Threshing in the Dirty Thirties
Field Work
Interviews with Don Troester: Summers of 2007 & 2009

Introduction

In the 1930s, the Troesters near Hampton in Hamilton County, Nebraska, grew oats, some barley, and winter wheat, the latter being the subject of this narrative. These farmers harvested their winter wheat with two machines: the binder and the thresher. The binder cut the wheat and the thresher removed the grain from the straw. The term \textit{thresher} refers to the machine or individual employed in the process of threshing. Even though the dictionary gives the pronunciation as \textit{thresh-ing}, the workers called it \textit{thrash-ing}. This alternate pronunciation is not unique to Hamilton County, Nebraska; this writer has heard it pronounced this way in Wisconsin as well. The majority of the following information comes to you through Don Troester. Other contributors are credited within this narrative.

Step One: \textbf{Planting Winter Wheat}

Like other Troesters, Herman planted winter wheat in September so it began growing when the snow melted in the spring. By planting it in the fall, he avoided waiting for the muddy, spring fields to dry up before getting his planter into the field. The preferred name for this device was a drill. The drill looked similar to its modern counterpart, except it was run by “horse power.” The drill had a long, trough-like box, simply called a drill box, which sat between the drill’s two large metal wheels. Herman filled the drill box with seed, closed the lid, hitched up his team, and away he went. As the horses pulled the drill down the field, disks about eight inches apart sliced small furrows. The seeds dropped from drill box spouts and into these furrows. A same disk now covered the seeds. Finally, two-foot-high press wheels behind the machine ran over the furrow to secure the seed in the ground. For decoration, some farmers display old drills in their farm yards today.
Step Two: **Cutting the Wheat with a Binder**

*A Binder Cutting Wheat on the Stump Farm near the Town of Boston, KS*

There were two varieties of binders, those pushed and those pulled by horses. The Troesters pulled their binders, unlike the one illustrated above.

After the winter wheat was ready to harvest, Herman cut it with a binder. Horses and, later, tractors provided the pulling power. Herman started by cutting the wheat around the perimeters of the field and continued in a circular path until his final cutting placed him in the middle of the field. In other words, he didn’t pull his binder up and back as a farmer plows corn, but in a circular fashion like a spring coil.

Only one person drove the horse-drawn binder. After the binder cut the wheat, it bound and tied it into individual bundles and dropped them into a simple carrier made of parallel rods. At the appropriate time, the teamster tripped a lever to drop the bundles to the ground. He tripped the same lever to reset the carrier rods. He didn’t just drop bundles anywhere. As the binder made its circular round, the rider dropped bundles next to those he dropped earlier. Consequently, he dropped them in a straight line from the edge of the field to the center. This was convenient for the shockers. They just had to walk a straight line to gather 8, 10, or 12 bundles into a shock of grain. The shock formation allowed the wheat to dry and the rain to shed. The shocks remained standing to dry a few weeks before the thresher came.

All four of Herman’s children helped him set up standing shocks of wheat. His daughter Ardith says her mother Helen usually needed her at the farm house, but a few times she shocked with her three brothers. On one occasion, when he was a young boy, Leland, one of the twins, got too close to the binder, and it cut off the end of his middle finger. Upon seeing this, one of the chickens scooped it up and ran off with its newly-found trophy.
Step Four: **Threshing: Separating the Grain**

![Case thresher without the belt hooking it up to a tractor](image)

Herman and his Troester neighbors threshed the winter wheat by the 4th of July, which made for hot and hard summer labor. The men and sometimes a few capable boys united to thresh each others’ wheat, farm by farm. Threshing machines were rather expensive so few farmers owned one. In some cases the owner was a non-farmer, who’d hire out his services and machine to different farming neighborhoods. An example of this was Don’s Uncle Bill Bamesberger of Aurora. He originally owned a large, steam-driven thresher that he used in Herman’s community. He had other employment, but he’d mobilize his machine during the threshing season.

Sometimes, like John Troester, one active farmer bought a thresher himself. After his Uncle Bill discontinued operations, John supplemented his income by purchasing a John Deere D tractor to power a smaller yet sufficient threshing machine. By the time Don and Lyle were old enough to help, John used his own tractor and thresher among his Troester neighbors.

