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.***

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.

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.

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 while it was still moving, and sped off after that slow-moving apparition.

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, “Ann Arbor Balers”.

Ann Arbor Balers—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.

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 had more or less stopped looking. And now, amazingly, here was a stationary Ann Arbor Baler from the 1930s right in front of me.

I pulled up beside the tractor driver, waved both hands at him, and climbed out. It was Mark Blummenauer, a farmer I first met 30 years ago. He stopped the tractor down the road, 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.

I had earned it for a half day’s work as a pickup baler. The baler wire was transported through shots in the wooden blocks that separated the baler as they were pressed together toward the back of the baler.

The baler worked on its long ago had belonged to an 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 punch had taken sick, and he asked my father if I’d take his punch for a day. When the job was finished he held out that shiny quarter and I refused it. To me it seemed that any arrangement of that sort was between Mr. Bell and my father.

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

Mark told me the old baler was bought new by his grand father in the 1930s. He had bought the baler from Mr. Miller. He was pulling it down the road through Hughes, on the edge of town. Then on Sunday, local farmers were having their biennial show of threshing and baling the old-fashioned way. He said they had pulled the baler out of its stall in Blummenauer’s barn a week ago, greased it up, and tried it out. It worked perfectly.

Saying this is a stationary machine means a farmer would park it in an appropriate place, where either hay or straw from a large pile or stack could be easily be pitched forked into it for baling. As a teenager I also worked parts of two summers on a 1940s Ann Arbor pickup baler. Pickup balers are pulled by a tractor through the field, gathering up the hay or straw that has previously been moved and raked into windrows, and popping the finished bales out behind.

Starting a few decades ago, such balers could be operated by the tractor driver alone, but in the 1940s two men sat on benches on either side near the back of the baler and punch and tie the bales as they were pressed together toward the back of the baler. The early pickup balers I worked on didn’t draw the hay from heavy windrows easily into a pitched chute, and the first summer I worked on it I often stood up on a shelf behind the top of the pickup and the wood blocks for their drops between bales. The early pickup balers. I worked on had a handle that the balers had drawn the hay from heavy windrows easily into a pitched chute, and the first summer I worked on it I often stood up on a shelf behind the top of the pickup and the wood blocks. The hay was dropped down into the baler with a forked stick.

At the Bridgewater show, Art Schadenbrand told me that when he baled with a stationary baler he usually saved the first bale and sat on it. I think Mr. Bell must have put a bale on top of the “sitting” bale when I punched wires. You needed to be able to go through the baler, working with the baler, because sometimes you would have to push the baler back. It was a slow, dusty old baler that was moving past you.

Elsie Duble, long time owner of Equipment, told me that for a while they used pickup balers so that the pickup apparatus could be removed. To remove the pickup and place the flat wooden platform on top of the baler, just like the ones on Pickup balers, one man would then position the straw up to the table and another man stood up there and forked it into the baler.

At the right moment the follow on the table would push the bale 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 between the last bales. Those wooden spacers set the length of the bale.

In later years, on the old-time pickup balers, the fellow who initially punched the wires through the shots in the baler and then removed them always still stand upright, the young man stood up there and forked it into the baler.

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.

At the old-time threshing and baling in Bridgewater, Elsie Duble told me that the first ten balers made by the Ann Arbor company were actually made in Ypsilanti and were called Ypsilanti Balers. Then the company moved to Ann Arbor and changed its name. Finally, still in the 1930s, the company sold that part of its operation to a business in Shively, Illinois. Shelbyville didn’t change the name. Today the town has a plaque in the courthouse square, commemorating the Ann Arbor Balers. A not too close photograph of the plaque can be seen by googling Ann Arbor Balers. Eventually, Elsie said, the company was sold again, to the makers of Oliver machinery, and somewhat later to the New Holland machinery folks. I never owned anything made by Oliver, but the two balers I have owned and operated were made over the past 30 years. That was both made by New Holland. In a way they connect me to that awkward, sturdy old baler that was changing away in Bridgewater a few Sundays ago, after more than two-thirds of a century.

—Richard D. Alexander

WEDDING

Bashaw, Spaulding wed

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

The bride is the daughter of Russell Bashaw of Adrian and Kriki Smith of Dyersville, Iowa; the groom is the son of Herbert and Patricia Spaulding of Phoenix, Ariz., formerly of Manchester.

The bride’s strapless ball gown, designed by Monique Lhu, featured a beaded bodice, an illusion bodice, and a strapless back.

Kaiser of Naples and Cheval Scarlett Spaulding, daughter of the couple, rings the church bell at the Spaulding of Grims Lake, son of the groom and Tyler Bashaw, as the bride and groom, at the Spaulding of Grims Lake, son of the groom and Tyler Bashaw, as the bride and groom.

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

Following a honeymoon at Mackinac Island, the couple has settled at their home in Grims Lake.

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