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Craig Nelson and his sister Joyce (now Joyce Dohmen) stand in a newly shocked field of oats northeast of Newman Grove, Neb., sometime in 1948 or 1949. Growing up in the years before combines simplified the oat harvesting process, Craig said that farmers relied on their neighbors and community to help get the job done; having fun was just an added bonus. (Photo courtesy Craig Nelson)

## The bygone era of community farming

By Katy Moore

Midwest Messenger Field Editor

Back in the days before combines, it was just kids, pitchforks, and water jugs.

A lifelong resident of Newman Grove, Neb., Craig Nelson still remembers the days of oat harvesting, when most of the process was done without machinery. It was itchy work and long, tiresome hours, but it also meant community.

“You had all these people come to your place,” Craig said, reminiscing. “Big dinners. It was summertime, so other kids came, too. It was kind of a neighborhood get-together, except you were working.

“To get together like that, that was a big deal.”

Though he was still a young tyke when he began helping his family in the fields, the semi-retired farmer said everyone had a job when it came time to harvesting oats — no age requirements or restrictions. A small field of oats could take days, between cutting the wheat, and then tying the stalks into large sheaves to be formed into shocks, and finally threshing when the shocks had dried. No offer of aid was ever turned down.

Shocking is said to have been the most labor intensive part of the process, and the most important. Shockers had to ensure their teepee-like bundles made good contact with the ground — to prevent toppling in the wind — and that the grain heads were all facing upward and creating an effective rain barrier.

“I don’t remember much about shocking. I probably wasn’t much

help, the water jug was always on the other side of the field,” Craig teased.

Once tractors entered the scene, though, he said one of the first jobs for all farm kids — aside from hauling water jugs to thirsty workers in the field — was loading bundles on oat threshing day.

“There was usually one threshing machine in the neighborhood,” he added. “One guy had it, and they would go around in crews and thresh at everyone’s farms.

“Threshing crews were a lot of fun. It was a lot of work for the women, especially, making all of the meals. But when you’re a kid, it’s like the carnival.”

Over the years, oats were steadily replaced by corn and soybeans in Nebraska fields, a fact that Craig lamented. And with the steady increase of machinery and technology use in agriculture, an entire community gathering to help with the fall harvest has become nearly obsolete.

It’s an entirely different world of farm life now, and not much like the life he and his sister Joyce knew as they stood in a field of hand-harvested oats and smiled, waiting for their photograph to be taken.

Fondly, Craig added, “It was a good time, growing up on the farm at that time.”

*To submit a historic photograph to be featured on the front cover of the Midwest Messenger, send a large resolution copy of the photo and your contact information — including phone number — to Midwest Messenger, Box 239, Tekamah, NE 68061. Digital submissions can be sent to [jodi.bank@lee.net](mailto:jodi.bank@lee.net).*

## EVENTS CALENDAR

### MARCH

24 Kansas Junior Beef Producer day, Weber Hall, Kansas State University, 785-532-1264

24 K-State Sheep Production Workshop, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., United Methodist Church, Clay Center, Kan., [www.asi.k-state.edu](http://www.asi.k-state.edu)

### APRIL

6 Midwest Meat Processing Workshop,

Manhattan, Kan., 785-532-1247

10 Livestock Fair Management Clinic, 8:45 a.m.-3 p.m., Gray County Fairgrounds, Cimarron, Kan., [www.youthlivestock.ksu.edu](http://www.youthlivestock.ksu.edu)

10-12 Livestock Traceability: Opportunities for Animal Agriculture, Renaissance Denver Stapleton Hotel, Denver

12 Livestock Fair Management Clinic, 8:45 a.m.-3 p.m., Jackson County Fairgrounds, Holton, Kan., [www.youthlivestock.ksu.edu](http://www.youthlivestock.ksu.edu)

12-13 Ethanol 2018: Emerging Issues Forum, La Vista Conference Center, Omaha, 402-471-2941

18-19 Fuller Field School, 8:15 a.m., Sacred Heart Parish Hall, Emporia, Kan., 620-344-3363

19-21 Oklahoma City Farm Show, 800-873-1411

20 Tux 'n' Boots Gala, 6 p.m., Heartland Therapeutic Riding annual fundraiser, Stilwell, Kan., 913-897-3939

25 4-H Wildlife Habitat Education Program Contest, Claythorne Lodge, Columbus, Kan., 785-532-5734

28 World Veterinary Day

### MAY

30-June 1 World Meat Congress, Sheraton Dallas Hotel, Dallas, [www.2018wmc.com](http://www.2018wmc.com)

### JUNE

6-8 World Pork Expo, Iowa State Fairgrounds, Des Moines, Iowa

### AUGUST

9-19 Iowa State Fair, Des Moines, Iowa  
16-17 Risk and Profit Conference, K-State Alumni Center, Manhattan, Kan., 785-532-1504