

Threshing Reunions and Threshing Talk: Recollection and Reflection in the Midwest

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During summer and early fall in every midwestern state, public festivities celebrate agricultural technology and farm life from the first half of the 20th century. Various called "farm machinery exhibits," "threshermen reunions," "steam and gas shows," "antique engine displays," and "old settlers' reunions," these typically weekend events are never quite identical, but almost all blend themes of community, historic farm technology, education, and celebration.

Threshing reunions (and celebrations with different names that center around threshing technologies) are perhaps the most alluring and popular of the gatherings. The oldest reunions started in the late 1940s and early 1950s as small informal meetings of rural male residents who liked to collect and tinker with "old" machinery. Most of these men were farmers or retired farmers, and their "old" machinery included the generations of threshing separators, steam engines, and tractors largely abandoned for pull-type combines and improved all-purpose tractors by 1950. People who had used the devices as part of their everyday operation now found themselves to possess "historical" artifacts and information about work processes increasingly unfamiliar to the owners' children and grandchildren.

Small local gatherings with periodic demonstrations have now grown into multi-activity events lasting up to five days and attracting thousands of visitors. Their complex planning and organizing have become formally attached to threshermen associations, engine clubs, Lions Clubs and other fraternal organizations, Chambers of Commerce, and County Fair Boards. Expansion and popularity, however, have generally not diluted original goals. A typical statement of the primary intentions of show organizers is the "Creed of the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association," adopted soon after their initial show in 1950:

Knowing from experience that each generation enjoys a clean, wholesome gathering of an educational and historic nature such as ours, the Association hopes to always keep gathering like this, where we can meet and harvest the golden memories of yesteryear and pause in our daily tasks each year to visit and relax, always with a thought in so doing, to improve the future harvests of good fellowship and good citizenship.

In contrast to most museum displays or antique shows, threshermen reunions stress working exhibitions. Visitors can often witness horse-sweeps, steam engines, and internal combustion engines powering grain separators of 1880-1940 vintage. Threshing typically occupies a place at the center of the grounds or in front of the grandstands. In addition, and depending on the number and interests of exhibitors, there may be demonstrations of hay baling, sawmilling and veneer-making, silo filling, corn shelling, and meal and grain grinding. As one Ohio show advertises, "The Steam Show offers the entire family an opportunity to see history in action. Hundreds of steam and gas engines, antique tractors and equipment in use, just as they were operated during 'the golden age of steam.'"

The celebratory and educational functions of these events is further emphasized in the marked absence of midways and carnival rides. "We provide a Festival Atmosphere, Not a Carnival" advertises the Miami Valley Steam Threshers Association in London, Ohio. As individual threshing reunions grow in popularity and size, organizers typically add activities they believe appropriate to a family-oriented event. Music performances tend to be popular country-and-western acts or old-time fiddle contests. Food is served by local organizations, and camping is generally offered on

the grounds. Some activities are not especially associated with agricultural tasks, but fit within the overall historic theme; these include antique shows, arts and craft displays, pioneer buildings and skills, horse and antique tractor pulls, steam railroads, calliopes, and hay and pony rides.

Expression of regional values and beliefs is an important part of these celebrations. Many shows include an invocation by a local religious leader, flag raising ceremonies with the singing of the national anthem, local beauty, baby, and other competitions, a parade through town, Sunday morning church services, and other activities that reflect what a central Illinois organizer calls "the homespun and wholesome values of the Heartland." While the Midwest is, and has likely always been, a region of often competing and conflicting voices, the threshing reunion is in many ways a public performance of a grassroots and dominant Heartland middle-class ethos.

