The Beginning of the Farmer’s Year

IF THE WEATHER PERMITTED, the year’s farming began in March with the sowing of oats. One year we got this job done in late February and were rewarded by an exceptionally large yield of excellent quality grain. Often, oats went into a field where corn had grown the year before. If there was time, the ground was plowed; but in most cases it was broken up by going over it once or twice with a spring-tooth harrow, followed by a spike-tooth harrow, to obtain a deep, well-pulverized seedbed. A disk harrow and a cultipacker would have been very helpful in this work, but neither was available until several years later.

We used a grain drill for putting in oats and other small grains. Nearly always, the drill was set to feed out with the grain seed a regulated quantity of grass seed. Red clover was commonly sown with oats and timothy with wheat. No grain drill in the area at that time had an attachment for applying fertilizers—commercial fertilizers were generally unknown until about 1919, when a sample was shown at the county fair. All seed grains were carefully selected. We always ran ours through a fanning mill to remove weed seeds, chaff, and bits of straw. Clover seed was sown over wheat fields in early spring by means
of a "fiddle bow" broadcast seeder. Soon afterward, the field was rolled.

Near the time we finished with the oats, we started plowing fields for corn. It was impossible to hurry any spring work at the outset because, having done little work through the winter, horses were "soft." Frequent rests were imperative when the weather was warm. One perfect spring day, about mid-postnoon, I stopped my panting, sweaty horses to let them rest and blow. I stretched out on the warm ground beside the plow for a little breather myself. When I opened my eyes after an unintentional nap, the horses were still standing quietly, half-asleep. It was high noon—dinner time. (The noon meal was always dinner and the evening meal supper.) That little snooze could have caused me a great deal of embarrassment but, taught by previous experience, I kept it a secret.

With steady, well-trained horses and a plow sharpened and adjusted properly, plowing was not altogether an unpleasant task. The hard work came at the corners, in getting the plow out and then back into the ground for the change in direction. Although the pace was slow, walking a full day in the furrow in crumbly, sticky soil was fatiguing. Operating a plow in stony soil or in stumpy new ground constantly exercised about every muscle in one’s body; he had to remain tense and alert to avoid being violently jerked or thrown in case the plow struck an unyielding obstruction. Plows we used were of the single-bottom, walking type, now rarely seen. The plowman had plenty of company all day long; flocks of robins, chickadees, sparrows, jays, pigeons, catbirds, and blackbirds followed just behind him to eat worms, bugs, and insect larvae as they were turned out. Occasionally, as in
Robert Burns's experience, a frightened mouse was unearthed, running in panic from its wrecked home.

Soil that was loose after being turned by the plow could be readily fitted for planting by means of a spike-tooth harrow. In case heavy rains after plowing caused the soil to "run together," it had to be first broken up with a spring-tooth harrow. At times, after plowing stiff sod fields, we had to use a heavy roller to press down the long strips of broken turf. Whether the roller was used or not, we gave broken-sod fields a thorough going over with a spring-tooth harrow, following up with a spike-tooth. Generally, the final fitting was done with a slant-tooth harrow that, the last time over the field, was dragged diagonally so that marks later made to guide planters would stand out distinctly.

There was a tradition, attributed to the Indians and fairly well substantiated by the white man's experience, that corn should be planted when the leaves of the white oak were as big as a squirrel's ear. Generally, this was about May 10. The first step in planting was to lay out the field in rows. This was done with a homemade sled-like implement that marked on the ground three rows each time it was driven across the field. Standing upon it, one guided the horses in a straight line by sighting at tall stakes set and reset for the purpose. After the field had been marked in one direction, another set of marks was made at right angles to the first so that the entire area was finally laid out in squares measuring about forty inches on a side. A hill was to be planted at each corner of the squares.

About the time the marker started on the cross rows, work with hand "jobber" planters began. At the bottom
of the planter's seed hopper was a small wheel that had several holes of uniform size near its outer edge. Each hole was supposed to hold three grains, considered the proper number for a hill. Using this planter involved a series of rhythmic movements. As you set your left foot beside a spot marked for a hill, you stabbed in the closed bottom blades, with three grains waiting, and at once brought the two handles together. That dropped the seeds and the soil closed over them. Moving right along, you pulled the handles apart as your right foot advanced. That closed the blades again, rotated the wheel one notch, and dropped three grains into the pocket formed by the blades, ready for the next hill. The work was fun for a while, but it soon became a monotonous grind. The necessary walking posture and handling the planter were fatiguing, particularly to one's back. Multiple-row planting machines now do this work and do it well.

