

HISTORY

Looking back: Ann Arbor balers

[Editor's note: Richard D. Alexander, a resident of Freedom Township, sent in these memories of his young farming years in the late 1930s to mid 1940s. The accompanying photos to this article and Alexander's first article were all taken by Mark O'Brien of Ann Arbor.]

Ann Arbor Baler. Oh, my gosh! I had been trying for years to find an old stationary version of that baler. A while back I located a man who had bought one at a farm auction, but before I could get to his place he had cut it up and sold it for junk.

Illinois farmer, John Bell. We were baling out a straw stack on my father's farm in Piatt County, Ill. Mr. Bell's usual wire puncher had taken sick, and he asked my father if I, at age 8, could punch wires for him that day. When the job was finished he held out that shiny quarter. I refused it. To me it seemed that sort was between Mr. Bell and my father.

There's nothing unusual about seeing old tractors and implements traveling the roads of Freedom Township. But on this day in September a split second view of the back end of something old and rusty, passing between the bushes in front of our house, caused me to leap out of my chair and run to the window for a better view.

Another fellow told me he had owned one briefly, but he sold it to another farmer who is long since dead. Nothing on the Internet helped. I had more or less stopped looking. And now, amazingly, here was a stationary Ann Arbor Baler from the 1930s right in front of me.

Somehow, as with virtually all farm kids, I knew that whatever I did was for the family and the farm. Eventually Mr. Bell shrugged, and with a little smile at me he flipped the quarter gently down into the dust by my toes and turned to go on with his work. An almost imperceptible nod from my father told me to go ahead and pick it up.

For some reason that rusty old implement seemed strangely familiar to me. Staring down the road I could see that it was being pulled by a bright orange restored antique Case tractor.

I pulled up beside the tractor driver, waved both hands at him, and climbed out. It was Mark Blumenauer, a farmer I first met 30 years ago. He stopped the tractor, climbed down, and came toward me with a smile. I was standing alongside the baler, just staring — staring at the machine on which I had earned my first wages ever: a shiny quarter, 25 cents, in 1937.

Mark told me the old baler was bought new by his grandfather in the 1930s. He said he had bought the baler from his uncle. He was pulling it down to the farm of Lloyd Hughes, on the edge of Bridgewater, where, on Sunday, some local farmers were having their biennial show of threshing and baling the old-fashioned way. He said they had pulled the baler out of Willard Blumenauer's barn a week ago, greased it up, and tried it out. It worked perfectly.

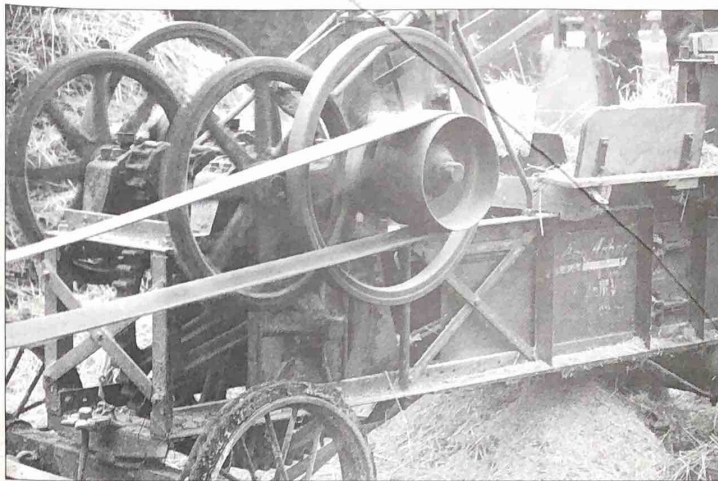
But what was it? And what in the world had caused it to startle me? Then I had a flash. Could it possibly be? I jerked on my shoes, ran out to the car with the laces trailing, and sped off after that slow moving apparition.

I had earned it on a half day of punching baler wires through slots in the wooden blocks that separated the bales as they were pressed together toward the back of the baler.

Elmer Diuble, long time proprietor of Diuble Equipment, told me that for a while they made pickup balers so that the pickup apparatus could be removed. To bale out a stationary object like a straw stack, he said, they could remove the pickup and place a flat wooden platform on top of the baler, just like the ones on the older stationary balers. One man would then pitch the straw up to this table and another man standing up there would fork it into the baler.