One thread of this ethos is the public presentation of a regional and national patriotism perhaps made more significant in recent years by patterns of agricultural globalization and industrial concentration and a belief, shared by many midwesterners, that the rest of the country has lost touch with basic values and sentiments. The threshing reunion incorporates a great deal of red, white, and blue, both explicitly in public ceremony and implicitly in patterns of technological display and performance. Machinery on display carries names of now-disappeared, but once well-known regional midwestern implement manufacturers (e.g., Aultman-Taylor of Ohio and Gaar-Scott of Indiana) or of the present-day giants of American farm industries (e.g., Case and John Deere).

The heart of threshing reunions are, of course, the machines gathered together for public display, admiration and demonstration. And the keepers of the heart are the former threshermen, farmers, and machinery buffs who collect, restore and maintain the machinery. A highlight of most events is the machinery parade, often held each day around noon, but sometimes occurring two or three times a day. The cauldades provide viewers with a procession of the tractors, steam engines, wagons and other implements of agriculture during the first half of the 20th century. Simultaneous commentary by announcers point out the year, model, and manufacturer of each machine as well as the name and hometown of the individual owners and restorers.

The centerpieces of threshing reunions are the steam engines that dominated midwestern threshing between 1885 and 1925. The romance of



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steam is compounded by the machines' status as the first major manifestation of America's industrial revolution to appear in many farming regions. Further, the threshermen who purchased, used and maintained these devices were role models for adults and children during the transition of farming from horse-power to horsepower. Threshing reunions thus expose a technological core of midwestern rural society through celebration of mechanical power, inventiveness and knowledge.

Displays of threshing machines and the engines used to run them represent more than a history of agricultural technology and mechanical inventiveness. For the midwesterners who used these devices, grain separators conjure memories of an annual rural social and economic institution — the threshing ring. Most rural neighborhoods developed cooperative groups called "rings" so that families could help one another with the labor and equipment needed to complete each member's threshing. This cooperation was necessary because machinery used to thresh before the adoption of pull-type combines was costly and



This crew is ready to thresh on the P.C. Frok farm in central Iowa, 1900. Photo courtesy State Historical Society of Iowa

was employed for only one to three days a year on most farms. Steam threshing equipment was hard to repair compared with other implements of the time, and it needed large crews of ten to twenty persons to bring the crop to the machine and handle the threshed grain and straw. The work generally took place in July and August, and a ring's "run" lasted between two and four weeks.

There were many variations in the way families formed and operated a ring. Some groups cooperatively purchased a set of machinery, but most contracted the services of an itinerant thresherman, who provided the equipment and the crew to run it and was paid by the bushel. Groups also differed in how they divided the work, figured each family's labor contribution, and equalized differences in acreage and labor contributions among farmer-members. The social life of cooperative labor was rich and usually included a dinner (at noon) provided by the host farmer's family and a post-harvest event, like a picnic or ice cream social, to mark a completed season.

At threshing reunions, one ever present, though not highly visible, activity is what might be called "threshing talk" by older rural residents who participated in the last phases of threshing rings. People may talk threshing when they meet to admire engines and separators and watch working demonstrations, when they eat together

as families away from the heat and noise of the machinery, and in other informal contexts. The dialogue is certainly not always on threshing itself, although one usually hears all sorts of stories about threshing meals, job experiences, local threshermen, good and bad crops, practical jokes carried out by ring members, and accidents. A group of men and women with shared experience often exchange narratives (and often the same ones) year after year, and at reunions one can usually find a few people with reputations as threshing raconteurs.

Outsiders may view threshing talk as reminiscing. Such exchanges do provide older residents an oral history forum, a means of repainting some of the signposts that mark life experience. To families retired from active farming, threshing discussions may recall younger years, better health, and greater energy and activity. Today's discussions of threshing rings often become inventories of rural neighborhoods, as former neighbors try to recall the members of their rings and catch up on the news of area families. In this sense, the cooperative nature of threshing rings is a perfect vehicle for shared discussion of people, places and experiences. The flow of conversation is typically not chronological or bound by agricultural tasks or seasons; it is rather the associations of people and places — all perhaps bound together by shared participation in an occupational task — that provide the turns and cues for



A farmer harvests soybeans using a modern combine in southwest Iowa. Photo courtesy U.S. Department of Agriculture

continued discussion.

