the meals that were prepared by the farm wives as they sometimes too helped one another to prepare meals for the hungry men who tugged away at hay from morning until night and still

did their chores before they came in the morning and after they went home at night dead tired."

To operate the hay press, it took one man to feed it or fork hay into it and two men to wire the bales with long strands of haywire that would make bales of the desired lengths. Four or five men would be needed to fork hay out of the mow and one man would put in a tag under the top wire of each bale. He would put the divider bale back up into the holder as the divider had to be put between each bale so the long strands of wire could be shoved through by the two men who wired the bale.

Another man would weigh each bale and mark the weight on each tag and the weight was also marked on a tally board that hung on the wall beside the press. At the end of the day the weights were all added and the custom operator would be paid on the number of tons pressed at each place.

Two or sometimes more men would be required to move the finished bales away and pile them in an appropriate place.

The Bilson hay press was bought by my father, Herbert, in the mid-1930's and operated until 1950. I do not know the age of the press as it was a used machine when my father bought it from a man near Beachburg.

It was made by the Mathew Moody company of Terrebonne, Que., and that is where all parts were ordered.

It was pulled around from farm to farm on wheels in summer and sleighs in the winter by a team of horses. For quite a few years, a 10 h.p. International Mogul gas engine provided power and it too was also pulled on wheels or sleighs as the season demanded and was also pulled by a team of horses.

"To our regrets we sold this gas engine to the junk man a good number of years ago. In later years we used a 10-20 McCormick-Deering tractor for power and this did away with the horses to move the press around although in

winter when you had to put the press on a set of sleighs you sure needed the horses."

"I think I was 15 or 16 when I started the job of wiring the press and shortly after I was allowed to feed the hay into it. From then on my father and I changed each of these jobs at half hour intervals while pressing hay."

"We pressed hay mostly in the Foresters Falls area but for two years that I know of we moved the press over to the Quebec side and pressed hay on Calumet Island, Vinton and Campbell's Bay around 1940."

To look at the fantastic salaries now that some of the labour force demands and receives almost makes one ashamed to mention the little bit of money we received then for so much work.

When we pressed locally we supplied the hay press, the gas engine, two teams of horses to pull them, gas for the engine and our two selves. We would make a total of \$15 per day as the fee for pressing hay was 75 cents a ton and on the average 20 tons of hay were pressed a day.

The fee when we went to the Quebec side was raised to 90 cents a ton and in the last few years it went up to \$1 a ton which would give you about \$20 per day for two or three men and all the equipment.

In closing I hope that this has been informative and brings back memories to many farm families that knew this as a part of farm life quite a few years ago.

Changes are meant to be good and as a labour saver I'm sure this has been achieved but I don't think anyone will ever forget the closeness of all when threshing bees, pressing gangs, sawing gangs and the rural telephone were part of our life.

If any farm people might have any old antique farm machinery that you think the Ontario Agricultural Museum might be interested in, contact Mr. R. W. Carbert, General Manager, Ontario Agricultural Museum, Box 38, Milton, Ontario.