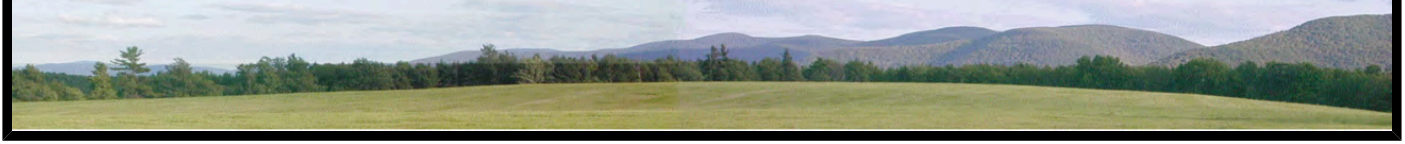


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HAYING THEN AND NOW

George and Nadine Danforth Wilson

We are a generation younger than Carl Lewis and also farmed using loose hay. By our teens, however, we were using technology to make haying easier and more productive while still not using balers.

In the 1960s, we used sickle bars to cut the hay. The hay was sparse enough that you could look down and see the cutters scissoring the stalks. Nowadays, you cannot see the blades due to the density of the hay—modern fertilizers and engineered grasses produce much more hay per acre than in those earlier years. I don't know what the yield of hay per acre was back then, but I know it had to be significantly less than the 4 tons per acre that we harvest today.



Young George with his mother and sister on the family drop rake. Dobbin is George's father. Nadine's favorite piece of equipment was this loader that swept the cut hay off the ground and up onto the wagon. Powered cutters, loaders, and hay forks to process loose hay meant that farm wives could be complete partners in the agricultural enterprise. Photos courtesy of George and Nadine Wilson

One of the problems with baled hay technology of the 1950s was that it required a lot of manual labor. Early balers left bales (each weighing from 40 to 120 pounds) on the ground. These had to be manually thrown onto wagons and then thrown from the wagons into stacked piles in the hot, airless loft. Nadine is adamant that loose hay, automatically lifted onto wagons as it is cut and then lifted by electric cranes and positioned in the barn is more efficient than the storing and use of square bales. George sees another benefit of loose hay—baled hay is tightly compressed within the bales and cannot breathe as well as loose hay. Damp baled hay will mold and can even cause spontaneous fires as it bakes in the barn, while overly dry hay has less bulk and nutrition. Until the late 1940s, tractors were beyond the means of Catskill farmers. After the war, the tractor industry had a series of boom years and tractors with names like Massey, Ferguson, and Ford offered power take-offs and hydraulic pumps.

Ferguson's TO-80s, the Ford's 8Ns are still seen on every farm and many homesteads. However, these machines could be flipped if they travelled across the inclines on our hills; did not have the mass to hold back a heavy baler coming down the incline; and didn't have traction to draw it up the grade.

Consequently, loose hay continued to be used, and even preferred, for a while longer. We had one barn that housed more heifers than could be fed from the loose hay that could be stored in the hay mow, and so we used baled hay for that barn while continuing to use loose hay for the others.

Baled hay is easier to transport than loose hay—a lot of hay could be dropped on a long trip with an open hay wagon. The final switch to baled hay came in the late 1960s as smaller farms were consolidated into larger ones and tractors came on the market that could control a train of tractor, kick-baler, and hay wagon.

The latest innovation that we have adopted is to use plastic wraps for the large (700 pound) round bales that you see in the fields. With baled hay, you must keep the hay from getting moldy, a process that needs oxygen. The plastic wraps are relatively airtight and that means you can bale damp hay without it going moldy. Now, we go out in the morning, cut with one tractor and immediately bale the hay in its green and damp state with a second machine. We wrap each bale in airtight plastic, and move them at leisure with a spike attached to the tractor's front-end loader. With this process, we can make over 4 tons of hay in only one hour, and store it using the powered equipment.

In Perspective

A farmer in 1910 using manual tools of that time might be able to harvest a year's worth of food for a dairy cow in about a day; in 2010, a farmer using today's technology can produce a similar amount of better feed in less than an hour.

The reasons: fertilization and advances in seed technology; heavier tractors to control heavier loads on our hills; and more efficient equipment for harvesting and storing hay and grain.



Nadine and George Wilson are both children of local farm families and have carried on the agricultural dairy tradition on their farm on Blenheim Hill Road. They have around 200 head of registered dairy cattle.

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