Four generations of Caseys — Tom Casey, Maureen Foley nee Casey, Patrick Casey and baby Tom Casey at baby Tom's Christening.

Modern day cattle mart.

FARMING IN THE PAST

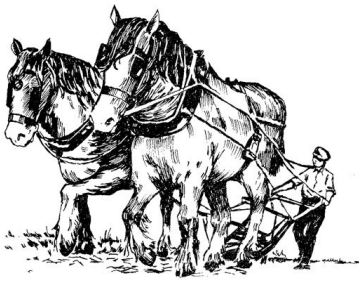
By Austin Cregan and Tom Casey

Austin and Tom provide great insights into farming in the past. Austin provides a detailed account of farming routines and practices during the 1940s and 1950s, including the utilisation of and advances in farming technologies. He lauds the men and women, assisted by great workhorses, who undertook back-breaking work that was performed before the arrival of the various machinery and, of course, electricity. He also points to the tremendous impact that more available education had on rural and farming life. Tom provides a fascinating account of local hay saving and harvesting during the 1950s and 1960s, an enjoyable reminder for those of us who lived in those times and experienced hay-saving first hand.

By Austin Cregan

During the 1940s and 1950s when I was growing up, the average farm size, I would say, was between thirty and sixty acres with some farms less than that. Then, of course, some were much larger, but those were in the minority.

Mixed farming was the order of the day. When I say mixed, I mean nearly ninety percent of farmers milked cows and kept some dry stock as well. Pigs were also kept and fattened. There were very few sheep men then.



Crops – during and for some time after the 1939-1945 war, tillage was compulsory – that meant that every farmer was compelled to sow and harvest grain on a percentage of land owned.

The crops were mainly oats, wheat and barley. The larger percentage was, naturally, wheat to provide flour for bread, which was a very scarce commodity at that time.

The Horse – tilling the land and harvesting the crops was most laborious and fatiguing work. The horse, which I omitted from the list of animals above, was the most important animal on the farm during those years. All viable farms had at least two horses and large farms had three or four. The horse was the animal that pulled the plough, the harrow, the seed-sower and the reaper and binder during the harvesting of grain.

An abiding memory is of Paddy Quain ploughing an eleven-acre field with a pair of horses and a single-board plough, a vast undertaking but yet a small part

of the forty acres or so tilled in that year of 1946 under the compulsory tillage order.


Hay gathering.

A pair of horses pulled the mowing machine to cut the hay. The wheel-rake, the swarth-turner and the tumbling-paddy all pulled by the horse were employed in the saving of hay for winter fodder, as hay was the main winter fodder crop then. When the wynds of hay were made, the horse was tackled to the float car *[hay float]* to draw these into the hay barn.

The horse, of course, was the animal that took the milk to the creamery. It was not unusual to see twenty to thirty horses with the odd ass *(donkey)* lined up waiting their turn to have milk delivered at the intake. The farmer would be helped to empty the contents of his milk cans into the weighing scales by the farmer who had just delivered his milk and the farmer who was next in line.

Root Crops – nearly all farmers provided most of their food needs for the household in those times. The root crops sown were potatoes, turnips and to a lesser extent carrots and parsnips. Another root crop sown was sugar beet – there was also sugar beet sown for the provision of seed described as "sticklings" as mature beet had to be "dibbed" into drills in the autumn and grown on to produce seed the following summer.

Mangolds and fodder beet were also grown to provide a supplement for the feeding of cattle during the winter. The harvesting of all those crops was very hard work. Beet, mangolds, turnips and potatoes were either dug up or pulled by hand. Machinery for doing this work had not yet been invented.

Sugar beet crop – I will give a brief history here of the sugar-beet crop from soil preparation to its arrival at the factory. The land was ploughed, harrowed and drills opened using the horse. The seed-drill, which had been invented by that time, was used to sow the beet seed. Those who didn't have or could not afford a seed-drill used pipes or chutes to get in the seeds. This was real back-breaking work.