Threshing talk also frequently educates younger generations of rural residents, many of whom do not farm, about farming systems no longer practiced except among some Amish and Mennonite groups. Reunion visitors may see machinery and exhibitions, but the technology is, after all, inanimate and demonstrations are recreative in selective fashion. Embedded in threshing talk are descriptions of farm tasks, activities and cultural landscapes, as well as verbal expressions, which often seem foreign to the current farming generation. Oral and visual history lessons of neighborhood processes, machinery and occupational techniques provide the “rest of the story” for equipment displays through specific recollections of local and regional uses of technologies. They remind listeners of individual values, social goals, and a degree of local control in mechanically complex occupational contexts.

Threshing talk, however, is not simply didactic, for through them participants also engage in a debate over change and the impact of current agricultural structures on cherished cultural and social norms. Many farm residents do identify

their occupation as “a way of life” or “expression of life.” They recognize that the social life associated with a community’s way of farming expresses and develops dominant rural norms. And, importantly, those men and women who have lived through the stepped-up phases of mechanical — and then chemical and now biogenetic — revolutions often feel a sense of decline in the quality of rural life. Quality in this sense is not solely measured by crop yields or numbers of conveniences or quantities of household goods, but rather is tied to the perpetuation of subjective social values and traditional cultural practices. Perceptions of a declining quality of life thus often portray a sense of loss or abandonment of cultural and social norms.

This perception is a complex idea that should not be confused with nostalgia or selective memory. The result of giving up important cultural traditions can be felt like the loss of a relative or friend; both may include emotions of denial, anger, or remorse. Years after their last bundles passed through grain separators, threshing ring members accept the past and the necessary cultural compromises they made to participate in

technological change. People who talk threshing do not associate the "good old days" of the threshing ring with easy work or high profits. Nor do former participants advocate returning to horse farming or to the technologies exhibited at these reunions. The modern, pull-type combine resolved many farm needs, and most farmers (and threshermen) welcome its speed and efficiency.

The change from threshing ring member to combine owner becomes more significant in the wider context of changes in rural life, from technological developments to school and church consolidations and the decline in the farm population. For many older midwesterners, the threshing ring is a reminder of a time when shared participation and local tradition were guideposts of social activity and expectations. In contrast, they perceive today's rural society as fragmented and impersonal, in part because technological evolutions have distanced families from the land, the lifestyle, and each other. Threshing attains special symbolic status in conceiving this duality, and contemporary discourse about cooperative work becomes a form of social criticism.

According to the many midwesterners' world view, the present rural crisis is older than the past decade. Events of the 1980s, however, demonstrated that the disruption of long-standing occupational patterns continues to have profound social and cultural impacts. Many midwesterners now feel that occupational "progress" is not synonymous with social progress. And a sustainable agriculture may not in itself stem the disintegration of many small midwestern communities. It is not simply that "neighbors don't get together like they used to," noted Dan Jones of Oak Hill, Ohio, but that "people don't have any idea anymore about traditions in their own places, they've lost so much."

To talk threshing, then, is to point to a perceived historical time and regional place when the work itself included opportunities to maintain desired cultural and social norms. Threshing, and the wider discussions of the period that naturally

stem from the subject, declare that the agricultural "way of life" has at times supported people's basic social needs and desired cultural goals. Threshing ring participation satisfied the labor needs of a complex technology, but in a way that also fulfilled shared perceptions and values grounded in local traditions and expectations. Older rural residents who congregate at threshing reunions and talk threshing tend to view current agricultural structures and transformations in rural life as being directed by outside influences, corporate manipulations, and decisions made with little sensitivity to or understanding of traditional rural patterns. In contrast, threshing experiences suggest things familiar, comfortable and shared.

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