

## The Last Harvest

By Phil DeBoef (written in 1999)

I'm not exactly sure when it all started - this crazy love affair I have with autumn. But I think it may have had something to do with an old wooden wagon in a ripened Iowa cornfield. It was really a bit of a ritual - a kind of coming to age for us guys. You see, in our house, fourteen was the magic age. That was the age when Dad would let us carry a gun on the annual pheasant hunt. It was the time when we were allowed to skip school on the last Wednesday in September for the Farm Progress Show. But the real sign of manhood at our place was when we got to officially participate in that hallowed Dutch tradition - coffee time. Mom was able to hold us off the substance for fourteen years, but when that magic birthday came, we truly became "one of the guys".

There was something, though, that Mom didn't know. On those crisp October days and those downright frigid November mornings when Dad would keep us home from school to help with the harvest he'd pack an extra cup for us, even though we were only twelve or thirteen. And about 9:30 in the morning, we'd climb into an empty wagon, soon to be filled to the brim with ears of corn, wrap our cold hands around a hot mug of coffee and reflect on God's bounty. The wind could be howling around us, whipping flurries of snow above our heads, but nestled up against those wooden sideboards, we were safe, we were warm, and we were blessed. And I think that in an empty barge box, the wonder of harvest was born forever in an Iowa farm kid.

A quarter century has come and gone since those days, and the wonder of harvest has never waned. In my late teens I went off to college and even worked in a factory a time or two. But about September, something would kick in. The crispness of the air would trigger an urgency. It's time. Time to harvest. Time to put every other job on hold and focus on the fields of grain.

For twenty years now, I have come to know firsthand why Dad became so single minded in the fall. Twenty years of planting the seed, twenty years of inspecting the small seedlings, twenty seasons of cultivating, spraying, scouting and always hoping. Hoping for a harvest. Some years too wet; some years bone dry; some seasons near perfect, only to find that the abundant crop has little value - but always hoping. Some years seeing a picture-perfect crop flooded by water; consumed by insects, or driven to the ground by wind or hail, but always hoping. And whether it's the sound of plump ears of corn hitting the back of the wagon, the mournful screech of an elevator conveying grain into the crib long after most of the world is asleep, or the howl of a gigantic grain dryer, the magic of harvest never leaves the mind of the most hopeful of all God's creatures - the farmer.

This year started out like most of my other twenty years in the business. But in the whole process of the planning of winter, the planting of spring, and the ridiculous work-load of summer, something odd began stirring in us. The rich Iowa fields with their lush crops began to fade out of view as another harvest field ripened before me. This field has no golden grain waving in the breeze; but aimless souls that sway to and fro in search of meaning. No ears of corn in danger of falling to the ground; but troubled hearts that will soon stop beating. This field waits not for the harvester's sickle, but for the grim reaper as

he stalks their homes in the night. While kernels of grain are gathered into cribs and bins, these whitened fields await the unquenchable fire of God's judgment. And while the physical harvest offers always the hope of another year, another season, another chance; this spiritual harvest that falls to the ground will be eternally and forever in the blackest of darkness where there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

Though I had been seeking God for direction for months, the intense struggle culminated just yesterday. As I was raking hay, feeling a tinge of autumn air, proudly surveying an abundant approaching harvest, tears began stinging my cheeks. I suddenly came to grips with what I had known in my spirit for months. This would be my last harvest. It seemed rather strange as I baled the last bale of the last cutting of hay. My eyes moistened when I thought about guiding the combine down those last six rows of corn. I'm not sure how I'll handle seeing my slick, clean equipment going home to someone else's machine shed. This is new territory to be sure. I've argued with God about the timing of all this. Why sell when the farm economy is in the pits? That's the time to be buying-not selling! What about the dreams of my boys joining me in the family farm?

Then a beautiful vision came to my spirit. I saw a young farm kid in that old wooden wagon; and the boy was me. Only now in the other corner was the Heavenly Father communing with the small boy. Those young eyes were filled again with wonder as the Lord of the Harvest birthed in him the passion for another field, another harvest, another kingdom.