

HARVEST IN SASKATCHEWAN

PATRICIA G. PLANK

MY vacation came in August last year, and, turning a carefree back on typewriter and study desk and all the little worries that are a part of every daily routine, I set out for home. Home is in the southern part of Saskatchewan, a half-section of land neatly sliced in two by the Soo Line branch of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and by Highway No. 39 which runs companionably along beside it; down in the country which should be losing its traditional "next year" optimism, the land of drouth and grasshoppers and cutworms and sawflies; the land that used to grow forty-bushel crops and now has to content itself with twenty. When I arrived, harvest was in full swing.

I can remember harvests very different from this one. When I was a child, the "combine" was unheard-of in our locality. Harvest was a long, laborious, and picturesque affair. It began in late July or August when the wheat had turned from green to gold, and the oats were beginning to bend whitened heads before the breeze, and the bearded barley rustled dry and ripe. Then binders entered the fields, each drawn noisily through the grain by four hot, fly-tortured horses, and operated by a hot, dusty driver. A whip like a fish-pole towered high in the air, its thin, short lash twisting snake-like with the motion of the machine. The tireless reel and sickle cut swath after swath around the ever-diminishing stands of grain, and the driver's foot automatically dropped the bundles in long, straight rows. Next came the stokers, gloved, straw-hatted men who spent long, hot hours gathering the sheaves into little teepee-like stocks in the rows. Then harvest reached its climax with the arrival of the threshing outfit. Our huge engine chugged into the field, drawing a little caravan behind it. First there was the separator with its silver blower-tail curved over its back and its hungry jaw for once at rest. Next came the white cook-car and bunk-house jolting and rocking on their iron wheels. Behind them the oil tank and the water tank rumbled along, and usually Bonny, our old brown cow, sauntered sulkily at the end, her halter-rope pulled taut. Half a dozen hay-racks were scattered about the field, each drawn by two horses, with a whistling man at the end of the reins, and a pitch-fork stuck upright in

the corner. Our racks had a little ladder built up the front of them, and a wooden seat cushioned with a straw-filled gunney-sack at the top.

The stook-loader required four horses, and they were usually fast and high-spirited. They sped along beside the rows of stooks which the loader gathered in joyously, swept up, up, up, and poured into the hay-rack hurrying beneath. By the time the racks were all loaded, the cook-car and its attendant train had been dropped in a convenient location, and the engine and separator were lined up in working order some distance away. The long, black belt would run endlessly between engine and separator. The latter would begin to tremble with eagerness, its jaw to work in glad anticipation, and its silver teeth to flash in the hot sunshine. A loaded rack was hurried up to each side of it, and the rhythmic pitching began into a mouth that was never filled.

This was all hard work, but it was poetry and romance too. It was a communal effort, and a sense of comradeship usually sprang up among the men who laboured together from dawn till dark, or sang and yarned under the harvest moon when the day's work was done. We kept eighteen or twenty horses busy, and half as many men. My father "ran both ends," which meant that he handled both engine and separator. After nightfall he would sometimes hold his thumb-nail near the flying belt to awe me with the blue flame that sprang into life at his gesture. My uncle used to drive the stook-loader, rousing his standing team with the shout, "Commence!" to delight and amuse my childish ears.

I used to haul wheat on Saturdays. It was hard, red-gold, mixed with crisp, clean straw from the blower. If you put a few kernels in your mouth and chewed for a sufficient length of time, you could produce a creamy sort of gum.

I usually drove Frank and Jerry, because their patient wisdom and quiet nerves were trusted to carry us safely through any novel plans which might occur to me, such as driving up the steep exit-runway of the elevator, or trotting with a load to make up time. Frank and Jerry were much *too* trustworthy to suit me. They were tall, rangy, raw-boned, with long, heavy heads, sleepy eyes, and drooping lower lips. They were filled with the calm and resignation of old age. Nothing was important to them. Life was made up of time, and if you didn't reach the elevator to-day—well, there was always tomorrow. They dozed with hanging heads while the wheat slid out of its red

spout into their wagon and the chaff sifted down over their backs. When the load was on and I ordered them shrilly to "giddap," they continued to doze. After I had screamed and raged, and pounded them with the ends of the reins, and worked myself into a perfect lather, Frank would open one eye, and lean experimentally into his collar. Having satisfied himself as to the weight behind him, he would arrange each foot with slow precision in the position which seemed to him most desirable. Then, at last, he would lean forward again. Jerry would now come partially to life, and the load would begin to move. I had meantime yelled myself hoarse, and, utterly defeated by the roar of the machinery and the determined deafness of the team, sank back on the wheat exhausted, while Frank and Jerry plodded placidly away from the outfit.