When the seed germinated and had grown on for five-six weeks, with seedlings in competition with each other, it was time for thinning out the crop. If ever there was back-breaking work, this was it – so much so that the work was

contracted out to anyone who would volunteer to do it, especially if there was significant acreage involved. There was a notoriously long garden in Fort Elizabeth, perhaps up to five hundred yards long or more. Two Manister men come to mind, who, after a hard day's work at their place of employment, contracted to thin out the excess beet. Their intention was to complete one drill each evening and thereby earn themselves the contracted sum of two shillings. Others too were contracted for this garden work, which could take a couple of weeks to complete. Our two subjects could be seen returning from the garden after dark each evening. The practice of thinning beet involved getting down on knees in the furrow between drills and taking out excess beet, leaving a gap of five-six inches between each beet. This allowed the beet to mature to full size.

The beet seed was sown in March/April and would be ready for harvesting by late November and December. Each fully-grown beet had to be pulled by hand, cleaned and crowned (ie the top leaves and crown taken off with a large knife – beet knife) and made into small heaps in the garden. Depending on the amount of beet sown, this chore took up to two or three weeks.

Crowned beet was then drawn out to the roadside using horse and butt-car, *(tumbling cart)* to be collected by a lorry. The beet-fork was used to put it on the "butt" and then again to put it on the lorry for transport to the nearest railway station, which was Croom in our case. It was then loaded onto wagons that were left on a siding. When all the wagons were full, the train engine arrived and took them to the beet factory at Mallow, being the nearest facility to us. Mud or "tare" was washed off at the factory and the farmer was then paid on the sugar content of the final product.

New Tractor – In 1947, my father bought a Fordson tractor from McCarthy's Garage, Charleville and Jack Quain was dispatched by bus from Croom to collect it. The tractor was green in colour and with iron wheels which were fitted out with rubber bands to allow it to be driven by road to Manister. Because of its iron makeup and its sheer bulk, the maximum speed was extremely slow. Consequently, the tractor and its driver had only reached Banogue by nightfall, where they had to park for the night. By the time the tractor arrived in our yard the next day, some excitement had built up – we were now the proud owners of one of the first tractors in Manister and certainly the first green one!


Using a buck-rake for hay-making.

To be honest, there were a lot of problems with it from the outset. It could hardly be used at all in wet conditions because of its extreme weight, which bogged it down quite quickly. It was run on kerosene but had to be started on petrol and anyone 'taking on' the starting handle would need to be in the full of their health and God help you if it 'back-fired'. There were stories of broken hands everywhere but I think,

on reflection, they were only stories. I would venture to suggest that until the little Ferguson superseded this tractor, the horse was well able to hold its own with it.

Threshing – in our time, the corn was cut by "Reaper-and-Binder". This, in the early days, was horse-drawn. With the advent of the tractor with its extra power, it greatly exceeded the capacity of the horse to do the work. It is owing to the relative power of the horse and the engine that a mechanically propelled vehicle is rated in horsepower to the present day. The reaper-and-binder cut and bound the corn into sheaves. The sheaves were "stooked", by bringing together six or eight sheaves. The stooks were quite often topped off by four sheaves, turned upside-down, to provide protection from the rain.

On occasion, too, hand-stacks were made: eight or ten stooks, or more, were put together to form a small stack that could be pulled onto a float by ropes, in the same way as wynds of hay were loaded.

After about a week or so, the stooks or hand stacks were brought into the haggard near the farm house, using the float or common car *(dray)* or both. Some skill was required for the building of sheaves of corn on the float or common car and, if poorly built, they could easily topple while in transit.

The making of stacks in the haggard had to be undertaken with the utmost care and attention – the collapse of a stack could spell ruination. In this regard, my father excelled as he was a stack-builder supreme. When all the corn was neatly stacked in the haggard, it was covered with hay or rushes awaiting the threshing mill.

