

A FARMER'S LIFE
by
Erec Harnden

Driving across the United States, sooner or later one runs into the Great Plains. This large area of land sitting in the middle of the country is known to many travelers as flat and boring and home to old people who talk slowly. Well, this might be true to those who are just passing through. It seems that it takes only a blink of an eye to drive across each small town. Also, many of the people in these towns are old, dressed like hicks, or driving tractors. Another apparently constant feature of people of the region is that they always wave and say hello. Those people just passing through do not understand the meaning of this, and may be confused by this public conversation. Passing through the towns, they get back on the open road and see endless miles of wheat or grass, and every once in a while they might see farmers or ranchers going about their daily chores.

The region of the Great Plains is much more than simply the accumulation of these features. Behind those rolling plains lies a history of harsh weather, hard times, and good people. Like many places in the world, the Great Plains shapes its inhabitants into a cultural group of its own, including my grandfather, Wayne Harnden. He is a man like many others in the Great Plains, yet his own unique experiences have shaped his life into what it is today.

In 1883 Charles Freemont Harnden moved to Dodge City, Kansas, and worked for the Hargmon Company. Being the good neighbor he was, he helped a family move from western Kansas to south central Kansas near the site of the Cherokee Strip. While directing his teams of horses and mules across the plains with his neighbor's belongings in the wagons, Charles realized that he liked the looks of the countryside he was passing through. He liked it so much that he decided to move there. He settled

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near Attica, in Harper County, started his own farm, and began a family.

One of Charles's children was Everett Harnden. He grew up on the farm, and in the late 1920s married Henrietta Smalley. On December 25, 1928, my grandpa, Wayne Harnden was born. He was the first of three children and the only boy. Not long after Wayne's birth, the Depression hit the United States. Many families were without money and jobs. As if that was not bad enough, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s was also getting into full swing. These traumatic events on the Great Plains would shape his life.

As a young child he grew up with nothing and learned that working hard was the only way to get what he and his family needed. Like all of his family, he worked very hard during his youth to help out. He attended Sunnyville Country School from kindergarten through 8th grade. Most days he and his friends either walked or rode horses the two miles to school. These trips back and forth to school were some of the most memorable times of his life because of the friendships he experienced and the relationship with his surroundings on the route to school.

He attended high school and played football like other local young men, yet also worked every day on the farm. With all his work and school activities, Grandpa still managed to have a good time. A small town often has limited things to do for young people, and occasionally he and his friends would resort to activities more harmful to their health such as drinking at parties, dances, rodeos and bonfires. The fun did not last long for Grandpa because in the last part of his high school years he had to contribute even more to the family farm. While still in high school he bought his first tractor, a brand new LA Case. At the time, World War II was coming to an end, and there was a great need for grain.

In 1946 he graduated from high school with dreams for the future. He went to Hobart Welding School in Troy, Ohio. After he graduated from Hobart he wanted to travel the world as an employee of a welding company or in his own private welding business, working on expensive building and oil production projects. The only problem was that back home the family farm needed him, and he had land of his own that needed tending. Grandpa's father had already made up his mind when he told Grandpa that he needed to stay around Attica and work on the farm. In the post-WWII era, many young men who had left the farms they grew

up on returned to carry on the family operations. With the economy doing well and wheat prices up, thousands more acres of sod were plowed up. Grandpa and his father took part in this action. The plowing created massive erosion, though not as bad as the Dirty Thirties. Soil erosion was not on Grandpa's mind at that time; making money was his goal.

Grandpa married Jerrylene Hadsall, and they had two boys. One would be my father, Rick Harnden, and the other my uncle, Rod Harnden. Though the early 1950s were a happy time for my grandparents because of their growing family, it was a bad time for agriculture. The fifties were very dry period. During this time, Grandpa said, "You had to take the weather as it came." The drought stopped a lot of farming all together. Grandpa, however, stuck with the family farm and continued even though farming conditions were not very good.

Grandpa and Jerrylene were divorced, and he married Wanda Oliver in 1962. They had one child, my Aunt Robin, while continuing to run the farm. My dad and Uncle Rod lived with their mother in Wichita, Kansas, during the school years and returned to Attica in the summers to help their father with the farm. Carrying on the family farm seems to be tradition in the Harnden family. As Dad and Uncle Rod grew older, they went in different directions, starting their own careers outside of farming. Grandpa continues farming by himself.

Farming was Grandpa's career, but it was not the only occupation he had. Many farmers on the Plains have more than one job. During the winter months when caring for crops and cattle did not take all day, Grandpa, like other farmers, picked up other jobs. Of course, one of these jobs was welding. Since welding was a part of his dream, he took great pride in it. He welded and worked on his own farming equipment in the winter, and helped other farmers with theirs. He also helped other farmers work cattle during the winter. The farmers had good friendships that always provided help in times of need. Such friendships have sustained many of the farmers who are still in business today. It has always been said that people in the Great Plains live simple, moral lives, and this mutual help is a perfect example.

