SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE

Des Keegan, M.Agr.Sc.

By the middle of June my father had become restless, rather like swallows sitting on telephone wires in early September, twittering and chattering to each other, knowing they should be doing something or going somewhere, not quite sure where. The Pierce mowing machine had been taken apart and put together again, all moving parts oiled, broken and worn out parts repaired or replaced. Blades sharpened.

Dick Lawrence, Brian Mulvey, Peter Gordon & John Bradshaw all dressed up for the Style & Appearance at Mohill Show August 1968

The meadows were ready. Time to cut. Carried on the wind the sound of a neighbour's mowing machine in action. It was a matter of pride if you were the first to mow, a sign that you were a good farmer, that your meadows grew faster and better than anybody else's. But we had a neighbour who was always quicker on the draw, who cut his meadows before anyone else. Sometimes, we suspected, even when the crop was light. Disappointment would be replaced by satisfaction when we would do a headcount on the number of haycocks on his meadow. The size of the cocks was noted because you could fool a careless eye if you made the haycocks small.

'What's the weather forecast'?, my father would ask. No talk allowed at the table while he listened to the forecast on the radio. But we didn't trust Radio Eireann, and used more sophisticated and accurate mechanisms to predict the weather. Old Moore's Almanac was consulted; it was usually accurate because it predicted a bit of everything, often in the same day. Cloud formations were examined closely. Willie McGuiness had pains, and the ass was seen standing with his rear end to the hedge. A sure sign of rain. God help the weather forecaster when he got it wrong, which happened fairly often. No satellites then to tell us that a ridge of low pressure was approaching from the Atlantic. And I can still see my father looking to the sky in the west, looking for some sign of an improvement, a field of grass rapidly losing quality and value as the rain came down and the sun refused to shine. For every aspect of farmwork was geared towards the winter; feed for stock, fuel for the fire, potatoes in a heap drylined with rushes and a salted pig in a tinfoil-lined tea-chest.

Growing up on a small farm in Leitrim in the sixties, life in general

and prosperity in particular were influenced by two variables over which the farmer had no control–the weather and the price of cattle & pigs. Farmers were almost self-sufficient - they grew their own potatoes and vegetables, they provided their own fuel, killed a pig annually, milked their own cows and made butter, and baked their own bread. However, because farms had not yet become mechanised, this self - sufficiency came at a price–a very high labour requirement. With four boys in the family my father had a ready and able, but not always enthusiastic, source of labour.

My father always mowed early in the morning, starting as the dawn lightened the sky. The early morning coolness was easier on man and beast. Every farmer had at least one horse, usually an Irish Draught, a powerful and durable animal that was easy to handle. And before the arrival of the first tractor, the Ferguson 20, neighbours shared animals for ploughing and mowing. For survival in the countryside depended on co-operation. No television then to distract us. Our 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away' was the meitheal, a sharing of labour, skills and animals.

He usually mowed until ten or eleven o'clock, when hunger would propel him home. And he needed someone to take out the back sward, for the sweetest grass always grew closest to the hedge. But along with the grass would be included briars and other non-grass vegetation, deadly when you had to pull the butts of cocks of hay later on. I still have thorns in my hands to prove it.

If he trusted the weather, he would keep mowing until most of the meadows were cut. And all other activity was deflected until all the hay was cocked, trimmed and roped. As young footballers with Mohill, we often had a game in the summer evenings. Only when the hay was secured would we be allowed go, and if rain threatened, there was no compromise.

My mother's appearance at dinner-time at the top of the hill overlooking the meadows was a welcome sight. Bottles of lukewarm tea and bacon–filled sandwiches. My father would rest for a while, while we played football, two strategically built cocks of hay acting as goal-posts.

When all the hay was finally reared, and gathered into the hayshed there was a comfortable feeling of achievement. All was well with the world. The cattle wouldn't go hungry.

For our lives revolved around the seasons, and the seasons dictated the work schedule. In the spring potatoes had to be planted. A rood of ground to be ploughed. Two horses straining in tandem, turning a tough Leitrim sod that resented such intrusion. If you weren't careful, you could look behind and find that the sod had returned to it's original location. Cowdung had to be spread between the sods, covered with scarce soil and the seed potatoes planted . I can still see my mother sitting in the shed cutting 'splits'–a way of extending the available seed. Each split had an eye, which later on would generate a stalk. Waste was fed to the pigs.

The cabbage had to be sown–Flat Dutch and Early York. A cartload of dung dropped in the garden, each plant given it's allocation, pressed down with a boot and covered with soil.

The cows calved in the spring, and sex was important. 'Was it a bull or a heifer'? No fancy continental cattle with fancy names then, but Whiteheads or Shorthorns or black Aberdeen Angus, tough, native and resilient breeds that could live on virtually nothing, and were often asked to. Each cow had her own name, depending on where or from whom she was bought–Maguire's or Mulligan's or Arva or Ballinamore. The loss of a calf at birth was deeply felt. Farms size was described not in acres but as a ten or an eight or a five cow place–the ability to carry this number of cows.