There were three threshing mills in the Manister area. The McNamara brothers, Frank and Bill of Ballygrennan, had one each and Willie Dunworth of Lacca also had one. The Albion, Ransome, and Bamford and Garvey were the most popular makes.

The threshing days were big events on every farm as they signalled the end of the harvest. In our case, with forty acres of corn to thresh, it generally took one or two weeks to complete the task. Breakdowns were commonplace, and rain would also slow up the work. As already stated, tractors had made their way onto the scene by the late 1940s and were now being used to drive the threshing mill – this was achieved by running a belt from a pulley on the tractor to a pulley on the mill.

Before the tractor era, steam engines were a popular method of driving the thresher, while in earlier times again, there was a horse-operated thresher. This mechanism had a long shaft to which the horse or horses were tackled: they walked around in a circle, and a series of cog wheels and pulleys operated the drum that separated the grain from the straw. John Fay, who lived at Tullovin Castle, had such a thresher in my young days.

The Reidy family of Ballymacstradeen had such a machine which was preserved in one of their outhouses. They continued to use this thresher combined with a winnowing machine, also preserved, long after others had progressed to the more modern techniques, as the method allowed them to produce clean and

unbroken straw for thatching their dwelling house. *(Ref: Danny Quain)*.

Threshing.

In any one day, at least ten to twelve men were needed around the thresher. One man was on top, feeding the sheaves into the thresher drum. On either side, a man was cutting the bindings on the sheaves. Where there was a stack on either side of the threshing mill, sheaves were "piked" onto the thresher platform. One man was required to keep the chaff (corn husks) cleared, as it was expelled to the ground beneath the mill.

Depending on the size of the stacks, as many as five or six men or more may have been required to deal with the threshed straw, keeping it clear of the mill and making it into a stack. The young and uninitiated were quite often given the task of keeping the straw clear of the "mouth" of the thresher, where straw spewed out incessantly from overhead. Any lapse in concentration could have the mill owner shouting to have the straw cleared away.

At the opposite end of the mill, grain came down through chutes onto which were fastened twenty-stone bags *(sacks)*. It was here, at the grain end, that the farm owner would be expected to locate himself with, perhaps, two or three of his fellow farmers. They checked out the yield and discussed the condition of the grain and how well it had threshed.

The "Macks" *(Mc Namaras)* looked after the mill and tractor and also carried out running repairs. Jars of porter were then commonplace at threshing. With dust everywhere, porter helped to keep throats oiled and contributed to ensuring that everything ran smoothly. A lot of hands had to be fed also. I need not tell you; the women were kept busy preparing and cooking the bacon and cabbage and spuds for dinner.

When the work was finished, the bags of corn were stacked together, awaiting transport by "Ranks" lorry to their flour mills in Limerick. My father used to travel on the lorry to Ranks, ensuring the corn "bushelled" well. Similar to sugar beet, where payment was calculated on the sugar content, payment for corn was based on the moisture content, or should I say, lack of it.

When the threshing had finished on one farm, the *meithil* of men moved on with the thresher to the next farm, and so on, until all threshing in the parish was completed.

Milking Machine – the 1950s heralded further changes. In 1951, my father purchased a Simplex milking machine which was driven by a Lister petrol engine, thus making it possible for one man to milk forty cows, where previously it had taken four or five people to hand-milk the cows.

While ***rural electrification*** commenced in December 1946, it was 1955 before our farm was connected to the national grid. The coming of electricity made an enormous difference to life in the farmhouse and farmyard – instant power, light, heat and water on tap became a reality.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, farm labourers became scarce. The younger lads, after leaving school, moved to the cities in England, where plenty of work was available. Wages were three to four times greater on the building sites in London, Birmingham, Manchester and all over England than on farms.

Where the farmer hadn't sons to do the work, he found it increasingly difficult to get workmen and, with the introduction of the "Workmen's Compensation Act", he had to pay much higher wages.

