

The Tractor and the Field

By Spencer Lehman

Editor's note: Spencer wrote this remembered event paper for his RBC composition class.

I have always enjoyed being a farm boy. The filthy chores of feeding calves, the smell of freshly cut green hay in the middle of spring, the moonlit walks through the dewy pasture while bringing in the cows for their morning milking, and running barefoot through the meadow all added to the fun. The freedom of the farm fields allowed me to roam and learn.

Being a farm kid is half genetic. My father farmed, and his father farmed, and his father before that. It is in my genes. I would like to say that farming is all genetic, but it's not.

Knowledge of farming is gained in part by being involved. Farming skills have to be taught. My grandfather farmed with horses, then went to tractors. He was taught by his father. My dad farmed with tractors, and my grandfather taught him. Back in 1948, my great-grandfather purchased his first two tractors, the Farmall H and the Farmall Cub,

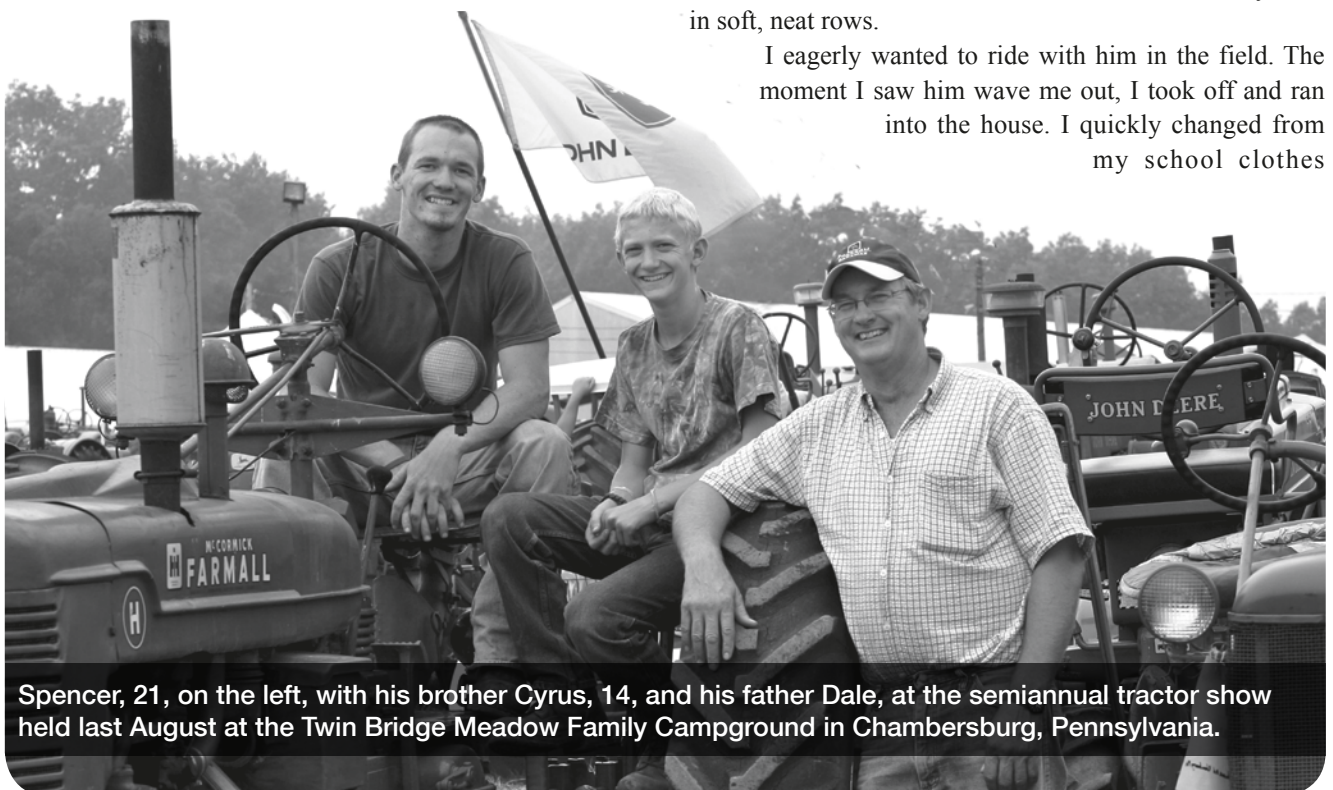
and we still have them and use them on the farm to this day. The "H" is my favorite.

The tractor is old. The color of rust dominates its entire frame, except for the gas tank. My grandfather attempted to restore it to the original red color a few years back, but weather has cracked the paint, and it shows its age even more. The rubber wheels were originally steel; in fact, the left wheel is smaller than the one on the right, which makes straight driving tricky. The narrow front end is stiff in its steering and usually jostles the direction of the tractor down the length of the field. The old gasoline engine spits and sputters with all its might while pulling in the hay wagons.

There came the day that I was to be taught to drive the thing. I was walking down the lane after school, as was my normal activity every day at 3:15. My fourth-grade school assignments couldn't have mattered less as I lumbered down our gravel drive, enjoying the warm spring breeze. As I neared the turn in the lane I could hear the rumble of the old tractor coming up over the hill. Dad was driving. The closer I got, the more I could hear the swishing clatter of the 1952 New Holland rake as it turned the fresh-cut hay over in soft, neat rows.

