

## Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

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### Threshing Season In Carroll County

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By Joe Getty

Fifty years ago in Carroll County, one of the sounds of the countryside was the “puff-puff-puff” of the steam threshing (pronounced locally “thrashing”) machine. On a hot night in late summer, the nighttime sounds through the open windows would frequently include the movement of these machines from farm to farm.

The threshing machine would go puff-puff-puff up a hill, and every once in a while give a gentle “toot-toot” on its whistle. Reaching the top of hill it would go “PUFF-PUFF-PUFF-Puff.”

You could tell from the sounds at night where the machines were moving --whose machine was going to what farm. Only a few farmers owned these machines and they would hire out to other farmers to process their wheat crops.

The machines were moved at night. A machine owner would let you know two days beforehand when he was bringing the machine to your farm. This would give you time to prepare for the threshing process. You would need to get a delivery of soft coal from the coal yard and also need to have the crops ready for threshing.

The wheat was cut by a binder and shocked in roughly three-foot by one-foot shocks. It was hauled by hay carriages with tall sides. Usually the oldest man and youngest child stacked the wagon, while the husky men handed the sheaves up.

Threshing season was a fascinating time for young farm boys. At about age ten, a boy could help loading the wagon. The loading was done by a systematic process with layers of butts on the outside and the interior layers reversed so that the shocks were tied into the center. This process helped insure that the tall loads, which were hauled by horses over rough roads, would not be tumbled over and lost.

The threshing machine site had to be perfectly level, so holes were dug to make sure that the machine could be set up on the ground out by the barnyard. At some farms, the machine was set on the barn floor. Along with the engine and threshing machine, a two-wheeled water cart was kept nearby which could add water without stopping the machine.

If the machine was outside it was staked to the ground. A continuous belt ran from the steam engine to the threshing machine, and it was necessary to keep sparks away from the straw. The straw was blown off during the threshing process by a telescopic blower stack. The blower operator would move the stack back and forth in order to create a mound of straw in the barnyard.

The machine was always moved and set up at the night. The thresher operator would make sure that everything was ready, bank the fire and go home for the night. In the morning, the belt to the threshing machine would be tightened by backing up the engine and the system would be fired up.

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The operation included a bagger man who would bag the wheat as it came out the machine, a stack man who would stack the straw, and feeders (usually the two strongest and toughest men on the farm) who fed the thresher all day long. Usually friends from neighboring farms would come with their wagons to help load the shocks from the fields, although at some farms the shocks would already be in the barns for the threshing process.

The threshing machine owner would usually provide an operator who would sit at the seat on the engine watching the valves. He might also provide a stacker because there were only a few good stackers around. They would produce square or rectangular stacks with the straw forks and form a top to shed the rain. Like most of the workers, they wore straw hats with handkerchiefs around their neck.

On most area farms, wheat was the primary cash crop. It was taken to the mill by the railroad and processed and shipped from there. The thresher owner was usually paid by receiving a portion of the produce. The separator on the threshing machine had a measure with a counter to tell how many half-bushels were produced.

At dinnertime, all work stopped and the men would go to a water trough and wash-up. Usually they took their chewing tobacco out of their mouth and put it on a ledge to dry. They went inside for a big dinner with three or four kinds of meat, various vegetables and pies for dessert. Dinner conversation revolved around how good a harvest they had that year, smut and various crop diseases, and similar topics.

To a farm boy, the threshing season was a fascinating time. There was action everywhere with the equipment running, the men working in the fields, and the families helping one another. And at night, there were the sounds of summer and the “puff-puff-puff” of the threshing machine as it moved from farm to farm.

Photo Caption:

Andrew P. Frizzell Threshing Machine and Rig. Run by David Byers and Kenneth Carr with Mr. Frizzell on horseback. Photo taken at Bloom Post Office on Salem Bottom Road near Salem Methodist Church. Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.