During this period, there was also a boom in farm mechanisation. The combine harvester, as well as more advanced machinery such as ploughs, tractors and tilling machinery in general, became more available. The man who could not afford this new equipment was able to hire it to do his work, as agricultural contractors arrived on the scene in great numbers.

In 1958, the first Programme for Economic Expansion marked a watershed in the transformation of Ireland from a mainly agricultural society into an industrial-based economy. As industry expanded, more and more small farms were sold, and the owners moved to employment in the factories, where they had regular hours and a guaranteed pay packet.

The period also witnessed a dramatic increase in government and public interest in education. In October 1959, Sean Lemass announced that an immediate policy of the government was to improve facilities for post-primary education. In September 1966, the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, made the dramatic announcement that free post-primary education would be available from the 1967/68 academic year onwards. This, coupled with the introduction of third-level student grants in 1968, had the effect of encouraging many farmers' sons and daughters into third-level education and ultimately employment away from the farm. The farmer, in many cases, had difficulty in retaining a son or daughter to stay and work the farm.

3-row potato planting.

As you can see, major changes have taken place during my lifetime and, of course, change is continuous in the areas of technology and social structure, leaving the fabric of rural life much altered from that of my boyhood.

By Tom Casey

I grew up on a farm in Grange, and I fondly recall the saving and harvesting of hay. In the times that I recall here, 1950s-1960s, the staple winter feed for cows and other farm animals was hay, as it was for hundreds of years previously. Saving and harvesting hay were the most labour-intensive and tormenting work carried out on every farm, big and small. At one time, before the horse mower was invented, hay was cut with the scythe – this was back breaking work that had to be performed on small and big farms, involving tens of acres of meadow-land in some cases. Furthermore, until the advent of the horse-drawn hay turner, about a hundred and thirty years ago, the only method of turning hay in the meadow was by hay-fork; in other words by manual labour.


Horse Power!

The whole hay-making process was entirely weather dependent. Hay was mowed when it appeared that there was going to be a dry spell of weather. After mowing, hay was left to save over about two dry and sunny days and more time was required if the weather was dull. Hay was then turned over by hay fork and after another day, any remaining green lumps of grass would be scattered to dry out and was then turned again. After another day, hay might be declared fit to be put in wynds. A wynd was the name widely given to a structure whereby hay was gathered together, in the meadow, in a cone shaped lump. In some parts of the country, our wynd is known as a tram. Locally, a wynd is commonly referred to as a "wine" – merely a distortion of the proper word.

However, if a fine spell did not last sufficiently long, and the weather became wet, the hay on the ground would be made into small rolls, known as cocks, in order to keep as much as possible of the hay off the ground. If it was left flat, the grass would grow through the hay, causing the hay to rot. Cocks of hay were turned after a few days if the weather continued to be poor, and they were subsequently shook out for drying when the weather improved.

The next stage in the hay-saving process was to make rows of the hay in the meadow, which was done by men, wielding hay-forks. When hay was "rowed", the

appearance was of many rows of hay, running the length or breadth of the meadow, with bare rows running parallel to the hay rows. Bare rows resulted from hay being pulled together to make hay rows. The hay was then collected from the rows and taken to points on the meadow, where wynds were to be constructed. This involved a man who worked a horse which pulled a wooden rake called a "tumbler", about six feet wide with teeth pointing forwards. The tumbler collected hay as it moved along a row. The tumbler was so called because when the horse arrived at the site where a wynd was to be made, having gathered hay from a row, the man would lift the handles at the rear of the rake, causing the rake's teeth to catch in the ground, thereby causing the rake to tumble forward, thus depositing the hay at that point. The men constructing a wynd would then fork the hay on to it. As I said, wynds were cone-shaped, widest at the bottom and pointed at the top, designed

Hay gathering.

in such manner as to prevent rain from penetrating the hay. Wynds were made in various sizes, but a tall man would not usually be able to see over the top of a wynd.