Grandpa was also a mechanic and worked on everything from cars to eighteen-wheelers to tractors. These skills came in handy during the

winter months when Grandpa kept himself very busy working on his and others' equipment. Even today at seventy years of age, Grandpa still does a lot of his own mechanic work on his prized possessions—his John Deere tractors. He takes great pride in how his tractors and vehicles look and run, and that shows as even his older model tractors still run as if they were brand new.

One other job that Grandpa did when not farming was driving a truck. He worked for various companies, but mainly for John Deere and Graves Trucking Company. As with all of his occupations, he took great pride in driving a truck. He enjoyed those long drives across the Plains delivering tractors or equipment to John Deere dealers or other farmers. Those long drives gave him the chance to see every corner of the Plains. He enjoyed seeing how other farms were run, what kind of crops were being grown, and meeting other hard-working farmers. Many of the people he met on the way have become close friends over the years. Those who know my Grandpa know that he loves to learn other types of farming, and he loves meeting new people. I know this because I went along with him on some of these truck drives. Riding on a big eighteen wheeler and traveling all over the Plains, and missing school to do it, were some of the most memorable times I've had with my Grandpa.

Another way Grandpa traveled the Plains was with his harvesting crew. This was done every spring before harvest from southern Oklahoma to Wyoming. He took his family and hired hands for a long, hard, working trip every year. Most of the time they lived in an old school bus with beds in place of the seats. He even carried tanks on top of the bus so water could heat during the day, for a warm shower after a hard day of cutting. This, like truck driving, gave Grandpa the chance to experience many areas of the Plains, and gain more knowledge of the Great Plains.

Grandpa, his family, and hired hands ran these tractors from dusk till dawn, only stopping to eat. Actually, many times they ate while driving the tractor and farmed long past midnight. This was around the time that tractor companies were building their first four-wheel drive tractors, and my Grandpa was one of the first in Harper County to own a Versatile 145. It came in handy during the winter of 1971. The blizzard was so bad and the snow was so deep that Grandpa fed his friends' cattle because his

four-wheel drive tractor was the only thing that could get around in the three-foot snow drifts.

He enlarged the family farm many times, from running a couple of small tractors to running five big tractors, and farming over 3,500 acres. This growth happened after the death of his father in 1969.

When I asked him how farming has changed since he started, he said “Farming hasn’t changed that much, but technology has.” Farmers still wake up early every morning, go to the fields and work all day. These days they get a lot more done because of the large tractors and combines. When he started farming, it might have taken more than one day to work a quarter section of land. Today, with just a few large tractors, a quarter section can easily be farmed before noon. Also, the tractors today are comfortable because of nice seats, computer gauges, and air conditioners. These machines do get a lot more done, but they cost a lot more than old ones. I imagine Grandpa wouldn’t mind returning to the old days. I know this because he still uses equipment that he had when he started farming. I think he does this to keep in touch with his roots, and maybe so he can appreciate what he has now.

With changes in technology have come changes in farming techniques. Before, everyone used to plow to turn over their crop residue to get ready for planting in the fall. This was a very common technique, and had been used for hundreds of years. Today, the plow is seen almost as an evil tool by soil conservationists. Minimum tillage equipment was introduced to slow down the soil erosion created by plow. Using this type of equipment, farmers leave more crop residue on the surface of the soil to help prevent wind and water erosion. My grandfather has always used minimum tillage equipment like chisels, disks, and cultivators to slow down the erosion process.

Using these techniques is very important because Kansas and the rest of the Plains have always been very unpredictable when it comes to moisture. Minimum tillage saves moisture in the soil because it does not fully overturn the soil to leave it drying in the sun. Grandpa’s Dad once told him, “Farm like it is never going to rain again, keep all the moisture you got.” Maybe that is why he is still farming today, when most farmers his age have either been shut down by the bank or had to retire. I think this gives him great pride in his farming.

He also feels that people on the Plains are the best in the world, especially back in the days when he was growing up. The times were rough and neighbors and friends had to help each other just to survive. Grandpa says that in some places today people do not even recognize the other people around them. They go through life not knowing who lives next to them, or who walks by them. Grandpa thinks that this would be a hard way to live, because if you don't know the people around you, you cannot learn anything. Discussions and conversations help people learn about one another, and without that, people would be ignorant about their environment.

To end this interview, I asked Grandpa how he felt about giving up his dream and becoming a farmer. He paused for a while with a puzzled look on his face, then he started to smile and said, "I wouldn't change my life for anything, the Great Plains is a good place to live and a great place to raise a family." He also talked about farming and how it was the right lifestyle for him. Farmers do not have any bosses, they can go to work at any time and leave any time, and it seems like they get more done that way.

Many people might not understand my grandpa or the way he lives, and that is fine. I am just proud that he made a decision and stuck to it his whole life. Even more, he did not go through life just to get by, he tried to perfect everything he did and you can see it by the way he farms. This gives him a sense of pride when he finishes with a field or any other project. This type of attitude rubs off on those around him, and it has made me a better and more efficient person. I agree with my Grandpa when he says that he made the right choice.