At once after the corn shoots appeared above ground, we went over our fields with a slant-tooth harrow, if the soil was not too wet. This gave us the jump on the weeds, at that time tiny and tender, destroying them by the million. Thereafter, we kept the single-row riding cultivator going. At times we “speeded up” the work by using also a one-horse, double-shovel walking cultivator that did one row per round. Farmers generally tried to get over their corn with the cultivator at least four times at weekly intervals; often, rains and the necessity for harvesting hay upset such plans.

On a good many farms some space was reserved in a cornfield for a melon patch. A few times we located ours near the center of a field, hopefully believing that it would thus be concealed from predatory youngsters.
(and oldsters) of the neighborhood. The stratagem was never successful; the patch was always spotted by prospective raiders long before the corn grew tall enough to hide it. Our luck was a lot better with patches located nearer the house.

A number of times we put in with our corn a long row of broomcorn. We used the long, tough stalks for tying corn shocks. One fall we chopped off the bushy tops, stripped away the seeds, and took the straw to a broom-maker, who turned out enough good brooms to supply us for several years.

At that time a good many farmers reserved a plot for sorghum cane. When ripe, the tops were clipped off and all leaves were stripped away. Then, the stalks were cut off close to the ground and tied in bundles. At the mill the stalks were fed between rollers and crushed to a dry, stringy pulp. The juice flowing out was caught in a receptacle and transferred to evaporating pans. There it was boiled, and skimmed from time to time, until it became a moderately thick syrup. Housewives used the syrup in baking and as a sugar substitute in other cookery. It was then an everyday commodity that commanded only a nominal price; now, if one can find any, the price runs to several dollars per gallon.

Early each summer, hordes of striped beetles appeared and began to devour the foliage of our potato plants. They were similar in size and appearance to the lightning bug or firefly indigenous to the area. We boys called them “blisters bugs” because if we happened to crush one in contact with the skin, a blister would appear there within a short time. No one knew any way to combat them except to rout them from the plants and then, as they scurried over
the ground, whip them vigorously with brushy branches from a tree. Crude though it was, this procedure was successful—at least temporarily. The pests left, crawling and flying away in great haste, almost with an air of remorse and penitence. We often wondered where they went, suspecting that they very shortly would show up in a neighbor’s patch. No doubt when he whipped them, they hurried right back to take up where they had left off in our potatoes.

Once Dad found a heavy infestation of these beetles in our potatoes and sent us boys to whip them out. While glumly girding for the fray, an inspiration came—why not let our ducks do the work? We promptly drove in the flock, some fifty or sixty half-mature birds that belonged to my brother and me. It was heart-warming to see our white Pekings go after those bugs. They waddled down the line gobbling the pests right and left until, within an hour, the last one had disappeared. Then, noting the distended crops and recalling how our bare knees had once been blistered by bugs we crushed as we crawled along plying our whips, the alarming question arose: “What dreadful thing is going to happen to those beetle-stuffed ducks?” Luckily, nothing happened at all; they went back to their pen, serene and satisfied, and no symptoms of any kind of trouble were noted.

One year the long beetles did not come in bothersome numbers. Instead, we found on the potatoes a few squat beetles with wing cases striped in black and yellow. Though we didn’t know it then, these were Colorado potato beetles, which have long made trouble for potato growers in many areas. We brushed all we found on the plants into a pail containing a small amount of kerosene.
This was easy because, possum-like, the adults feign death when they are touched or jarred and drop like stones from the plants. The oil no doubt would have killed them, but we made this doubly sure by burning them in the oil.

The actual effect of this procedure, so far as protecting the potatoes was concerned, was practically nil. The groundwork for its failure was laid when the first female adults, extraordinarily prolific creatures, began depositing yellow egg masses on the underside of the first leaves that appeared. After a short incubation period, small, soft-bodied larvae came from the eggs. Their total number was legion. They were born with insatiable appetites, and immediately began feeding upon the foliage. It is at this stage that the pests cause practically all of the damage. Reaching adulthood within a short time, a new reproductive cycle begins. Unlike mature beetles, the larvae cling so tenaciously to leaves and stems that it is almost impossible to dislodge them. We held them in check by applying arsenate of lead or other poison to the plants.

In the fall potatoes for winter use were piled conically on a layer of straw in the garden. We spread over them a blanket of straw, then shoveled earth over the straw, finally placing a piece of tough sod at the top to reduce washing down of the soil. Apples, beets, turnips, and cabbage were stored the same way, except that only potatoes and apples got a straw covering.