

THE THRESHING CREW, TRAVELING FROM TOWN TO TOWN

Thirteenth In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

In the late 19th century new machinery revolutionized farming when horse drawn binders and steam powered threshers became available in Wisconsin to harvest the wheat in the field, replacing the method where farmers cut, shocked, flailed and winnowed grain by hand. This transition was captured in the photography of Gerhard Gesell.

Horse-drawn reapers cut the grain, and binders tied the stalks into bundles. Two men and sometimes more followed the binder setting up the bundles in shocks. Shocks were left standing in the field until the thresher arrived or they were stacked in a cone (this method can be seen in Gesell's picture of the Edward Truempler Farm in Mill Creek).

When the grain was dry, the threshing team arrived. Some members of the crew loaded the bundles onto a wagon and hauled them to a threshing machine. The machine usually looked like a railroad locomotive. It had a firebox that burned coal to produce steam, and the steam drove wheels and gears that operated a conveyor belt. The firebox was kept at a distance from the main process because of the danger of fire. Black smoke poured out of the chimney and a piercing steam whistle signaled farmers when it was time to start and stop work. The new threshing machine required up to 20 workers, men from up to a dozen farms would work together for several weeks, moving from farm to farm when the grain was ripe until all the grain was harvested.



Teams of horses pulled the wagons loaded with bundles close to the big conveyor belt of the threshing machine. Farmers on the threshing team climbed to the top of the pile and began pitching bundles onto the moving belt. A rotating knife cut the twine holding the bundles together. Then the stalks of oats were pitched into a series of beaters that knocked the heads from the grain (flailing). The breeze from the operation blew the stalks and chaff into a straw pile while the clean grain dropped into a waiting wagon (winnowing). When the wagon was full, the crew drove it to the barn where it was stored in a grain bin. It was hard, hot, and dirty work which required a lot of manpower.

New technology had changed the wheat harvest from a manual process to a mechanical process with the introduction of steam. There is nostalgia surrounding this era of threshing and it has a lot to do with socializing and community ... crews were often made up of large groups of friends and neighbors and there was always lots of great food prepared by the women.

In 1939 Mary (Raetz) Wohlwend was interviewed about her early days in Fountain City, Wisconsin and later Barnesville, Minnesota. She came to Buffalo County in 1851 as an infant and her health was poor until the age of ten, requiring her to be indoors. From that time on she helped her father on the farm because she wanted to be outdoors. Her brother left the farm during the Civil War and since there were no boys in the family, Mary toiled in the fields along with her father and soon this plucky little girl was as good as any hired man. She plowed the fields with oxen, planted corn with a hoe, helped grub out stumps, hauled hay, hauled grain to town with the oxen, helped to make the rail fences and when her father cut grain with the hand cradle she and her mother would bind it. She did all the plowing in the fall for the corn. From walking in the stubble and brush and her skirts dragging against the furrow, her dresses would all get torn at the bottom so her mother made her a special outfit to wear while working in the fields. She wore chambray pantallettes which came down to the ankles, a full short skirt which came below the knees and a garibaldi blouse. It was much better than the dresses to work in, but she wasn't anxious to have her beau, Casper Wohlwend, see her in this outfit.

Mary always preferred the outdoor work, even after she married Casper, and as help was hard to get she continued to help outdoors even though she was only 5 feet tall and weighed just over 100 lbs. During harvest she shocked grain and stacked the bundles. She could make a stack as good as any man. She did not use a pitch fork but got down on her knees and threw the bundles in place with her hands.

When threshing machines came into the picture the work for this mother of 15 shifted and she traveled with the crew while they were working on the Wohlwend farm along with her husband and some of her sons. There was a one-room building out in the fields, containing a stove and a table. In the fall at threshing time Mary packed food and all things needed to cook for the men and went along with them to prepare the meals, but at the same time worked outdoors all day. If they would run short of bread, she would set bread in the evening. In the morning she would arise at four or five o'clock, mix the bread while getting breakfast. The men would set the table, cut bread, peel potatoes for dinner and carry in water and wood. She would put the meat on at breakfast time. When the grain hauler came to the work house with a load of grain, he would look at the fire and put the potatoes on or do whatever had to be done. When the bread needed attention, Mary would walk to the house or if the distance was too far would go horseback. During the supper hour she would stir up a cake and bake it while the men washed the dishes. At bedtime they pushed the table aside and the men spread their straw ticks on the floor. In the morning they rolled up the bedding and carried the straw ticks outdoors. Mary was a fountain of energy and the "living" force that kept the threshing crew viable in the fields.

Threshing machines and their large crews, a common fixture in the wheat fields of Wisconsin for several decades, fell with the introduction of the combine which appeared in Wisconsin during World War 1. By combining the work of all other harvest equipment (cutting and threshing) into a single power machine, the amount of work a single farmer could do exploded. The combine was more efficient and a farm could yield more with less work. The combine dropped less grain in the field so yield increased, but the wheat cut by a combine had to be ripe. Harvesting took less time and labor costs were drastically reduced. Timing became the most critical factor because wheat cut by a combine had to be ripe; it no longer stood in shocks where it could continue to ripen if it was cut early. The farmers' risks of hail, disease and pests increased. Farmers often bought their own machines to ensure they could harvest the wheat in their fields when it was ripe and the shared harvest process came to an end as the steam-powered threshing machines were repurposed or parked in the corner of a field ... some can still be seen today as relics of the past.

The threshing crews may have disappeared as farmers no longer share the work, but when a neighbor needs assistance in times of injury or illness farmers still rally together to bring in the harvest.

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Photo: The Threshing Crew (WHS Image 26025)