

Dust Bowl

By John Gilbert, November 28, 2015

I was browsing through a book store in the fall of 2010 and came across a paperback about the Dust Bowl ("The Worst Hard Times," 2006). While glancing through it I noticed a map showing the outline of the Dust Bowl that included Webster County, Nebraska. Webster County in South Central Nebraska, and is adjacent to Northern Kansas.

Having been born there and being a book junky I bought and read the book. Yes - the book is depressing and something I did know a little about, but much more after reading it. The book includes excerpts of a diary kept by one farmer living near Inavale, Nebraska. Inavale is a small town in Webster County.

My parents probably knew him as a neighbor. After reading the book I also found a DVD, "The Panic is On," released in 2009. The DVD shows excerpts from old movie films of the Dust Bowl and depressing pictures from newspapers of the era. I have a few memories when I was about 4 years old living there. Here are several of them, accurate or not:

I recall watching Dad (b. 1887) while he ploughed by walking behind the plow being pulled by a team of two horses. The soft sod would turn over into the adjacent furrow. Every few minutes he would have to stop to let the two horses rest. I recall once of lying down in the furrow and letting the plow blade pass by and cover me with dirt. Dad gave a hearty laugh when it happened. Mom would have screamed at him if she had been there to see the sharp plow blade pass by within 1-2 feet from me.

I also recall going to the field with dad and his team of horses to watch him shuck corn. He had a wide leather wrist band strapped around his wrist. On the inside - palm side - was a steel curved hook. He would pull an ear of corn off the stalk with one

hand and with other hand use the hook to peel-back the shucks. Then he would grasp the shucks, twist and drop them. The shucked ear would next be tossed over his shoulder into the wagon and he'd move to the next corn stalk. When he got past the wagon he would lead the horses pulling the wagon forward, walk back and start over. A worker was judged on how many bushels of corn he could shuck in a day. I recall overhearing discussions that a good day's work was 50 bushels of corn. The next time you see an ear corn in the grocery store pick up an ear of corn and visualize the manual procedure of shucking corn.

How is it done now? It is probably mechanized, and one-person shucks 1000's of bushels per day with very little physical exertion!