In the strict sense of the words, I did not drive Frank and Jerry. Rather, I rode in the wagon and held the reins, and they took me where we were supposed to go. They made the decisions. They would droop along through the field on the trail that previous loads had marked out. They would cross the shallow ditch and tug the wagon upon the road. There they always felt that they were entitled to a rest, and they would stop and doze. After about five minutes I would begin a vigorous shouting and rein-shaking campaign which would eventually succeed in arousing them to a sense of duty. The process of weight-testing and foot-planting had to be repeated and then we would be off once more. I used to pray that, when we finally arrived, no other wagon would be in the elevator, forcing us to stop and repeat this lengthy procedure again!

They took me into the elevator with the same effortless calm. As they started up the incline and the pulling became heavier, they humped their backs to take care of the additional strain, thumped up the board-road and across the scales, and sank into grateful slumber while the front end of the wagon was raised above them and the grain poured down through the chute.

The trip home used to try my soul to the utmost. Other horses would come plunging and snorting down the steep incline back to the road, and would whirl their wagons around toward home with breathless speed. They might shy playfully at clumps of weeds, and at last settle down to a steady trot, glad to be free of the load, rejoicing in the rumbling rattle of the grain-tank behind them. Not so Frank and Jerry. When they felt the weight of the empty wagon pushing them forward out

of the elevator, they braced themselves backward and jolted slowly down. Sometimes near the end they would break into a grudging, jiggy amble that did duty for a trot. They shied at nothing. They turned deliberately on to the road, and went home with the same leisurely walk that had brought them away. I could shout myself hoarse and flap the reins until my arms ached, or I could absorb some of their elemental patience. I learned at last to accept their unhurried philosophy; to sing to the rhythm of lumbering wheels as we rolled slowly along, or to gaze out across the level, endless miles of golden stooks and straw-piles; to dream formless, endless, warm, contented dreams; and to feel peace and well-being flooding down upon me in the hot August sunshine.

Well, as I said before, that is all changed now. Frank and Jerry have long since returned their equine resignation to the cosmic calm from which it flowed. The binders and separator are rusting behind the barn, the hay-racks have been rebuilt into outhouses or pig-pens, the big engine has gone the way of all scrap-iron. The stokers and threshers, those hordes of young, inexperienced men who used to ride the rods out west every fall and blister their hands in Saskatchewan wheat fields, where are they? Doing odd jobs in eastern cities, tamely working behind desks and counters, standing disconsolately in bread-lines, marching against Nazism across the seas—who can say? Now a tractor not much bigger than the hind wheel of our old engine takes the place of that engine and the twenty-odd horses, and a combination harvester-thresher does the work of binders, stokers, stook-loader, hay-racks and separator in one operation. Two or three men move the crop that used to require nine or ten, and do it in half the time. The poetry and romance of harvest have taken flight before the confident approach of mechanized efficiency. It is purely an ironic coincidence that prosperity fled with them.

However, harvesting goes on in spite of grasshoppers and drought, low prices, and over-stocked elevators. One must admit, too, that the new harvest has a certain subdued glamour of its own. The combine roars around the fields of standing, ripe grain like some ancient dinosaur advancing broadside. A strange beast is this modern dinosaur: a beast with digestive processes reversed! Its short, powerful tail flicks greedily, gathering in the yellow straw, and at the end of every round it bends its expressionless face over the wagon-box and pours out a red-gold stream of wheat. This is not, however, the clean,

hard grain that childish jaws loved to convert into gum. It is mixed with the mutilated bodies of grasshoppers, many still living, crawling aimlessly about.

We haul our wheat with a grain-truck now. It has all the speed that I used to long for in the days of Frank and Jerry, but none of their steadiness and dependability. It growls along the road, intent upon making its goal in the shortest possible time, oblivious to the hushed, golden peace of the country-side, completely out of tune with the universe. And when it reaches the age of Frank and Jerry, it still will not know the way to the elevator alone! It will always have to be guided along every inch of the road.

However, sentimentalizing is in vain. The combination harvester-thresher is on the prairies to stay, and the men who operate it would not go back to the old method for all the poetry of all the ages. In another generation there will scarcely be a child who knows the feel of hot leather reins in his hands, or the leisurely calm that a wise, old team can teach him. The zoom and roar of the grain truck will urge him to hurry, hurry, hurry. There will be nobody to tell him that life is made up of time, and that there is always tomorrow to take care of to-day's unfinished business. Little Grain-Hauler of 1940 and the years to come, this sentimental tear for the sun-washed, eternal calm that you will never know! Shades of Frank and Jerry, dozing and dreaming in the lush pastures of the Happy Hunting Grounds, this grateful tribute from a child who learned from you a long, long time ago!