*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Memories of winter morning milking**

“Time to get up.”

It was 5 a.m. and Dad issued notice from the foot of the stairs. Usually, I was already awake, having heard the alarm clock and listening to Dad walk down the steps and start his early-morning preparations.

It was winter on the farm. Outside it was well below zero and I was loath to leave my warm bed. I could easily turn over and go back to sleep. But I learned the hard way that you didn’t want to be told twice.

“I’m up,” I replied, turning on the bedroom light for affirmation. I caught a whiff of smoke as Dad stirred the coals in the woodstove before adding some pieces from the wood box, which would need to be refilled later in the day.

I came downstairs in my pajamas and shivered slightly as I pulled my barn clothes from the closet in the utility room. Mom was always adamant that even though we worked in a barn we didn’t have to live in a house that smelled like one.

I slipped on my boots, zipped up my coat and put on a pair of heavy gloves before stepping out the back door.

The frigid air hit my face and made me gasp. My boots squeaked against the snow as I made the short walk to the barn to join Dad. Sometimes it was my brother Kevin and me. On school mornings chores were handled by Dad and his cousin Bill.

Inside the stanchion barn were 65 Holsteins. The cold air was filled with vapor from their breathing. The only source of warmth in the barn was the body heat from the cows. Sometimes it wasn’t enough. On extremely cold mornings water pipes would break, sending streams of water into the gutters.

Dad came from the milkhouse pulling a cart that held two buckets of hot water with a disinfectant and a large sponge for cleaning udders. I grabbed the surcingles — large leather straps that went over the top of the cows to hold the milker machine buckets.

The morning silence was interrupted when I threw the switch on the vacuum pump that operated the milking machines and the Step-Saver, a stainless steel cart wrapped in hose that was wheeled down the center of the barn aisle.

A foot pedal opened the lid and the milk was dumped into the cart, sucked through the hose and fed into the bulk tank through a glass receiver jar in the milkhouse. The hose was hung from the ceiling by hooks.

We had four milking machines. The barn door was shut and we started milking. If there were three of us milking, one would wash and prep the cows, moving the surcingles down the aisle. Each milker would take a side with two machines.

We milked the cows with our bare hands that were constantly wet and numb from the cold. I tried to keep them warm by pressing them between the top of the cow’s udder and her haunch.

Sometimes there was idle chatter about which chores needed to be done that day. To pass the time we sometimes played our own version of 20 questions. Sometimes we listened to the clock radio hung by two pieces of twine that was halfway down the barn.

But usually, we milked in silence, slowly moving down the barn from cow to cow, skipping the cows who were out of lactation. It was important but tedious work. You became familiar with each cow, how much they’d give, which took longer to milk and which tended to be a little jumpy and likely to kick at you or the milking machine.

Two hours later, we’d reach the last 15 cows who were in one row of stanchions on the far side of the L-shaped barn. As we’d finish, one person would fill a cart with ground corn and feed each cow individually. The other would complete the milking, carry and wheel the milking equipment back to the milkhouse.

It was time for breakfast, so while the cows ate we’d go inside the house around 7:30 a.m to warm up and fuel up. The day had just started. Chores ahead of us included feeding calves, throwing down hay from the mow, scraping pens, cleaning gutters, spreading manure and hauling wood, with a short break for lunch. Then it was another repeat performance of the milking at the end of the day.

The barn was a busy place, but like many barns now, today it’s dark and silent, the last cow milked there nearly 20 years ago. I sometimes glance at it during these winter mornings and think back to those busy days.

I hated the hard work then, not realizing until I was older how much I learned. Responsibility, ingenuity and character became ingrained, building a straight line to later career successes.

A boy became a man.

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