

More Reminiscences from Rodney Rockenbach

(transcribed from the original handwritten notes with minor edits)

During the Depression years, maybe about 1931 or 1932, George, Joe, Ray, Lyle and Rodney went on a muskmelon and watermelon equalization escapade one night. I think we can give credit to the two senior members for a well-planned operation.

There was a large melon patch just north of the cemetery on Ridgefield Road. We all went in a big car with gunny sacks. We drove up to the melon patch. I knew how to drive a little bit, but the older brothers explained the difference to me between the accelerator and the brake pedal. I was to drive to Ridgefield (about 2 miles) and return. Just before I arrived at the melon patch I was to turn the lights on and off. In the meantime the other brothers with the know-how had jumped the fence and filled the bags with melons. Then we returned home.

Our mother was very upset with us. We were not upset. It was a governmental taking, "share your melons with others". This was a family confidential operation and shall not be shared with anyone outside the inner family.

Before I started school the older boys in grade school played "duck on the rock" or some similar name. A piece of fireplace wood was placed standing on end. The participants would then throw a piece of firewood to see who could knock the standing piece over first. After George had set up the target he was hit on the head by a thrown piece of wood, with some sort of short-term injury. After that, Mom made beanbags to throw. Much safer, but not as exciting.

Before Milwaukee Avenue was paved, a road grader was always parked in our big yard down in the area where there was a haystack. There was a long cable between two big trees for the hay fork to roll on.

In the spring of the year Pa, Bob and a neighbor farmer would grade a section of Milwaukee Avenue, a gravel road. Pa would furnish one team of horses and the neighbor one team, for a four team hitch. It took three people, driver and two on the rear of the grader, one to operate the elevation of the grader blade and one to operate the angle of the blade. Before the horses were taken from the barn their tails were "bobtailed", long tail hairs were weaved back up in such a manner that they were one half as long, to avoid the wet sandy gravel from the road. I believe trucks use that term "bobtail" when they are operating the tractor unit without their trailer. This "remember when" makes a lot of "horse sense" I hope.

I must have been about five years old at that time which nobody, or only one or two, can dispute.

When we would visit grandpa Catlow in the old theatre (a large stage) Grandpa would get behind us, put one of his hands on each side of our head and then lift us up by our head. I never did appreciate that. But then Grandpa would gently touch our ear and then turn the palm of his hand up with a nickel or dime for us. He must have had a lot of money to do that to 14 kids over the years.

When they paved Milwaukee Avenue, I think about 1925, I made my first fortune. A work truck with a flatbed with 12 or 15 highway workers riding on the back would go through our yard and through two farms to get to Aptakisic Road. At the end of our driveway, which was about 1/4 mile from Milwaukee Avenue, we always had a gate up to keep our livestock within the yard area. Ray and I always knew about what time the truck would be coming through our yard. Then we would run to open the gate at about the time they arrived. The workers always threw a dime or a nickel to reward us.

When we moved to Crystal Lake, in February 1927, I took my fortune with me. Then the Big Depression came and banks failed. I lost my \$13.71 in Crystal Lake Home State Bank. Over a few years I did get five cents back. Then I started on making my second fortune. Only took me 75 years.

At trip school, with the cement outside steps and metal handrails, more than one kid got convinced to put his tongue on the handrail when the temperature was below zero.

On those same cold days, at recess time, Mom would bring hot cocoa and a treat for all the students.

Kids were smarter in those days. Nobody had to go to kindergarten or prekindergarten.

I remember after I came home from school at the end of the first day Pa and Ma asked me how I did. I said "I jumped right into second grade". But I think what I did was I jumped into the second row of seats.

In Crystal Lake on Halloween night the police picked up Dory. The police called up Pa to pick her up. Pa's reply was "you can keep her and I will come get her in the morning!"

When Grandpa [*Joseph Goodman*] Catlow was dying, his daughters got together at Aunt Ruth [*Whitcomb*]'s house. Ma took a few of us kids along. Some of us got into Uncle George [*Whitcomb*]'s small chicken coop and got covered with lice. In spite of that, Grandpa died.

Uncle George Whitcomb was the nicest guy. He had the popcorn machine at the Catlow Theatre and always gave us kids popcorn at no charge. We all got in free at the theatre. On a trip to the show, one night it would be four brothers with Ma and Pa. On the next trip it would be four sisters.

Ma and Pa used to ship one or two of us to the Mill's farm in the summer. They got rid of us for the summer. Uncle Louis made us earn our room and board.

I drove one horse on a thistle machine in the grain fields to pull off the Canada thistle heads. It somewhat resembled a side delivery rake, but it rotated in the opposite direction. It was done before the grain headed out. I have never seen a machine like that since then, thank God for that. We get a Reminiscence Farm monthly magazine but have never seen this farm machinery in the magazine.

I drove the team of horses on the hay wagon with the hay loader attached. I had to be sure the team went slow enough so that Louis would not get behind in spreading the hay on the hay rack. Louis had the nicest way of reprimanding me. I made a deal with Louis that I would be paid a nickel for each load of hay. I thought we would do about 20 loads in a day, but I think the highest number was 17 loads. But I got paid and went home with some money.

On every Saturday night Lewis would take us kids to Libertyville and buy us each a strawberry sundae. That was quite a treat.

When Louis with his large tractor and large threshing machine would go to the neighbor farmers to do their threshing I had to cultivate corn with a single row cultivator with a team of horses. My legs were a little too short to meet the stirrups for swinging the cultivator side to side as needed. I removed a lot of weeds as well as a lot

of corn. Sometimes I got off the cultivator and replanted some of the corn.

I also used to drive a team of horses on a bull rake when the cut hay was stacked in the field. I drove the number three rated team of horses. One horse on each side of the bull rake, each horse about 12 feet apart, one third-grade horse and one blind horse. That blind horse was that easiest horse that I had ever driven. He was the first living thing that ever paid attention to what I was saying, and maybe even today. I could guide that horse over and around obstacles with ease.

Louis was way ahead of others farmers. He had more ideas and original ideas how to change farm implements and their operation. He had developed a method to pull up the field hay stacker. It was mounted on a four steel wheel trailer. It had a drum on it for coiling up the hay rope for raising the end up with the hay loaded on and then dumping it on the haystack pile from a height above. This drum was driven by a gasoline stationary engine. Normally it would have been pulled up by one horse or a team of horses, much slower.

One night after supper Louis, Chuck and I went out into the hay over the railroad tracks. The railroad ran through the farm on the east end of the farm. Louis told Chuck and me to go tow the trailer with drum and engine on it to a different location while he did some repair on a tractor.

I went and hooked the trailer onto the truck to move it, but I did not think about removing the rope from the drum. We started off and then we heard a crash. The hay stacker had raised and then fallen back to the ground when the end of the rope came disconnected, breaking a few wooden timber members. What now? What words and punishment? I drove back to where Louis was. I suppose he had heard the crash. What a surprise, no reprimand. Maybe Lewis thought he should have told me.

Lewis was good at repairing anything. He had one fine machine shop on the second floor above the hog barn, and we never were supposed to enter that area. But we did.

In those days we were concerned when we did something wrong, but today kids do not have to be concerned. They have the right to talk back to their elders.