

Farm Work and Life Able
As told by Richard Maus
Written by
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My parents had one older child and farmed 105 acres of Watkins, Minnesota land at the time of my birth in 1939. At four months of age, I developed a fever that left my right lower leg paralyzed from Polio. In the course of the next fifteen years, I would have to endure sixteen trips to surgery, but in my youth, I learned to walk with a metal brace. The chores that my parents assigned gave me the confidence that I was as capable as any boy; my leg may be disabled, but I am farm work and life able.

In the early spring, mother asked me to come out and help plant the family garden. Dad tilled about a third of an acre that he had plowed and fertilized the fall before. Mother reserved one section of the garden for popcorn marking off the space by dragging a hoe to define the rows, carefully laying out the garden to place the popcorn plants as far away from the sweet corn as possible to prevent cross fertilization. I would then use a shovel to make holes in the dirt about a foot or so apart down the length of each row, drop three popcorn seeds into each hole, and step on it to cover the seeds.

Wearing the brace in the field did not slow me down much. If I got a pebble in my shoe, I would sit down on a mound of dirt, loosen the leather strap below my knee, and untie and remove my shoe to shake out the stone. A metal bar ran down the right side of my leg and connected to a dowel pin that ran through the built up sole just in front of the heel, and a metal plate in the sole prevented my foot from bending. I didn't think much of my brace except when it broke and mother would send the brace off to Gillette Hospital for repairs. During that time, I would be assigned other chores like feeding salt to the cows, washing eggs, or helping do the dishes. My sister would then have to work in the barn instead of helping mother in the kitchen; she didn't like that a bit. With my brace on though, I could get around as well as anyone. I might not be able to compete on the playground at school, but I found a place at home to test and stretch my legs. I loved to run on a sandy road near an old tobacco shed. When I took lunch out to dad in the

field and neared the shed, I ran as fast as I could, as fast as anyone could for a hundred yards or so. I could run, I could walk, I could lift, and I could climb. I could do it all.

A couple of weeks after planting, the popcorn would start coming up and the weeding began that lasted throughout the spring and summer and by October, the cornstalks began to turn brown. If it had been a dry fall it might start turning in September, or if it was warm and rainy it might not turn until late in October. Mom told me when to start picking. I pulled along a little Red Flyer wagon that had two baskets in it for corn, parked it on the edge of the garden, and walked along the popcorn rows carrying a smaller basket with my left arm. When that was full, I emptied it into the Red Flyer. We used that old wagon a lot on the farm.

You don't have to use a knife to cut the cob from the stalks. If the crop was dry enough by picking time, you could grab the cob, twist it and snap it down in one clean motion to break it off the stalk. Someone who didn't know how to grab the cob would look like they were in a fighting match with the stalk of corn to get it off; it looked almost funny. If you snapped it correctly though, it popped right off. Next, you take the husks off right there in the field and let them drop on the ground to make a good mulch for next year, and put the cob in the basket.

Once loaded with corn, I pulled the Red Flyer up to the wood shed near the house. We filled half of the 20 x 20 shed with wood to be burned in the furnace in winter, used additional space for storage, and had a little work bench for the repair of shoes including different size metal forms to hold the shoe, and a special hammer. We had an outhouse in the shed that we would use mostly in the summer time because if you went in the house with dirty shoes mother would get after you.

We laid three old doors up in the rafters and spread out all of the corn on top of them to dry. I climbed up on a stool or a bench—even with the brace on I could get up there easy enough and arranged the entire crop, a couple layers thick most years, for about a month to dry. The entire crop would yield about a hundred pounds of popping corn. The shed is not heated; we just air dried the corn. There could get a heavy frost outside, but inside the shed it would be 10 degrees warmer, so the popcorn wouldn't be frozen.

We never had to inspect the cobs or rotate them; the only reason we put them up in the rafters was to keep them away from the rabbits or other animals. We knew the corn had dried enough when we were able to shell the cob by hand; you could just twist your hands on the cob to get the kernels to start coming off, but it's rough on the skin. The easiest way is to rub two cobs against each other. If one cob looks like it was not as dry or is holding its kernels tighter you would use that as the master cob. You might shell three or four or a dozen cobs while using the same master. Maybe eventually it would lose its kernels then you grab another one. While you're rubbing, the kernels fall off and drop into a metal wash tub placed between your legs; the process didn't damage the kernels at all. Of course, you couldn't do this on a washing day because mom would be using the tubs.

In the process, the chaff fell into the bucket and would have to be separated from the kernels. You do that by taking the tub of corn and another empty tub outside on a windy day, scoop out some kernels, hold them up high in the wind, and pour them out slowly, you have to pour slowly. The wind would then blow the chaff away and you end up with a tub of clean popcorn kernels. We would then scoop the kernels out of the tub and put them in a large burlap sack that dad carried up into the attic in the house where it was cool and dry. If we wanted to have popcorn at night, someone would go up to fill a glass, gallon sized jar and add about a quarter of a cup of water to the jar, just pour it right in, cap it off, turn it over a little bit, and let it set for two days. The moisture that the kernels absorb is what causes the kernel to pop. When the jar started to get low, we emptied what kernels remained into a smaller jar for storage, and we brought the gallon jar up to the attic to begin another batch.

During the week, we typically popped corn in the evening about two hours after dinner when we came in from doing chores, Sunday we'd do our popping in the afternoon. We would put a tablespoon of lard or cooking oil in a deep, high sided frying pan with a lid, and wait for it to start to smoke a little bit, then add a half cup of popcorn. Early on, mom taught us how to measure, but later on we just sort of eye-balled it. We kind of sloshed it around a little bit to coat each kernel, and waited for the magic to happen. We kept shaking the pan to keep the kernels down, of course, and when the popping slowed to almost a halt, we would empty the pan into a

bowl, we would add the salt and butter, and the family sat around for an hour or two talking and listening to radio programs like Fibber McGee and Molly or the Lone Ranger before going to bed.

Popping corn and spending time together is how we ended the day three or four times a week during the winter. From planting to popping, I learned how my work made a difference in my family's life and in my sense of accomplishment and self worth.

Richard went on to earn a Baccalaureate Degree in mathematics and physics and a Master's Degree in mathematics. He Taught physics, mathematics, and computers for 32 years in the Pine Island and Robbinsdale Area Schools in Minnesota.