

My Experience As An Agriculturalist

(Courtesy of W.G. Hopkins' grandson, John Leeper)

Written in the 1950s



It might be well to define the word "agriculturalist," a man who lives in town and makes his money and spends it in the country is an agriculturalist. The man who lives on the farm and makes his money and spends it in town is a farmer. I belong in the first category.

During the 1920's and 1930's, the writer was a town dweller. Having been elected County Clerk and Assessor in the year 1922, and re-elected for three consecutive terms, we soon found that the salary was barely sufficient for a respectable living. This was our excuse for engaging in agricultural pursuits.

Our first adventure was to buy 160 acres of land in the Sand Hills, and to our delight we discovered there was about 40 acres of beautiful level land lying between the Sand Hills.

We decided to break this land

and plant it to watermelons, and made arrangements with a farmer to handle the project on a fifty-fifty basis. [This was near the Oasis Service Station.]

Spring dawned following a winter of considerable snow. The ground was saturated with moisture and was in perfect condition for planting. We bought the best seed available and planted them. The seed came up ten in a place thicker than the

whiskers on, "peter boys face," and those beautiful vines never ceased growing. First the blooms and then the melons. The melons were so numerous that it would be impossible to estimate the number. This fine melon field, surrounded by sage brush and sand hills was something to gladden the heart. The spring and summer was ideal and these countless melons never paused in their growth. We lived in anticipation of the day when these melons would be ready for market. Naturally the time arrived when we could pick truck loads, only to find that the market was one-half a cent a pound; the melons would average better than twenty-five pounds a piece. We estimated there were enough to fill twenty-five box cars. Our dreams of supplementing our little salary was fastly [sic] fading. We never sold a melon but we did have the satisfaction of making thousands of people happy.

We drew a diagram of the place with directions as to its location and advertised in the paper for one and all to drive out and help themselves. This was satisfaction number one, but number two was equally satisfactory.

The county swarmed with prairie chickens and if there is anything these chickens love it is melon seed. The state had a three day chicken season which finally arrived. On the opening day, I got up early, before it was time for the chickens to arrive and laid among the melons. They came in by the hundreds and attempted to land on my head. I reached out and caught one by the legs and that only left me four to shoot. However, many of my friends were also fortunate in getting their limit of birds.

Our next adventure in this field was much more remunerative [sic]. By virtue of my office as County Assessor, I became acquainted with [non] resident land owners thru correspondence and actual contact. We called them suitcase farmers. They never attempted to develop their land and many had never seen their land. Occasionally, some energetic young farmer would break out some of this land, and plant it to crops undenounced [sic] to the owner. The result was that the owner never received any revenue whatsoever, he only paid the taxes.

Some counties assessed this land higher than the surrounding land, and as a result, many delinquent taxes occurred against this land. Many speculators and others eagerly awaited the sale of these tax certificates. After a stated length of time, by law, they were able to secure a tax deed. Tax collection was not in line with my duties, but when these tax certificates were offered for sale, I would do my best to notify the owner.

Many considered their land worthless and never attempted to pay the taxes. I personally, knew one party living in a county close by that acquired over one hundred quarter sections of land. Thru this and other methods and in later years, he sold this land for a million dollars.

I can truthfully say, I never bought a tax certificate. We considered it beneath the dignity of my office.

I previously stated that we engaged in something that was more remunerative [sic] in the agricultural field. Having become acquainted with a few of the non-resident land owners, one in particular was appreciative of my efforts and asked me to look after his land and insisted on giving me a share of the crops. I did not want to engage in the farming business as I owned no farming equipment, but he insisted. I sat down and drew up the most ridiculous [sic] contract ever written. It stated that he was to furnish the land, which consisted of 320 acres, pay for all the farming, such as plowing, disking and seeding, furnish the seed, wheat and pay one-half of the harvesting expenses on a fifty-fifty basis. To my utter amazement, he said okay, that sounds all right to me and signed the contract. [This could have been Marion Russell.]

This was beautiful level land located seven miles from market. The land had previously been broken out but had never been planted to crops and was gradually going back to grass. This was in the spring and moisture conditions were favorable.

I hired a farmer with a Fordson tractor to summer furlow this land, including plowing, disking and planting. The wheat came up and never stopped growing as the season was the most promising we ever had for many years.

This beautiful field of wheat, surrounded by a vast expanse of prairie was something to behold. The yield was approximately thirty bushels per acre. With the exception of forty [sic] acres, after combining, we hauled the wheat to one elevator. I wrote the gentleman landowner telling him of the yield and in a few days he arrived.

I could see that he was pleased, which relieved my conscience quite considerably. We walked in the elevator and sold the beautiful number one wheat for ninety-two cents a bushel. When we arrived at the court house, he started laughing and said, "now it is my time to laugh."