Until the hay in a wynd settled down, it was a somewhat loose structure. Therefore, it was necessary to tie down each wynd by two 'ropes', each called a "sugan". This word is, most likely, derived from the Irish language (súgán, possibly). A sugan, about two inches in diameter, was constructed from the hay itself by adding and twisting hay until it was of sufficient length to reach from the bottom of a wynd over the top and down to the bottom of the wynd at the far side. The ends of a sugan were pulled as tightly as possible by a man at each end and were secured to the wynd by winding the sugan ends around hay in the bottom of the wynd. Usually, two sugans crossing each other at the top were required to adequately tie down a wynd.

There was a skill involved in the construction of a strong sugan. With the passage of time, the sugan method became redundant as hay twine became available.

Hay made into wynds before it was dry enough would heat, and it would be of very poor quality as a result. Saved hay was left in wynds in the meadow for several weeks, so as to season and dry out further. During this period, hay was being saved in other meadows.

The farmer took great pride in the appearance of the wynds that stood in his meadow. The day after wynds were made, the men would return to the meadow to pull loose hay from the bottom of each wynd. This hay was forked on to the top of the wynd to form a pointed top. It was at that stage that the sugans were made and tied. This process was known as "pulling the butts and heading the wynds".

Those of us who were children in the 1950s and 1960s will remember the flooding that could occur several times in late summer at Grange Corcass before the farmer had the opportunity to take the hay home for harvesting. In such cases, hard-earned saved hay was destroyed. Thankfully, flooding does not occur in the Corcass area since the Camogue River was drained in the 1970s.

When hay was drawn from the meadow to the farmyard, it was forked into a hay barn or made into one or more reeks. A reek was constructed from about twenty wynds of hay, usually about fifteen feet wide and up to twenty feet high, in a shape similar to that of the wynd. When a reek was completed, it was thatched with rushes to keep it dry.

The farmer no longer depends on dry weather for saving hay as new methods of harvesting have evolved. Mechanisation has taken over, and mown grass is now baled tightly and sealed from the weather using the round baler and wrapper machinery. However hay is still saved and made into round bales, but there is not a fork in sight! Magnificent machinery has taken over.

One of my clearest memories is of standing in Grange Schoolyard with other pupils during the month of September as we watched loads of hay, drawn by horses, passing in the direction of Holycross, coming from Grange Corcass. At going home time from school, if one of those hay floats was passing, we would try to hang on to the back of the float before hopping on, in order to take a lift without the driver's knowledge. Most of us could easily do this as the horse and cart moved at walking speed. Of course, the driver being at the front of the cart could not easily see what was going on at the rear.

There were two types of hay cart: a hay float and a common horse car with four, almost vertical, poles. The common horse car was most numerous as it could carry more than one wynd of hay. The poles were attached to the car, one at each corner, and they sloped out from the centre of the car to extend the load capacity. When a load of hay was well built, it extended halfway over the

horse's back, and it seemed as though the horse was emerging from underneath the load.

The hay saving and harvesting operations were highly labour intensive and very few farmers were self-sufficient as regards adequacy of labour during the hay season. Some were self-sufficient owing to many sons and daughters in a family together with employees. However, it was frequently necessary for farmers to enter into reciprocal arrangements, thus assisting each other in having the work done. It was also a time when casual labour was employed. Of course, it was a time when the Irish renown for neighbourliness came to the fore as many skilled hay-saving men provided assistance, sometimes after a day's work at their place of employment. Sometimes "a few bob" changed hands, to the mutual satisfaction of the parties. Meadow, hay-barn and reek work accounted for numerous social occasions. While the work was hard, requiring enormous physical exertion, there was time for banter, news-swapping, reflection, analysis and prediction. The season coincided with the big GAA hurling and football All-Ireland championships, and this topic alone sparked many a conversation and, of course, some heated differences of opinion. A day in the meadow or the farmyard was invariably one of plenty to eat as well as the odd bottle of porter. The women of the house were renowned for cooking huge meals – much appreciated by the hay men.

Those were the days!

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