

Dennis Sobotzak Preserves Old Threshing Tradition...

Separating Wheat From Chaff The Old Fashioned Way



Dennis Sobotzak hauls in oat bundles for threshing.

By Michael Stein

As a boy growing up on a farm, Dennis Sobotzak always enjoyed watching steam threshing. It was an era between the days when farmers cut their grain by hand with scythes and today's high-tech equipment. "I was too young to help," Dennis said. "But I would always go out to the fields with my mother to help bring lunches out to the workers. One thing I noticed, those lunches were extra special for the threshing group. For them she would always cut much bigger pieces of cake, so I thought, well there's got to be something special about this." But by the time he was 10, Dennis's dad had bought a combine. "So that was the end of the threshing in the family." In those old days, the bundle wagons were pulled by horses, which is his other love. "And so that's why we started it up again. We had our first annual threshing bee in 2003. Our friends would bring teams over and we had about four bundle wagons pulled by horses. I made up a list of some who came and six are now deceased. Some of them, like Dick Watkins, kept on bringing teams. "Years later I called Dick, and he wasn't feeling too well at the time. And I said, 'Dick, I know you're not feeling too well. You don't have to come, but you're one of our charter members.' He told me, 'I'd rather die hauling bundles than lying in the hospital.' That was the attitude those guys had. It was the incentive—a

farm project that was able to use the horses we had." Dennis didn't have a threshing machine when he started, nor did he have a tractor with a belt pulley. "After 1960, tractors didn't come with belt pulleys anymore because there was no longer a need for them. You had to have an older tractor with a belt pulley that would run the big drive belt so different people would furnish tractors. The Swenson brothers had been restoring threshing machines, and they had like six of them stored in their quonsets." They would use a different machine each year just to keep them limbered up. "I did that for a long time, but hauling them back and forth worried me. I was always afraid I'd tip over when we loaded them on ramps and that was always a precarious job—you can see how clumsy they look. You push them up on the ramp and thought, boy I'm going to tip one of these over someday and then I'll feel bad." Eventually, Dennis bought his own threshing machine, along with a couple "classic" tractors with belt pulleys. The word of his threshing bees got around and it didn't take long for others in the region to journey to the Sobotjak farm. We borrowed some of the equipment to begin with," Dennis said. "And, of course, the people would come along with them. One year we stopped to figure out the average age, and it was like 74 years old. That was my threshing crew.

Once we hired three or four football players to help load the wagons. They were around 16 years old, but the average age still came out to be 74!" As the threshing progressed, the decades melted away and memories flowed for those who did it for several weeks in fall during their younger days. "Some would thresh for six weeks, and that got to be a lot of work. We do it for one day, so you can leave with a smile on your face. We're all exhausted for that one day or a few days afterward, but we do it for fun." Despite preservation efforts that include the annual Stream Threshers Reunion in Rollag, Dennis said it's getting harder to find old threshing machines and the parts that go with them. "Threshing machines can go for up to \$3000," Dennis said. "There are some cheaper than that, but a lot have been standing outside so long that they need a lot of repair work. There are a lot of wooden parts to a threshing machine. Raccoons will get inside there and chew em up. So sometimes the insides are missing something. I've seen some just parked out in the trees and over time they just fall apart. And that makes them good for lawn ornaments or something. It's hard to find one that's been stored inside." As you might expect, searching for old threshing machines can open the door to other interesting treasures. A few years ago, Dennis made a stop to look for a particular

threshing-related item. "So, this guy had in the back of his shed a 1958 Ford Fairlane Skyliner with a retractable hardtop. They only made those for three years. It was a model with a hardtop that retracted back into the trunk." Along with the threshing machine you also have to have a binder, which cuts the grain and ties the bundles. The binder has been replaced by the swather, but now that's been all but eliminated because they straight combine stuff rather than swath it.

"You cut the grain and set them up into shocks—about six bundles for each shock," Dennis said. "You set them up like a little dog house out in the field so the kernels are on top. And that helps them to dry. With oats you can cut them when they're still on the green side and they'll ripen in the shock. By doing so you have less shelling. If you leave it in the field until it's ripe and then shock them they will 'shell out' so you'll lose oats. But when you cut them on the green side, you don't lose that much to shelling."

Of course, before all that happens, Dennis said, "Ya gotta plant," which he does the first part of April. "I tell people I'm sowing my wild oats." Harvesting, or cutting with a binder, begins in late July. Dennis and his crew usually thresh within a week after cutting, then let it dry for a week to 10 days. Next comes the separation process, separating the grain from the straw or the chaff. "That's when straw and the chaff goes up the blower to the straw pile and the grain goes out the spout that goes to the grain box or truck." Dennis explained that the chaff is usually used for bedding. But during those frigid winter days it can be used for feed. "I'm told that oat straw for feed has more BTUs than grass hay," he said. "For example, we used to raise bison. One time we took a semi load of these big rectangular bales of oat straw and just dumped them out in the bison pasture. We did the same with big round bales of hay. So I called back in February and asked my son Jim how it's going and if they ate up all the hay. He said, no, and as a matter of fact, they ate up all the oat straw first. I was surprised that bison would be smart enough to know that oat straw was better for them."

Both Dennis and his wife, Eloise, grew up in northern Minnesota. He is from Greenbush and she is from Roseau. Both attended North Dakota State University. Eloise taught school in Fargo for several years. Dennis entered the service during the Vietnam era, serving as a military policeman. "After living in Fargo for awhile, we wanted to move back out to a farm," Dennis said "If you grow up on a farm, city life can be very confining. You walk out of your house and there are other houses 12 feet from you in every direction. We bought this farm in 1973 when the road leading out there was just a couple of ruts in the ground. There were no buildings at that time, just a hay field and lover's lane back among the trees." Yes, back in those crazy 1970s, there was a covert little spot where couples could find a little paradise by the dashboard lights. "When we started building the house, we kept the lumber out in that area," Dennis explained. "By sundown they'd start coming out three or four carloads, all parked under the trees. Of course, after a rain it would be muddy and the cars would get stuck, so one of our neighbors to the east would sometimes bring his tractor over to help pull them out."



In the last stage of the threshing process, the separated oats are gathered while the straw is blown into a pile.

Dennis put his MP experience to good use when he started becoming concerned about his lumber. "No, I think I'll give it back to your dad." And, snap! Just like that she snatched it out of my hand, hit the gas and I never saw them again! It was comical." As the Sobotzak farm grew and prospered, "lover's lane" became one a distant, but vivid, memory. But threshing goes on. Dennis takes it one year at a time, so he's looking forward to August 2018 to gather area threshing enthusiasts and make more memories.



Jim Sobotzak loads up the bales into the threshing machine, which, in this instance, is powered by a belt pulley attached to an older model John Deere tractor.



Dennis and Jim check the belt pulley before it's used to run the threshing machine.

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That's how they did it in the old days. Dennis operates a springtooth powered by a team of eight horses.