



Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

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Abstract: Mark Johnson was born on October 19, 1965 in Columbus, Ohio. He completed a B.S. degree in Animal Science at Oklahoma State University in 1989. He currently judges sheep shows nationwide, and also raises Southdown sheep on a small farm in La Salle County, Illinois. Mark works as an Agricultural Specialist for Kline Creek Farm, an 1890s era living-history farm in DuPage County, Illinois. In this interview, Mark describes the process of planting, harvesting, and threshing oats on “Country Fair” day at Kline Creek Farm. Oats are a cool-season grass that are planted in March or early April at Kline Creek using an Appleton grain drill pulled by Percheron draft horses. They are harvested in July using an International grain binder, which cuts off the stalks and ties them into bundles. Field workers then stand up the bundles in shocks to dry. Then the bundles are placed on a hayrack wagon and fed into a McCormick-Deering thresher that separates the seed from the chaff. The thresher at Kline Creek Farm is powered by a 1922 Minneapolis steam tractor. Oat seeds are fed to cattle, horses, and sheep on the farm, and any surplus seeds are sold for farm income. Oat chaff, or straw, is baled and stored in the barn to be used as animal bedding in the winter.

Keywords: Kline Creek Farm; Country Fair; oats; cool-season grass; spring planting; Appleton grain drill; Percheron draft horses; oat growth (best <80°F); oat harvest; International grain binder; oat bundle; oat shock; hayrack wagon; oat threshing; McCormick-Deering thresher; straw walkers; oat seed; box wagon; livestock feed (cattle, horses, sheep); human food (oatmeal, Cheerios, oatmeal cookies); oat straw (chaff); hay vs. straw; stationary baler; grain bin; surplus; cash crop; Minneapolis steam tractor; steam power; coal fuel; wood fuel



Mark Johnson

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Interview with Mark Johnson

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Interview # 1: unknown date

Warren: unknown

Johnson: Did you get my good side?

Warren: Which side is that?

Johnson: Yeah, we're still looking.

Warren: Do a 360.

Johnson: Yeah.

Warren: Okay, we're good.

Johnson: Okay, we're having our threshing and country fair here at Kline Creek Farm today. The crop that we're threshing is oats. The oat crop starts way back in March. In Northern Illinois here, we like to start planting our oats in March or early April. This year with the wet spring, most of it got planted in early April. Oats are a cool-season grass that grow real well in this area. Oats grow best less than eighty degrees, so we try to get the oats planted early. That's one of the first crops that you get planted on a farm in the spring in this part of the country. The oats were planted on fields behind us here, on the south side of the farm. They were planted entirely with the team of horses that you've seen working today. We have an 1880s Appleton grain drill that we use, or we have an end gate seeder that we could use, but if we use the cedar, then we disc them in lightly. The oats grow all spring. This has been a terrific spring for growing oats—not too many degrees above eighty degrees, enough rain that they did real well.

Typically they'll start to die in July when it starts to get warmer, and then we go through—once the plant is dead and it turns that beautiful golden color that you see out in the fields, we go out with a grain binder. We have an 1890s International grain binder that we pull through the field that cuts off the stalks near the ground level, brings them up onto a series of conveyor belts, ties them together into a bundle, and dumps those bundles out into the field. And then me and a couple dozen of my closest friends will walk through those fields, and we build the shocks in the field, where we pick up all the bundles. And we usually put seven bundles in a shock—six around, and one on top to shed the rain—and that allows the crop to continue to dry. Because if you put them into a bundle or a shock and the kernels are still too wet, it will mold and rot that entire—not only the bundle, but a lot of that shock as well. We don't want them too dry—if we get them too dry, then the oats will shatter, and all the seeds fall on the ground. Once they're shocked, we can leave them sitting out in the field for quite a while, or in our case, we'll go ahead and put some inside so we can thresh whether it's rain or shine this week. And fortunately, we've had great weather for threshing.

And what you see going on behind us here is the actual threshing part. All the bundles that are on the hayrack over there were the oats that were planted here by our horses, and then we ran through with the grain binder that I mentioned, made the shocks, we load the bundles onto that

hayrack. The bundles are then forked into the threshing machine. We put them in head-first. The straw walkers there drag the bundle into the machine, where it separates the seed from the chaff. The seed is where all the nutrient value is in the oats. Oats like these are typically used to feed a variety of farm livestock, like the cattle, horses, and sheep that we maintain here at Kline Creek Farm. Those are the same oats that you'll find used in human food in things like oatmeal, Cheerios, or my favorite, oatmeal cookies—all made from these same kind of oats.

