

I have had for many years a print of a painting done by an Iowa artist named Charles Freitag. I can relate to Freitag's paintings as he was born and raised on a small farm in Iowa. Inspired by Norman Rockwell, Freitag said that growing up on a small farm in the heartland of rural America gave him a deep appreciation of the rural life. His fond childhood memories of life on the family farm are conveyed in his paintings. Just below this paragraph you see in the picture a glimpse of what the print I have looks like. Freitag named it Oliver Twist. The 660 Oliver tractor narrow front is what I grew up with and it's depicted in this painting. It's one of the two up by the barn. We did not have an Oliver 77 although we had a wide front Super 88. The use of bale forks to get the hay and straw into the barn through the large barn door is one of my early recollections of baling hay. Our barn on the Kleven farm would hold, when the bales were neatly stacked and filled to the rafters and cupolas, about 3800 bales.



I got my first experience with baling hay in the haymow when I had just graduated 2nd grade. The year was 1961. The use of bale forks, like what is depicted in the Freitag painting, was actually quite scientific, what with all the ropes and pulleys and angles. If you grew up and saw or used this kind of system, you know what I'm talking about. First the wagon load of hay had to be stacked just right. For us I believe it was two rows 8 bales long and four bales high for a total of 64 bales per wagon load. The forks would be put in each corner of four bales. The forks would reach to the second row of bales underneath so 8 bales at a time would go up to the big barn door. To get the hay on the forks to go up, we put a pulley on the front of the old 56 Ford truck and then would pull on the rope with the International Super M tractor.

Once there, the system would glide down the rail that stretched from one end of the barn to the other. I don't know how many feet of rope were used in this system but it was a lot. When the forkful of hay got over the portion of the haymow where we wanted to drop them, I was supposed to yell down to pull. My brother Harvey, who was on the wagon down below would then pull the rope and release the bales. They would tumble down. Now normally we would have older boys helping us stack these in the barn but I guess everyone was gone this particular day. Now being a 2nd grader at the time, most of these bales outweighed me so I would try to move them but I'd only get two or three bales moved and here came 8 more bales. I would quick get out of the way and yell for Harv to drop them. Pretty soon I was like 50 bales behind in stacking. Needless to say, I never did catch up. I think Harv and my dad would come up at some point later and try to sort through the mess the best they could.

The picture on the right is dated June, 1959. This helped me recall that we used bale forks to get hay and straw to the north end and middle of the barn. This is an old Kelly-Ryan grain elevator that we used on the south end of the barn. I don't remember what year we ended the use of the forks and used the elevator exclusively. This Kelly-Ryan grain elevator was a heavy steel elevator used for moving grain. You'll see them occasionally now sitting under trees in a grove on a farm. When used for hay, the bales had to be put in just right at an angle or they would simply fall out. It was not a good system. When we had this elevator set up on the south end of the barn, it was where the sheep hung out. Well as you can see, one of them decided he was half mountain goat and did some climbing. He couldn't climb down, only up. My dad had to go get him and slide down the elevator with sheep in tow.



Finally we got a real bale elevator. It was red in color. It could have been a Cashman's but I'm not sure what the brand was. It worked great. The bales would hardly ever fall out once you got them in there.

We then added a 24 foot extension that hung from the old rail used by the bale fork system. This would allow us to get the bales to the middle of the barn. I thought this was the greatest invention for handling hay.

But then along came the round baler. Delmer Paulson was one of the first in the area to get a Vermeer round baler. Delmer did some round baling for us and then we finally got one of the big yellow balers



ourselves. They made vast improvements on them over the years. That's where I ended my hay baling career but they kept improving systems and along came the big square balers. I'm trying to imagine lifting one of those big square bales with bale forks. It probably could be done but when you drop one of them 30 feet to the haymow floor, it would go right through the floor.

When I left the farm to be a farm broadcaster, people from time to time would ask me what I missed most about the farm. Baling hay is always one of my responses. Yes it was a hot dirty job at times. That chaff would stick to the sweat along with getting in the eyes, especially when throwing a bale 5 high against the wind. Colleen Sathrum Hayne told me that baling hay with her dad Howard is one of the dearest memories of her life. She would be the tractor driver while Howard would be loading the wagon. Having those lunches in the field under the hay rack to get out of the sun made for special memories. I remember my mom would come out to the field with sandwiches and cookies and some cold water or lemonade. They are special memories that I wouldn't trade for anything.

I still have those bale forks. They moved with me from the farm to Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota, back to Nebraska and now in Minnesota again. They're heavy and awkward to handle but it's a reminder of a past that I miss quite often.

NOTE To see more of Charles Freitag's art depicting farm life with all colors of tractors, go to <https://freitagart.com/>

