

Haying Progress

By Jeremiah Vardiman

Agriculture Extension Educator

University of Wyoming

Harvest season is in full swing in Wyoming as I write this.

Combines are busy threshing grains, beans, and forage seed. Beet diggers are steadily working through the fields piling sugarbeets into transport trucks, while hay equipment is knocking down and baling the last cuttings of the year.

This time of year can always bring perspective into view, especially in how much progress the agriculture industry has made in harvest equipment. Most harvesting was done by human hands, such as digging sugarbeets with forks, not that long ago.

This is especially true for hay production in the Cowboy State. Some ranches still have relics of beaverslides and other hay stacker equipment from the early 20th century. The history of haying can be traced back into the middle 1800s and the beginning of Wyoming's cattle industry. According to the Wyoming State Historical Society, Seth Ward left cattle out on the open range North of Cheyenne along Chugwater Creek in the winter of 1852 -1853 and were found the next spring thriving.

During those early years, Wyoming was known as having abundant and free grass, which did not encourage large-scale haying operations. Hay operations were all hand-harvested, typically for feeding horses and mules. Nathan Baker, editor of the Cheyenne Leader in 1867, once declared, "Mild winters necessitated no feeding and while an operator might expect winter losses to his herd of two to three percent, this was still more economical than buying hay for feed." It probably wasn't until after the winter of 1886-1887, during which an estimated 15 percent in cattle statewide were killed, that hay production gained much interest or demand for feeding cattle.

In the late 1800s hay production was done by hand-harvesting with a scythe or cradle, or, for more wealthy operations, a McCormick reaper, which was a horse-drawn swather of its day. The hay was then piled with pitchforks into loose stacks of hay, hoisted into haylofts in a barn, or pulled to hay stackers, like beaverslides, using horse-drawn hay rakes. There are a few ranches today that stack hay in loosestacks similar to what beaverslides did, but with modern equipment.

Stationary balers were becoming available on the market in the early 1900s. Tractors of the day were used to power stationary balers, and the baled hay was hand-tied with baling wire. The hay was still gathered in the field with pitchforks or horse-drawn hay rakes and brought to stationary balers. The first swathers, which cut the hay, were not on the market until the 1920s.

Haying operations that would be similar to today did not materialize until after World War II. World War II's mechanization flowed into agriculture with various sizes of tractors, which could pull implements like balers, plows, and discs. From the 1950s to now, swathers, tractors, and balers have increased in power,

size, and capacity. As with every industry today, agriculture is on the cutting edge of technology with GPS (global positioning system)-guided equipment, and developing unmanned equipment.

Changes in labor is the largest driving force for this mechanization of hay production and agriculture in general. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), hired farmworkers make up less than one percent of all U.S. wage and salary workers and has steadily declined over the last century from 3.4 million to just over 1 million. The beaverslides, swing arm hay stackers, and hay derrick relics needed hay crews of 6 to 25 to operate, while today's hay operations can be done by one or a few individuals, depending on the size of the operation.

This fall, take a moment and be thankful of the modern conveniences in hay production, even when it is broke down, because resorting back to the scythe is not very tempting!