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AGRICULTURE CHANGE OVER TIME

I am not in the great generation to know what it was really like to survive the dirty thirties, WWII, and the huge change in mechanization of agriculture. But I do know what the past 50 years have been like with agricultural change. I have an appreciation of what it was like growing up on a farm south of Nemaha in the 60's and 70's. There has been so much change since then.

The small herd of beef cows (about 30); the two dirt lots and barns with 100 to 150 pigs as finishers; the 7 dairy cows (which eventually was one Holstein for our own milk, and yes, we all drank milk that wasn't pasteurized); the large garden; picking fruit off fruit trees; harvesting and plucking about 35 broilers for the freezer (we ate chicken a lot); baling small square bales of red clover or alfalfa (in fact, for a summer job in high school, I helped a neighbor put up 6,000 small square bales of straw, just the three of us); four row planting equipment; a three row moldboard plow which eventually changed to a field cultivator, and heaven forbid, leave some crop residue on the soil surface (a huge change or shift at the time); and how about cutting weeds out of the soybeans (button weeds, pigweed and shattercane). We could leave the milkweeds, they came back every year anyway because it is a perennial.

Commercial slaughter of animals has changed so much over the years. Saline County Pork Producers used to deliver a lot of pork to the local Farmland plant built in the 70's. We don't deliver very many hogs locally anymore, that has all changed. I remember at Sokol Hall in the 80's an Extension program called "Whole Hog Days" and a talk about the hog of the future, bigger and leaner and that sounded pretty crazy at the time. The industry speaker was talking about slaughter weights 30 pounds heavier than the current weights being marketed. It was not an easy talk because of the cost of feed at the time in relation to the price being paid, it was a little warm in the room and the speaker fainted. A quick trip to Dr. Travnicsek's office was in order and he was ok. Last week the average weight of all pigs in the U.S. marketed was 271 pounds live or 203 pounds dressed. Locally, Smithfield used to pay a premium for leanness, now the industry has changed to the preferred weight range for carcass weight for the highest prices.

In September of 1970, the U.S. farmer slaughtered 1.78 billion pounds of beef, 1.19 billion pounds of pork, 23 million pounds of lamb and 1.2 billion pounds of poultry. Last week that report was 2.29 billion pounds of beef, 1.84 billion pounds of pork, 14.1 million pounds of lamb (significantly lower) and 5.1 billion pounds of poultry. We are still eating a lot of chicken. Per capita the Beef Council indicates we eat more beef per person when you take out the bone and just consider the meat. In 2010 the U.S. has crashed through the 300 million people mark from 203 million in 1970. That's a lot of mouths for the bread basket of the world to feed just in the U.S. alone. Fewer farm operators, larger farms and decline in rural population, we all know that story.

The use of no-till farming has sharply reduced the labor and time that it takes to plant a crop. Side benefits have been large with greatly reducing soil erosion, improved soil health, reduced use of farm chemicals, reduced fuel usage and enhanced yields. A couple of special conferences in Hallam that Extension sponsored the past couple years emphasized how no-till farming was



enhancing carbon levels in soils and farmers willingness to experiment with cover crops to enhance diversity, soil health and grazing opportunities.

Last year, during an extreme drought year, we saw the tandem effect of better genetics in corn and the effect of long-term no-till fields with corn yield. A similar year in the 1980's would have produced a lot of zero yields. It's all about the ability of our soils to be more resilient to drought and capture more rain in thunderstorm events due to long-term no-till.

So we have gone from 4-row planters to 16 and 24-row, with GPS and precision agriculture. With rapid advances in seed technology and drought resistance, one can only imagine the exciting changes coming in the next 10 years, let alone the next 30.

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