

The Good Ol' Days are Gone - Thank Goodness!

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Maybe it's because change is disconcerting. Maybe it's because we remember our childhoods with some fondness. Whatever the reasons, as a society we seem to harken back to earlier, simpler times - the good old days. Nowhere is this more true than with farming.

The nostalgic quaint farm of yesteryear is held up as some sort of shining symbol of perfection. Modern advancements are often portrayed in the media as evil. These days, as farmers we're all poisoning the land and destroying the environment in pursuit of the almighty dollar.

Horse feathers. Farming has continued to evolve and despite popular opinion most of the changes are positive. Some aspects of the past are appealing, but we need to get over the notion that the old days were good. In fact, we need to say "good riddance" and celebrate the positive changes that have come with modern agriculture.

Think of the farm you grew up on or the farm your parents would have seen as kids. Yes, there were more farm families on the land and the social aspects of rural life may have been better. But was it really more relaxed? Was it really less stressful? Our parents and grandparents went through some terrible times.

When I was young, we still had a milk cow. We had some laying hens and a small herd of cattle and we kept a few pigs for our own meat. We drank unpasteurized milk and enjoyed free range chicken that pecked at all sorts of things around the yard. The kitchen slop pail went to the pigs. The dead animal management plan was to feed the cats or to drag it far enough from the yard that you couldn't smell it.

The cattle handling facilities were ramshackle and poorly designed. (I know that now. I didn't know it then.) Every time the herd needed a vaccination, it was like a rodeo - hard on the animals and hard on the family members.

Putting up cattle feed, small square bales and chaff, was labour intensive. Maybe it built character, but at the time, it certainly wasn't a lot of fun.

The grain operation was the main money maker. Even though the land base was small by today's standards, seeding and harvesting took forever with the puny equipment of the day. It takes a long time to seed 600 acres with a 15 foot discer. And all the seed was pailed from the truck to the discer box.

The main summer pastime was working summerfallow. Four, five or even six times over the same ground with cultivators and rodweeders. And then you held your breath the next spring hoping it wouldn't all blow away.

Herbicides and insecticides were not treated with respect. No rubber gloves even when using

insecticides. Guess how we dealt with plugged nozzles out in the field.

There were no hopper bottom bins. Most were small wooden bins that required a lot of maintenance to keep the mice out. Some rotten wheat on the bottom was the norm. Of course, no one wore a dust mask when shovelling out bins. That would have made you a sissy. Far better to cough the dust out of your lungs and spit brown for a day or two.

I remember day after day on tractors without cabs. On nice days, when the wind was right, it could be quite pleasant. But you could also freeze your butt and eat a lot of dust.

No one talks about the open air combines and living in thrasher's dust all day, but that was a reality for most farms until sometime in the 70s. I still remember riding with my dad the first year he had a 914 International combine powered by a tractor with a good cab. When we turned the corner and the tail wind started blowing all the dust and dirt towards the tractor, he instinctively reached to button up the collar on his shirt and then stopped, realizing that he was safe from the dirt.

In the coming years, environmental farm plans will become a requirement. There's going to be more paperwork and some of our practices will have to change. As farmers, we may not welcome the extra record keeping and further restrictions on how we operate, but we are producing food, after all. The whole food system is moving towards trace back and HACCP and ISO. We can't expect to remain exempt. Some of the changes may be pointless, but it's hard to argue against the general thrust to improved food safety.

I have nothing against organic farmers. They are fulfilling a consumer demand. However, I do take exception with the inference that as conventional farmers we're producing an inferior or less safe product and that conventional agriculture is less sustainable.

I also bristle when I hear the anti-technology crowd wanting to take us back to "the good old days". The world is changing rapidly and so is agriculture. If someone wants to lead a pastoral life, that's their choice. If you want to run a business that way, good luck.

Farming has many challenges. It isn't an easy way to make a living, but you can't stop the world from changing. And you can't turn back the hands of time. I don't know why you'd want to.

The crop protection products we use are safer and used more judiciously. There's less tillage and far less soil erosion. The crops we produce have never been more diverse or more safe.

Financial returns are often disappointing, but farm families aren't on the verge of starvation like they were at certain times in the good ol' days.

Those who look back with rose coloured glasses are often the same people who look forward with trepidation. Far better that we recognise all the progress in agriculture and look forward with determination and optimism.