A Story about a Boy I knew from Rogers and his Father’s Hammer Mill

1/25/2010 WC 1232

In the fall of 1971 I decided I needed a hammer mill. I grew about 60 acres of corn at the time and fed it to my cattle and hogs. You can feed corn on the cob to these animals but it is easier and more efficient if the corn is ground into a course meal before feeding. A hammer mill can do that.

A hammer mill is a medium size machine that hitches behind a tractor and is powered by the tractor. Corn or any other suitable feed material is shoveled onto a short conveyer; the conveyor moves the material into the hammer chamber where it meets rapidly whirling steel hammers, which smash it through a steel screen. The hammers spin so fast that they drive air through the machine which carries the ground material up and into a conical metal tub from which it falls into a metal tube of about six inch diameter and several feet in length.

To the casual observer, large material is shoveled into one side and in seconds ground material comes falling down the tube on the opposite side.

In those days there were still many small farms and the local weekly newspapers all carried a page or two of good “farm classified ads”. There was an advertisement “Hammer Mill for Sale” in the paper with a phone number from the Rogers exchange. It is neither here nor there but in those days you could tell what town a number was from by simply knowing the three-digit exchange number.

I called the number, spoke briefly to the seller and decided to drive down to Rogers for a look.

The farm was on the short road west of Rogers where my Mom was raised so I knew it a little. The family name of the farmer was a common name in those parts.

The owner and I went to his machine shed to see the hammer mill. It had not been used for some years but it had been shedded and was in good condition. The farmer was a nice old fellow, well old to me anyway. He was probably only in his fifties but I was in my twenties. He was lean from work and had hard farmer hands. He was lonely or at least he wanted to talk. He spoke softly and had a profound sadness about him.

I looked the machine over and decided quickly that it would do the job and the price was just fine. The farmer was proud of the simple old machine. Even though the sale was made he wanted to tell me all about its features. There was a wooden platform built onto the back where the ground feed came down. He told me how he used to shovel the grain in while his son would stand on the platform to collect the ground feed into sacks. He said his son had died in a car accident and he asked if I had known him. I told him that I did know his son and that we had played on the same softball team one summer. I told him his son was a very nice fellow and that it was shame that he was gone, because it was true.

He showed me around the farm and I thought about his son while he talked. Every machine or building or stanchion was described relative to his son, how he had used this tool, or done this job. While he talked I remembered how his son was a good natured, dependable, capable and competent fellow. No doubt he was a good son as this man no doubt was a good and loving father. I did not mention that I was at the accident or that I had seen his son there.

I probably spent most of two hours at the farm before driving off with the hammer mill hitched behind my pick-up. I never saw the man again, there was no reason to.

The accident was a bad one. It was in the spring of 1964. I was a senior then. I had dropped my girlfriend off at her home and was cruising through St. Michael on my way home. The accident scene was on the east edge of town. The car with three boys, all my age or a year older had hit a car with two women head on. The women had been out for the evening with their husbands. Both women had small children. I did not know the women but I knew the boys.

The details of exactly what happened were never known. It is probably safe to say that the guys were traveling 100 miles and hour. I knew for a fact that their car could easily do that. We drove that way in those days. Some said that the women forgot to switch their headlights on. No doubt all five had been drinking. We did that too in those days.

Cars did not have airbags or even seatbelts. Ambulances took a long time to arrive and little towns did not have the great fire and rescue capability that they have now. I am not sure the terms EMT or Trauma Center had even been invented. All five died at the scene or were DOA at the hospital.

When I got to the accident there were already a number of people and vehicles there. More than anything I remember the glistening blood with all the bright lights. You might be amazed at how much blood can come out of five human beings. The cars were still in the center of the tar road and the blood ran in streams to both ditches. The women and the driver of the boy’s car were dead instantly. All three boys were riding in the front seat. The front of their car was compressed to nothing. The engine cut their legs off and crushed them inside. In those days there were no tools adequate to extract bodies from such a mess quickly. The second boy died mercifully soon, the third took longer. Too long, there was no possibility of saving his life.

I did not need the wooden platform on the hammer mill because I worked alone. The platform was built and shaped a lot like a workbench. Good solid 2-inch lumber and it stood about waist high. I took it off the hammer mill and while I farmed I kept it in a machine shed. In 1984 I sold all my farm machines, equipment and tools but for some reason I kept that bench. I kept virtually nothing else.

The bench is still here. I have lots of better benches but this one is now in the barn I built in 2000. It gets used from time to time. It has been 40 years now since I bought the hammer mill and almost 50 since an accident crushed the lives out of the boy and his father.

Last week my son-in-law and I were working in the barn. The bench caused me to think of these things and I told him this story. He asked if he could keep the bench after I was done with it. Maybe he knows why I keep it; I do not know that I do.