The story of this achievement made many metropolitan newspapers across the United States.

The chairman of the Board of County Commissioners was also President of local [sic] grain firm [R.J. Ackley]; he prevailed on me to accept the position of manager of this concern. I did accept rather reluctantly, knowing the company was in poor condition financially and that seemed to be the least of their troubles. Their assets consisted of one elevator thirty years old together with its equipment. The only thing it offered was a challenge. It was by nature, a cooperative, but they had no affiliation with the national organization. One of the deciding factors in me accepting this job was that I would have a free hand in operating this firm. The property was not worth the mortgage that was on record against it. The story that

follows may sound preposterous, however, it is my intention to offer this story to the County Historical Society to be placed in the archives.

I guarded my armor about me and went to work. Words are not adequate to describe the word work. In the beginning I wish to acknowledge the assistance my wife gave me. She was the only bookkeeper I had for all the years I managed this concern. The first thing we did was to buy new equipment, including new electric motors, new wiring, belts and many other items. The next item was to build a new elevator adjacent to the old one with high speed belts and automatic loaders. This enabled us to load a two thousand bushel capacity car in less than an hour; and load out of the old elevator at the same time. We started rolling, all this in less than one year. This same year we paid off the mortgage.

I had the advantage of knowing all of the stockholders personally and as queer as it may seem, it worked to my advantage.

We had resolved in the beginning to furnish our farmers a good market for any and all things they raised. This resolution we kept to the end. This was a large county in area, in fact the second largest in the state, necessitating the hauling of their grain for long distances. We decided to remedy this situation at once by building more elevators in different localities and asked the farmers to sign notes to the extent of two hundred dollars. This amount was required before they became stockholders. We felt that they would never have to pay these notes, only thru their patronage dividends and this proved to be the fact.

Then it was our suggestion that we do away with selling stock and let the farmer earn their stock by virtue of their patronage. This was the move that assured the success of this institution, and as a result, we were able to build the largest farmer institution of this nature in the United States.

We had one thousand stockholders and another thousand who were earning their stock by their patronage. During the harvest, we would secure one hundred thousand bushels of grain a day. At one time, I sold one quarter of a million bushels of wheat to arrive at destination in ten days and beat the date two days. This I believe was the largest sale for a country origin in the history of the grain trade.

We owned seven elevators. I felt very fortunate that I was able to dispose of this amount of grain for the day following the week-end holiday. The market broke ten cents and continued to break five cents more. The confirmation for this sale was [as] agreed, number one wheat and without dockage.

We built facilities for feed mills and manufactured many varieties of feed. I was also seed buyer for two seed companies; one in Chicago and one in Kansas City, Missouri. I also furnished the money out of my grain company to build one of the largest local oil and gas companies in the state. There were times when two tank cars of gas were delivered in one day. For many years my good friend Lee Divine

very successfully managed this department. In recent years the grain department has added five million bushels of grain storage all within one county.

It is my sincere wish that this [s]tory does not place the reader in the same position that Mark Twain was in when he said, "he was out in the mountains riding down a glacier and the thing moved two inches a year and the scenery grew monotonous." [Trials] and tribulations lie ahead of us. We are approaching the greatest calamity that any country was ever compelled to endure, the dirty thirties. This catastrophe [sic] covered more country and effected [sic] more people than all the floods and tornadoes combined. It created a national emergency. If I were only able to place on a written page those that endured the tragedy.

When the first of these storms appeared no one gave it much attention. The county, having broken out millions of acres of grassland, followed by dry seasons was in prime condition to blow.

The first storms of major proportions were only a prelude to what was to follow. From out of the northwest a great black cloud first put in its appearance about 9:00 a.m. No one could believe it was caused from blowing earth. It rolled higher and higher and as it gathered momentum, it struck with the speed of a passenger train. It completely blotted out the sun and the city was enveloped in total darkness, necessitating the turning on of all lights. This was a sample of what was to come for a number of years.

In the beginning it usually lasted for a few hours and the sun would break thru again but each succeeding storm enveloped more and more acres until millions of square miles of beautiful soil was swept away. It seemed that the sun was always the brightest before these storms struck as if reluctant to be obliterated by substance from the earth.

Tourist [sic] became frightened when caught in these storms and would ask for shelter thinking a tornado had struck. During the height of the storm complete and total darkness would envelope the country for hours and even days. Sitting in your car you were unable to see the radiator cap. Great mounds of dirt began to appear all over the country. Fence posts would disappear and machinery was completely buried.

Many farms with trees planted around their buildings found themselves living in a basin. The dust had piled up to the top of the trees. Neighbors would gather outside their homes gazing into the skies watching and praying for relief from this terrible catastrophe.

Fortunes were swept away; grass was non-existent; livestock were fed on the farms when feed was available and still no rain. As the months and the years went by, this condition became intolerable.