The straw or the stalks that the oats are grown on, that's where the straw comes from. Straw is used for bedding. It's high in fiber. It's very absorbent. It also has very low feed value, so it isn't worth very much, so that's how it ends up getting used for bedding. Typically, when people walk through the barn at Kline Creek, they'll say, "What's the difference between hay and straw?" In a nutshell, hay is green. It's harvested while the plant's growing. All the nutrient value is in the leaves and the stems. Straw is harvested after the plant is dead. All the nutrition is in the seed, and the stalks or the stems are what we use for bedding. So straw is yellow, used for bedding. Hay is green; animals eat that.

From here, we'll blow the straw into a pile there. Typically it would have been burned. We do have a stationary baler that we use to make straw bales out of that that we can haul up to the farm and use for bedding for the winter. The wagons—the box wagons that you can see there—where the oats are loaded into, we'll haul that up to the barn where the horses pull it into the upper barn, and then we shovel it all into our grain bin that we use for feed all winter. Any surplus oats that we have, we sell for income for the farm. Typically, grains like oats or corn were used as a cash crop on a suburban farm like this. You figure in the 1890s, there were almost as many horses as we have cars today in the metropolitan Chicago area, and what's the number-one fuel for horses other than hay? Oats. So suburban farms like this would have been a place that would use hay and oats as a chief source of income, along with corn. So we can follow the oats from the field all the way through the threshing process. If you guys want to get a closer look, we can get closer.

unknown: We're good.

Johnson: Okay.

Warren: Tell us a little bit about the tractor's belt (inaudible speech).

Johnson: I only know a little bit about the tractor. The tractor that's behind us is being used as a steam engine from the 1920s. One of our local excavating companies, Lootens and Son comes over with the steam engine and the threshing machine. They're here in West Chicago. The steam engine is from the 1920s; the threshing machine is about the same vintage. The steam engine provides the power to power the threshing machine. You can see the large belts that are turning behind us. We started this engine with coal yesterday; we keep it going with wood to keep enough heat and enough pressure, build up enough steam, so that it can run properly. The guy running the engine, his name is Sam. Say hello, Sam! There you go. Those guys can tell you more about exactly how it works than I can. I need to check on the wagon up here. I'll be back. (pause) You want to push this one out of the way? Shut them down for a minute, and we'll switch. There's five or six of us. This one rolls pretty good. That one, I wouldn't do.

Unknown: (unintelligible).

Johnson: So you're not going to finish that load. I'm asking; I couldn't hear what you said.

Unknown: I said (inaudible speech) shut down a little bit. (unintelligible)

Johnson: But it's going to take them a while to unload that, and we've got to get this unloaded. So I got to have three or four—I got to have four people up there to get everything unloaded. We're shorter on people today than we were yesterday.

Unknown: (unintelligible)

Johnson: Don't leave.

Unknown: No?

Johnson: No, you're going to help us move it up.

Unknown: This one, right?

Johnson: And that one. Yeah, both.

Unknown: (unintelligible).

Johnson: Yeah, I got to switch wagons. (long pause, engines shut down) Hey, Ed, would you volunteer to steer? Just up out of the way. Yeah. I need some able-bodied assistants. I see one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—all right. Eight. We've got to push this side. Come on, let's go. Don't be bashful. Come on.

Unknown: Can you release the brake?

Johnson: Did they release the brake? No, it's on.

Unknown: It might be nice if we'd release the brake.

Johnson: Oh, we were just going to test you. He passed. Come on, put your back into it, men. Where's my drum? Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Hey, they're doing good, Ed, keep going.

Unknown: Yeah, (inaudible speech) to the barn.

Johnson: Exactly. That's perfect right there. You guys are good. Don't wear out; we've got to put another one back. You know what those are?

Unknown: Oats.

Johnson: Oats. Do you ever eat oats?

Unknown: Yeah, well, I cook them.

Johnson: How so?

Unknown: Boil them.

Johnson: Oh, I like mine in cookies. What are you doing next Saturday? (laughter) I need cookies!

Unknown: In here?

Johnson: Yes. Ready? Oops, sorry. (pause) Good.

(end of interview)