I eagerly wanted to ride with him in the field. The moment I saw him wave me out, I took off and ran into the house. I quickly changed from my school clothes

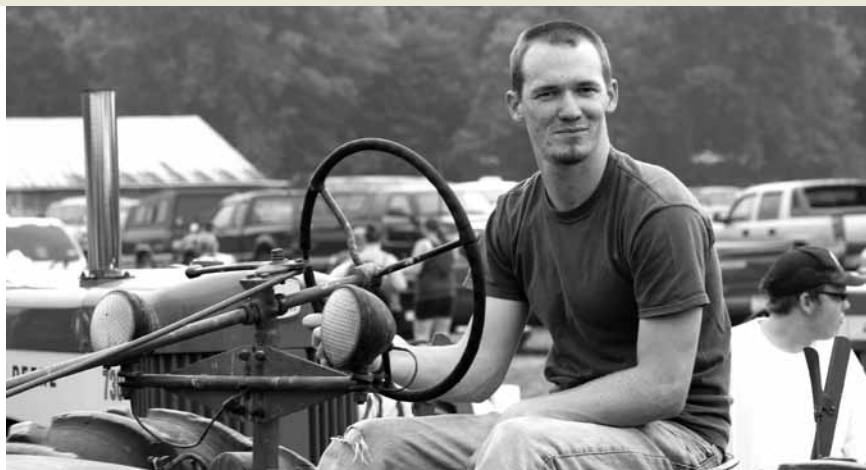
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Spencer, 21, on the left, with his brother Cyrus, 14, and his father Dale, at the semiannual tractor show held last August at the Twin Bridge Meadow Family Campground in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.



Spencer's grandfather Archie Lehman riding the Farmall H.



Spencer on the "H."

into my chore clothes. I ran out to the field, my excitement growing. Dad swung the tractor around the corner, stopped, and waited.

"Come on up here, Spencer-encer," he said with a smile. That's what he called me sometimes. His shirt was soiled and dirty from a long day of working alone.

This tractor has no steps, so I climbed onto the hitch and up into the seat. Dad slid out and stood on the hitch. Placing his left hand on the seat behind me, with his other hand firmly gripping the steering wheel, he got me situated to drive.

"All right, your job is to push the clutch and the brake," he hollered over the sputtering of the smoke stack. I did.

"I'll run the gears, and you steer." I nodded my head in comprehension.

He gripped the gear stick that stuck up from the metal frame beneath my feet and shoved it into second gear. In one swift motion his hand went right to the throttle, and the engine snorted with energy.

"Now ease out on the left pedal, and match it with your right foot on that pedal too." I tried my best, knees shaking nervously.

Slowly the old machine rolled forward. Immediately Dad grabbed the wheel beside my young hands and spun the tractor towards the row. The clatter of the rake behind us combined with the sputtering of the "H," and we were in motion.

Dad instructed me as if he had been rehearsing this lesson in his mind all day. "Now, keep the front wheels of the tractor along the row, and the rake will follow right behind and flip the

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hay entirely." I gripped the old, thin, metal wheel with both my hands as the tractor rolled along the cut grass; I wanted to impress Dad with my control of the machine.

As we neared the end of the row I noticed Dad's hand wasn't on the wheel beside mine.

"All right, now you get to do the turn. Hammer your left brake and swing 'er around to the left and go

back along the other side of the row!" he yelled.

The tractor did not slow down, and I did as I was told. The brake locked, the engine lugged under the pressure, the rake stopped chattering for a second, and we whipped to the left. The left wheel released its hold, smoke puffed from the top of the stack as more power engaged the motion, and I turned the steering wheel with both my hands to correct the direction back to the row. The rake began its motion again to the unturned hay – a successful turn.

I looked behind me at Dad for approval. He did not look super surprised, but had a hint of pride in his grin. The knowledge of the generations before me was being handed down, it seemed. It made me wonder what it was like when my dad had his turn learning how to drive the tractor, and how many other farmers through the years worked in this field. I felt proud to officially join the list of farmers.

We made turn after turn through the maze of hay rows until the hay was entirely flipped. My arms were sore from the tight grip I kept on the wheel, and my eyes were getting dry from the dust, but we were done. Dad and I unhitched the rake and I climbed down from the seat. He mounted back up to his perch on the tractor and took off to park it in the shed. As he sputtered away, I stood and watched. He disappeared behind the barn but I could still hear the old engine idle down and sleep. I strolled home. As I neared the walkway to the house, Dad came up behind me.

"Now someday I can let you rake the hay all by yourself." This time the pride was in his voice. The day was over and my happiness was abounding. As the sun set we walked side by side to the house at the close of my first day of farming. But homework still needed to be done; I wasn't a full farmer yet.

>>> *Spencer is from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania and attends Chambersburg Mennonite Church. He served as the men's Resident Assistant this year and will graduate from RBC this May with an associate degree in biblical studies. Spencer hopes to be active in youth ministry and worship leading in the church; he also hopes farming is in his future.*