Later on when the weather improved, the turf had to be cut. Not everybody was allowed into the boghole, for cutting turf was an acquired skill which not everybody had the capacity to master. The less skilled were restricted to catching turf, which were built on a wheelbarrow and wheeled out to the low bank to be spread later on. Tough uncompromising work, greatly alleviated with the arrival of the tractor and transport box. The best turf were always at the bottom of the boghole. Unfortunately,

Frank Keegan (second left), often had Irel Coffee and currant buns with his brother Des in Cannings Pub, as a reward for minding the cattle. Frank is pictured with Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year, Shane G Flynn, Jim Fox & Leitrim County Manager, John Tiernan at the Leitrim Association Dance, London.

the deeper you went, the more likely it was that the boghole would suddenly flood, and you had to be nimble on your feet to escape. Yet, there is no record of anybody ever having being drowned cutting turf.

Catching turf for eight or ten hours a day, every day for a week, should be compulsory training for every aspiring young footballer, for the turf came off the slean at different angles, and at increasing speed as the water threatened to invade.

As the summer moved on, the turf had to be turned and turned and put into clamps. And the potatoes given a further dressing of soil and a sprinkling of Sulphate of Potash, the only artificial fertilizer they ever got. They had to be sprayed, the frequency depending on the weather. No man-made fungicides, but a mixture of bluestone and washing soda, mixed in a forty gallon barrel, a blue-green concoction that was sometimes effective, sometimes not.

As the summer drifted on into autumn, the hay was reared, and the turf were drying. Good weather, and farming was a pleasure, bad weather, and farmlife was a battle, a constant struggle to outflank the elements.

September and October brought reward for all the work, the hardship that had gone before. The hay in the hayshed or a rick, the turf in the turfshed, and ridges bloated with potatoes. Cattle to be sold, for bills had to paid and the rates were due. Fair days, held once a month on the Fairgreen where the mart now stands, had to be planned for like a military campaign. Our father appreciated the value of presentation long before the marketing gurus discovered the concept. Cattle, selected for sale, had to be assembled the night before, and had to undergo a complete hairdo before they walked the mile into town.

A lick of linseed oil there , a rub of a currycomb there. With cows he had a particular strategy which was probably illegal. He would make little pellets of dough, which he would insert up into the cow's teats two days before the fair to prevent the milk running. At the fair the cow had to be milked to prove her dairy pedigree. Of course, not having been milked for two days, she would surpass herself, and a second bucket was often called for.

Selling and buying at the fair was almost a ritual. A price was asked, and a derisory offer made and refused. An exhortation by those present to split the difference. Much spitting on and clapping of hands. Very often the difference between asking price and the bid was consumed in the Widow Reynold's Public House. And when the ritual had been completed and the deal done, the event was registered by marking the animal with a raddle, or cowdung daubed on with a stick. And then, back to the Widow Reynold's to celebrate the transaction, which had to be blessed with a luckpenny.

All the while, we cowboys, my brothers and I, stood on the fairgreen, guarding our stock, preventing them fighting with their neighbours, frozen with the cold, looking forward to our reward for contributing to this great act of commerce – a pint glass of Irel coffee and a current bun in Canning's Public House. Mrs Nicholl stood at one gate of the Fairgreen, her husband Harry at the other, collecting Value Added Tax of one shilling for every animal sold. Occasionally a stranger would wander into town, and not familiar with the implications of trying to hide a sale, would be forcibly reminded of his tax obligations by Mrs Nicholl, often with an ash plant.

'How did ye do'? – the first question

my mother would ask when we came home in the evening. Disappointment when the price was bad, or no sale took place. A good price, and little extras could be catered for. No EU to guarantee prices. Often, when the trade was poor, my father would refuse to accept the price offered, only to sell for less at the next fair.

Our father seldom came home with the rest of us. The monthly fair was his day out, and he made the most of it. And the next morning he would be up at the crack of dawn, whistling and pretending that he hadn't a hangover.

As autumn darkened into winter, cattle had to be housed and fed, and the byre kept clean. Younger stock were outwintered , and fed outside, hay thrown up on a bush or a convenient whin to prevent the cattle trampling it into the ground. The hay was cut with a hayknife, piled on to a rope and carried on your back from the rick out to the field. Staggering through ankle grabbing muck, hungry cattle grabbing what they could as you went. Very often in total darkness, the fairies and a dog for company.

A tough life, even if we didn't know it at the time. For hardship, like wealth and like poverty, is relative. Hard physical work, to which everybody was expected to contribute. School was but an interlude in the yearly schedule of spring ,summer, autumn and winter work. But happy times, which left us physically strong and naturally fit. What young people now have to spend many hours in fitness centres acquiring, we got for free. Our gym was the hayfield, the turfbank, the potato field. While modern sportsmen pump iron, we pumped hay, turf, and cowdung. We ate organic food, free from fungicides, pesticides and insecticides. Our food was grown almost exclusively from the nutrients that came from the rear end of a cow, sow or bullock.

And we have memories, that 'flash upon that inward eye'. The skylark, a mysterious and invisible bird that regaled us from on high. The cuckoo, who reminded us in April that he had come for his annual holidays.

But of all the sounds associated with summer in Ireland in those childhood days, it is the sound of the corncrake that most demands to be remembered. And I can still see a summer mist hovering over a pink tinted meadow in June at six o'clock in the morning, and hear the corncrake calling 'ate mate', 'ate mate'.

STALWART LEITRIM BUSINESSMEN

Alan Richardson, Paul Corrigan, Mervyn Richardson, John Richardson & Stanley Richardson.