*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Farm memories last a lifetime**

Many of my stories are remembrances of growing up on a farm and lessons learned that have carried through to this day. Those memories resonate with readers who share similar experiences of life on the farm, including Bob Zeman of La Crosse.

Zeman was born in 1942; he grew up on a farm in rural Jackson County. It was in the town of Irving in the area known as Shake Hollow. The farm was homesteaded by his grandfather John Zeman, who died in 1941.

“Your column is an enjoyable read for me,” Zeman wrote. “I look back and again realize how very much I enjoyed the country life. As the only boy and younger by 5 to 9 years to older sisters, other than work I spent many hours studying nature on walks in the fields and wood, and the farm creatures — cows, horses, pigs, chickens, ducks, cats and dogs.”

Zeman said the farms in the neighborhood were multi-generational and there was a sense of community.

“Neighbors helped each other out when help may be needed,” he said. “Groups of men formed crews to fill silos, etc.”

Being self-sustaining was ingrained with rural life.

“Very little was purchased,” he said. “It was a way of sustaining life for each family. One grew, harvested, canned, butchered and stored mostly what you ate. The animals were fed from the harvest of the fields. Homes were heated and cookstoves heated by wood harvested from the woods.”

His mother and grandmother had a large vegetable garden — a season of work planting, weeding and harvesting. Spoiled hay was used for mulch.

Raising chickens started when 300 leghorn day-old chicks would arrive via the mailman the first week of April. The brooder house was sanitized, ground corn cobs were spread on the floor and a fuel-oil-fired brooder stove kept the coop warm. The chicks would quickly grow; three months later the roosters would be ready for butchering.

“For the Fourth of July, along with new potatoes and peas, we’d have the first ‘mmm-good’ fried-chicken meal of the season,” Zeman said.

The neighbors were connected by a phone that hung on the wall powered by two batteries and a crank.

“We were on a seven-party line,” he said. “Our ring was 48-F-12 – one long and two short rings. If one cranked out seven even rings, then all parties were to listen or answer — for maybe an invitation or even an emergency. One would call Central to ask many different things … even what the current time was.”

Like many growing up on a farm, Zeman said he learned many skills by watching and then doing — like learning to weld and maintain and repair tractors and machinery. Other skills were carpentry, electrical work, plumbing and painting.

Zeman served as town clerk for six years; he began to design and remodel homes. He moved to La Crosse more than 30 years ago but he’s still a farmer at heart.

“I miss the country life and the serene time with nature,” he said.

Soon it will be spring, an amazing time on the farm when nature comes to life. Zeman misses walks in the woods, hills and along the creek. And he wonders about what today’s youth tethered to their electronic devices are missing.

“Don’t know how society can really continue with all the electronics that now seem to rule one’s life,” he said. “Maybe it’s just me, but there’s got to be a better medium to attain and not lose one’s identity.”

No, Bob, it’s not just you. I totally agree. Unplugging and taking in nature is food for the soul and not something you can get from an app.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*