Taxes went delinquent, mortgages [sic] unpaid, the health of the people began to fade, strong men lost their reasoning and wept unashamed. Many people caught

out without protection were blinded and even died from exposure. It was my misfortune to see few of those dust bowl victims, their eyelids were unflamed [sic] and turned wrong side out. It was my time to weep.

As manager of the farmers elevator, it was my duty to furnish [roughage] and cotton seed cake for their livestock. I bought hay from far away Oregon and shipped it in by the train load. A car of cake would last but a day and then I would ration it allowing each rancher enough for three days. We bought train loads of molasses with a Hanolills[town?] billing. I was in the midst of this terrible tragedy. Having previously mentioned that we had several elevators it was my responsibility to try and call on them one or two days a week.

Many times I was caught on the highway in one of these storms. My car would ground out and I was compelled to sit out the storm. I carried a gallon of water with me and also a silk handkerchief or two. Wetting this silk and placing it over my face enabled me to survive the storm.

But in back of these terrifying clouds was the sun still shining and the days came back when we could assess what values were left and take a retrospective of those trying years.

During the dusty years, our children consisting of two girls and one boy were in college. Before the two eldest were thru, the youngest had enrolled. It became increasingly more important that we supplement our earnings by continuing in agricultural pursuits. The continuing dust storms began to abate and the monumental task of rehabilitating the country was lying ahead.

I have previously mentioned buying seed for eastern concern. We attempted to keep abreast of the propagation of seeds and feeds by working with the extension department of our state agricultural college. During this time a salesman for one seed company sold us one thousand pounds of seed for a dollar a pound. This seed was a cross between sugarcane and some other sorgum [sic] [black amber cane seed]. We bought this on a contract providing they would pay me a dollar a pound for all the seed that could be produced on a four acre tract of land that we owned. It was under irrigation stipulating the seed germinate 80% and on a clean basis. He also assured us it would be impossible to mature the seed in this climate.

Needless to say we did everything possible to facilitate the growing of this crop. We planted it with a one row lister pulled by horses. The rows were sixteen inches apart, and after planting we irrigated it with our own pumping plant. This pump produced four hundred and fifty gallons of water per minute. The seed came up so thick that we considered thinning [sic] it out. Never in all the years of my life did I see crops grow like this one did. We hired Mexicans to hoe the field as the rows were too close to cultivate.

Spring dawned exceptionally early. Nature smiled as if to compensate in a small way for the suffering we were compelled to endure.

The plants reached the height of six feet but had barely begun to grow. It finally reached the height [sic] of over ten feet. The heads formed and began to form seeds. Beautiful heads twelve to fourteen inches long.

At last the seed began slowly to mature. Nature, in its benevolent way continued to smile.

We were sure this field would produce one hundred and thirty bushels per acre, as I had bought standing fields of kafer [sic - kafir (corn) - renamed durra] and milo that produced one hundred bushels per acre. The standard weight of this seed was fifty-six pounds per bushel.

It required a simple problem in mathematics to find this field would produce approximately thirty thousand pounds of seed worth one dollar a pound.

The heads fully developed and the seed began to ripen, with the top part of the head ripening first. Then one of the most devastating things in all the annals of history occurred. The English sparrow appeared in countless thousands; they darkened the sky. They would sit on the heads and peck and peck away, eating this dollar a pound seed. It was despairing to say the least, I wasted boxes of shells and killed hundreds of sparrows but to no avail, more would come to their funeral.

In order to save what was left, we had it cut and shocked by hand. Great shocks covered the ground and I am sure the foliage produced thirty tons to the acre. After it was shocked the sparrows and blackbirds would sit on the shocks and continue to peck and peck away.

We covered the shocks with burlap only to find they would peck holes in the burlap. At last we had the heads cleavered [sic] and threshed. We had one thousand pounds out of thirty thousand to sell at one dollar per pound.

It is impossible to do justice to this pesky louse carrying (he is not a bird) that our English speaking friends exported to this country. We whipped them in every war, but at last they evened the score.

I continued buying seed and during my ten days vacation I would buy seed on my own account, [sic] in other states and would come home with a thousand or two dollars.

My health began to fade. I was a large man over six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds before the dust period. My health continued to worsen until I weighed 149 pounds. This about closed the chapter of my life among my many friends. I loved them with a passion. To those that have gone to their final resting place. I cherish their memory and those that are still living, I wish them the best of everything.

It might be interesting to know that we were compelled to leave our old home state and seek a climate more suitable to my health. This place we discovered in Big Sky Country. The greatest country and the best people in the whole world. Within six months I regained my health and weighed 185 pounds.

We would have but little trouble writing a real success story. Everything we touched turned to gold, but the best of all was the return of my health. This is another story.

~W.G. Hopkins