A quarter-mile down the road, I caught up and pulled alongside. Unbelievably, on the side of the ancient monster I could see the label,

The baler I worked on so long ago had belonged to an



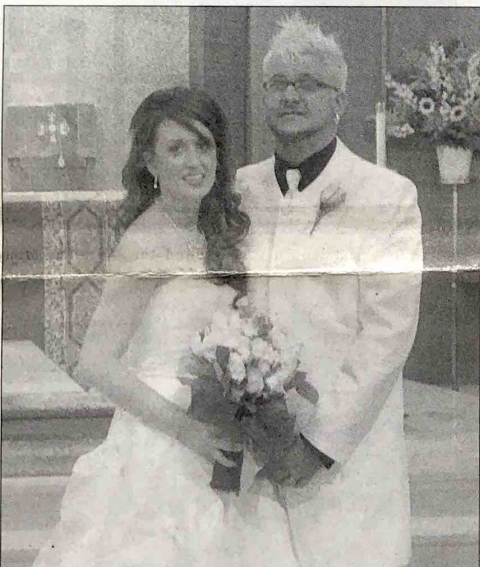
The famous antique Ann Arbor Baler dates back to the first half of the 20th century.

At the Bridgewater show, Art Schaldenbrand told me that when he baled with a stationary baler he just saved the first bale and sat on it, I think Mr. Bell must have put a board on top of the "sitting" bale when I punched wires. You needed to be able to slide back and forth, while working with the bale wires, because sometimes you fell behind as the bales were moving past you.

He had to do all of these things while the baler was moving. He was a busy man. Simply punching wires back so they could be tied on the other side of the baler, the way I did for that shiny quarter on Mr. Bell's old stationary baler, was considerably less demanding.

Today the town has a plaque in the courthouse square, commemorating the Ann Arbor Baler. A not-too-clear color photograph of the plaque can be seen by googling Ann Arbor Baler. Eventually, Elmer said, the company was sold again, to the makers of Oliver machinery, and somewhat later to the New Holland machinery folks.

WEDDING



Bashaw, Spaulding wed

Rushelle S. Bashaw and Christopher Armand Spaulding were married in an afternoon ceremony Sept. 23 at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Chelsea.

Kaiser of Napoleon and Chanel Scarlett Spaulding, daughter of the couple; Ring bearers were Kaleb Micheal Spaulding of Grass Lake, son of the groom and Tyler Sanders of Dexter.

The bride is the daughter of Russell Bashaw of Adrian and Kristi Smith of Evergreen, Colo.; the groom is the son of Herbert and Patricia Spaulding of Phoenix, Ariz., formerly of Manchester.

A reception was held at the Comfort Inn and Village Conference Center in Chelsea.

The bride's strapless ball gown, designed by Monique Luo, featured a beaded sweetheart neckline and

Following a honeymoon at Mackinac Island, the couple have settled at their home in Grass Lake.

Starting a few decades ago, such balers could be operated by the tractor driver alone, but in the 1940s two men had to sit on benches on either side near the back of the baler and punch and tie the wires and set the wooden blocks for their drops between bales. The early pickup baler I worked on didn't draw the hay from heavy windrows easily into the feed chute, and the first summer I worked on it I often stood up on a shelf behind the top of the pickup and shoved the hay down into the baler with a forked stick.

At the right moment the fellow on the table would also swing around the device that held the wooden spacers that go between the bales, so that the plunger that packed the hay would come down on it, with a little extension built for that purpose, and drive it down in behind the last bale. Those wooden blocks set the length of the bale.

In the heyday of wire baling, used baling wire became so abundant that it was notorious as the farmer's repair kit for just about everything. On the newer pickup balers, wire was replaced by various kinds of string and twine. Nowadays, of course, bales are also made in a variety of different shapes and sizes.

In later years, on the old-time pickup balers, the fellow who initially punched the wires through the slots in the wooden block also had to tie them when they were punched back. The other fellow would punch the wires back for tying and also keep doing the block changes.

I was puzzled when I saw the Blumenauer's old stationary baler because there were no sitting benches for the two men working on the back of the baler. I knew I had been sitting down when I punched wires 69 years ago.

He had to move to the back end of the baler and grab the block before it fell off the baler, then replace it in the block housing at the other end of his work area. At the right moment, indicated by a mark on the baler, he would reverse the feeder house, which held the incoming hay, to empty the bale chamber momentarily. Then he would slide forward the block housing, causing the block to be dropped into place by the plunger.

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