

# Labor Day: For the Essential Workers

She remembers sitting up on the wagon and hearing the cobs bang, remembers horses going up the field pretty much on their own as Ma and Pa picked ears and flung 'em off the bangboard. Remembers, she says, how the sharp edges of a thousand corn leaves could cut up your arm but good.

She remembers bringing a load home from the field at night, in the dark. She was just a girl, but she remembers one winter when they finished picking corn on New Years Day! Can you believe it?

Remembers coming into the yard, tending the horses, unhitching them from the wagon, following them over to the barn, remembers how they'd roll around in barnyard dust, remembers hanging up halters just so, so that the next day, when, once again, you went back to work in the early morning darkness and it didn't take you half a day's work to untangle 'em.

All of that she remembers in a memoir she wrote of her life on a farm, a childhood cloaked sweat and dirt and manure that reads a bit nostalgically because she delivers all those memories with a homey gaiety. Handpicking corn was terribly hard work--that's what she wants her children to know once she goes. But it was noble, honorable. That's true too, and they ought to know.

She remembers that very first single-row corn picker, a blessing that freed the whole bunch of 'em from having to spend fall and half the winter trudging through wet and cold to get it all out. My goodness, how things moved faster with that miracle-worker. Finally, they could retire those stiff husking gloves in the barn with other tools mechanization made obsolete, a museum left left happily behind.

She remembers all of that as if those were “the good old days,” but she knows better than to say it. She's doing what most every old gent and missus ends up doing in the face of change they'd rather not make, telling those children that way back when, Grandpa's life--and Grandma's too--had lots more dignity than she has today, alone, over there in the Home.

She's bringing back what's no longer retrievable, an era no one hopes ever returns because you'd be out of your mind to pick forty acres of corn by hand. No fool would.

The worst, she says, was having to go back to that full wagon after chores, after milking, after taking care of the horses, after supper. It was nighttime, she says in this spiral bound book she wrote, but all that corn had to be shoveled off the wagon. Hard, hard work. Shoulders ached too, don't you know?

That's what she remembers, and that's what she remembers fondly, not because it was fun, not because it was a joy, but because finally, dead tired, you could lay yourself down, flop out on your bed, and fall to sleep in a flash because the job *got done*.

There's no other way to describe it, I guess, even though, she remembers, you start the whole back-breaking task again the next day, and it's not over until it's over. You're back at it before the sun rises.

All of that she told me. All of that is in the xeroxed, spiral-bound book she gave me, the book she wrote herself. She wanted her children to know what life was like way back when she was a child.

Covid-19 has taught us to honor Labor Day in a new way—or it should. A whole new assembly line of workers now loom as perfectly essential: meat-packers, grocery store clerks, mechanics, hospital dishwashers. It's never

been a problem to thank police and fire fighters, nurses and doctors and all kinds of first responders; but Covid has forced us to honor people who've never made more than minimum wage but suddenly have become irreplaceable—nurses aides in old folks homes. And now, teachers.

How we've worked—what made us sweat--changed immensely in the last century, but Covid has forced us to see an arsenal of ordinary people with whom, literally, we can't live without it.

Thank you. This year, this day, Labor Day, is all yours.