When the threshing machine owner began threshing in a particular neighborhood, the farmers referred to it as a “run.” Here, we are discussing the Troester run. Herman’s daughter Ardith recalls that threshing at Herman and John Troester’s each lasted two or three days—usually three. The fields in the Troester run belonged to Don’s father: William (WC); Don’s uncles: Walt, Gus, and John Bamesberger; and Don’s second cousins: Herman, John, Sam, and William (WH).

Although many pictures depict farmers feeding the hungry threshing machine in the field, the Troesters actually worked the thresher in the farm yard. One part of the crew began their work out in the field, where they
used three-tined pitchforks to pitch the shocked bundles into a hayrack (a hay wagon). At the age of 12 or 13, Don was one of the teamsters, who drove a hayrack back to the thresher in the farm yard. Before he left, field workers used pitchforks to fill the hayrack as high as they dared. They carefully placed the last bundles on top the hayrack so the load remained secure during his journey. As he entered the yard, he observed that John had parked his John Deere D tractor quite a distance from the thresher. Crew members connected an extremely long belt onto the pulleys of both machines so the tractor could power the thresher. Herman’s boy Lyle, the same age as Don, kept himself busy reattaching the belt when it occasionally detached from the pulleys, stopping operations.

The reason for the long distance between the tractor and the threshing machine was so Don and other teamsters could bring their hayracks around to the feeders at each end of the thresher. Here, farmers with three-tined pitchforks fed bundles into the two feeders. They couldn’t pitch them simultaneously but alternated pitching bundles from either side. Otherwise, it was too much for the thresher to handle at one time. After the workers pitched the bundles through feeders, the bundles landed onto a large canvass conveyor belt, which moved the bundles into the belly of the thresher to separated the grain from the straw.

As the threshing machine was working, the straw exited through a pipe-like device that made a pile of straw. The straw was very soft so children were told not to play in it lest they’d suffocate. The straw piles were removed from the center of the yard to a more convenient location. The piles provided wind protection for the animals and bedding for his cows, chickens, pigs, and the like.
The newly separated grain remained in the thresher until the machine had yielded the designated \( \frac{1}{2} \) to one bushel—usually \( \frac{1}{2} \). At that time, the thresher released the grain into a properly-positioned wagon, with the encouragement of an auger within the thresher. The thresher also kept a running total on a counter. If the farm was relatively close to town, a teamster might drive the wagon to the grain elevator. Otherwise, he drove the grain wagon to the farmer’s wheat bin, where one or two workers shoveled in the grain. Shovelers found this activity particularly strenuous.

After John Troester finished with the Troester run, he crossed Highway 14 with his tractor and thresher to begin a new run in another neighborhood. Don recalls this because he once accompanied John one particular year.

**Summer Fallowing**

After the threshing run was over, Herman and the other Troesters placed their fields into summer fallowing. He disked the ground to keep it clean from weeds. This gave the ground a rest in preparation for a spring crop, which wasn’t wheat. Thus, the Troesters practiced a type of crop rotation to prevent soil depletion.

**The End of an Era**

With the advent of the combine and tractor, the binder, the old threshing machine, and horses were on their way out. Among the Troesters this came around 1938 and 1939. The combine was so named because it combined the work of the both binder and threshing machine. Consequently, the threshing era and its accompanying farm culture also began to change. With the threshing machine, a half a dozen or more neighborhood farmers combined their labors into a large industrious operation. With the more efficient combine, the crews were smaller. In 1938, Don’s father and two of his uncles pooled their resources to buy a combine with a 12-foot header and pulled by their grandfather’s John Deere D tractor. Now only their three families were needed to combine their three farms. Even Herman modernized when he bought a John Deere B tractor, which pulled a small combine behind it.
Occasionally, the art of threshing with original machines is demonstrated in rural America. In Nebraska such expositions were conducted in Sterling, Henderson, and most recently Clay Center. Each summer, inhabitants in Symco County, Wisconsin, conduct a thresheree with multiple, noisy threshing machines on a working display.

Wheat planters, binders, and threshers can be viewed at the Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Aurora, Nebraska. Visitors may be fortunate to obtain the services of a guide to take them through the machine building and explain how these machines worked.

Wessels Living History Farm near York, Nebraska, is a good place for seeing how bygone farming was carried out. Their excellent website explains threshing and provides video interviews of “old timers,” who lived through the threshing days of the Dirty Thirties of the Great Depression. The website address is www.livinghistoryfarm.org

A Head of Wheat
Source: Crop Watch News Service Address: http://cropwatch.unl.edu/

Compiled by Dave Brown, Summer of 2009