



FARMING

When I was a boy, my father was a day worker in summer, a lumberman in winter and a log driver in spring. One of his brothers living near our place was a farmer. He had a pair of horses, a dozen or so of cattle, about 20 sheep, half a dozen pigs and a couple of dozen chickens. He grew hay for his horses and oats for them, too, buckwheat for flour and pig feed and potatoes. He was not a very big farmer but he had a binder to reap his oats. That machine was pulled by his horses. It would cut the grain and tie it in neat bundles (sheafs); dump them in groups, and a man would follow the machine and stand the sheafs in groups of four or five. The grain was left in the field a few days to dry and then was taken into the barn. Around the end of November, a neighbor would show up with his thrashing machine run by a gasoline engine and the grain was saved and stored in a cool dry place. The straw was saved too for the sheep and the cattle.

In 1918, my uncle was sick and I helped in harvesting his potatoes. He had no potato digger so a man drove the horses pulling a plow and turning over the potato plants. A man would follow with a hoe and digged the potatoes out of the ground. Behind him came a man who picked the best potatoes and I followed him, picking the small potatoes saved to feed the pigs. The potatoes were stored in the basement of his house. Every other day he would cook a batch of small potatoes, mix them with the crushed grain and feed that to his pigs. To do that, he had a big cast iron kettle holding around a barrel of potatoes. After the potatoes were in, he would spend some time in the fall plowing, until it was too cold to do so.

In December, he would butcher his pigs, a couple of them, a sheep and a cow. He had turnips, carrots and cabbages from his garden. After it was plowed, in spring, the garden was more the responsibility of the ladies and the children.

His chickens gave him eggs and his cows provided the butter. After a while he bought a cream separator but in the beginning, he would put the fresh milk in a deep can with a spigot at the bottom. That can was lowered in a deep cool well about half way to its top. After 12 hours, it was taken out and most of the cream had gone to the top. They would open the spigot and get the milk under it and after, the cream in a separate container. For an evening meal, there was nothing we liked better than that cool milk with homemade bread and maple sugar. You could get a gallon of it for a quarter.

Everybody burned wood for heat and kerosene for light. The kerosene lamp was lit and set on the kitchen table. We kids would sit around the table to do our homework during the school days. My mother would sit closer to the stove knitting our mittens and stockings.

There was a variation when buckwheat was sown. It had to be put in the ground a little later because it was sensitive to frost. The quality of buckwheat is that it can grow in poor soil and it is the best killer of weeds. To reap it the binder could not be used, the grain would fall from the stem and be lost. It was cut in the morning when the dew was still on it. A special scythe was used called a cradle. Above the blade was a set of curved dowels on which the grain fell when it was cut. The farmer would deposit it in fine rows and leave it there to dry or ripen. Then the grain was rolled in small bundles with a hand rake. To bring it to the barn or better to the trashing machine, the wagon was rigged with a rack used for all grain and hay for but buckwheat the rack was lined with canvas to save as much grain as possible. As a rule it was stored in the barn and later put through the trashing machine and spread on the floor of the grainery to dry.

A rich amber colored flour was made with the buckwheat from which were made the delicious buckwheat pancakes (plugs). The flour being very rich was not easy to keep long so the farmer would go to the flour mill once in a while with the grain and bring back the flour he could use in a few weeks. In winter and cool weather, the flour would keep longer. Otherwise, it would ferment and become useless.

At my home we seldom had buckwheat pancakes for breakfast but most of the time, we had them for the two other meals. My mother would use sour dough that she would keep in a little wooden bucket and if she ran out of that she would use baking soda over which she would pour a little boiling water. The pancakes were cooked on the wood stove and the heat

had to be just right. Too hot, the pancakes would burn and too cold, they would stick to the top of the stove. When the heat was just right, the result was something real good with syrup or stew. Really it was as welcome as any good bread on the table.

The grain is still growing in the Valley and the flour is still available for around 20 cents a pound. I remember when you could buy it for five cents a pound. Oats and some barley were reaped in the Valley when I was a boy but not much wheat. The land was too poor to make it pay. A few farmers did, but then prepared their fields well for it.

In April many farmers would go to the big woods for maple sugar. The maple groves were not on the farms but on the ridges owned by the government. The farmers were allowed to tap the trees and nothing was paid. Dad owned a sugar camp with my Uncle Ernest and I have seen them boil the sap into syrup and cook the syrup into sugar. Today the maple sugar makers use the evaporator but when I was a boy very few had them. It was the pan and iron kettle. Today they pipe the sap from the trees to the evaporator but then the sap was collected from the pails hanging from the trees or from the birch bark containers, placed on the snow under a wooden spigot made of cedar. A road went through the maple grove where a horse hauling a sleigh with a big container on it. The men would go from tree to tree emptying the collecting pails into their buckets and bringing their full buckets to the road where the patient horse was waiting. When the sap was running good the boiling pans were busy around the clock. By the end of April the sugar making season was over.

In May the sheep were shorn of their wool which was washed and dried before it was taken to the carding mill. When it came back, it was ready for the spinning wheel. After that, it was knit into mittens and stockings, even underwear and sweaters. Some of it of course, went through the loom and became warm blankets and even winter coats and pants.



