

# Making Hay While The Sun Shines

By Christopher Klose, HRH Member, July 14, 2022

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We are indebted to avid, early photographer Harriet Martin Dey, of the Upper Red Hook Martin family, for capturing this summer tableau of “putting up” hay in the barn at the dawn of the Twentieth Century. Because fully two-thirds of a farm’s output was needed back then to feed the horses (and mules), the rural rubric was simple: make hay – or else: no hay, no motive power. It took weeks of slow, heavy teamwork by farmers, their families, hired hands, and stock to cut, rake, stack, load, and stow the hay in the barn for the coming winter.

With the adoption of the internal combustion engine, the number of farm horses fell from a high of 25 million in 1920 to four million in 1954, replaced then by the five million tractors and increasingly efficient equipment for making hay more quickly from much less land and with fewer workers. These mid-century labor savers included the haybine to mow and condition the grass for faster drying, the side delivery rake to roll the hay into long windrows, and the baler to continuously pick up, pack and tie the hay into bales and drop them on the field for loading onto wagons, still mostly by hand.



*Men loading hay into a barn. This may be the barn at the Old Stone House (Martin/Cookingham house), c. 1899. View this collection at NYHeritage.org.*



*Making hay on Echo Valley Farm in 1982.*

“Haying” for Irving Fraleigh and Red Hook’s other dairy farmers was a mid-century rite of passage for young boys like me eager to make some spending money. At 14, after getting official “working papers” issued at the Red Hook Central School office, off we went. For trailing after the baler, hefting these 35- to 40-pound bundles of cow food onto the wagon and then off-loading and packing them in the barn to the rafters, we were paid a dollar an hour. And so the summers passed, load after creaking load, men and boys dust-covered, itchy, sweat-drenched, thirsty, and tired.

Worth it? Then, the money. But now and forever, the memory of riding atop the last load of the day at twilight, the sweet scent of new-mown hay on the evening breeze, swaying up out of the meadow across Route 199 opposite the big red brick farmhouse on the hill, built by the Fraleighs in 1804.

Although Red Hook is down to its last dairy farm and the iconic black-and-white Holstein cow no longer dots our landscape, hay remains in great demand throughout the town's and Dutchess County's numerous horse, cattle, and sheep farms. In response, like many other businesses, haymaking has become totally mechanized, computerized, and virtually hands-free. No more grunting, no more backaches, not in today's air-conditioned, touch-screened, wand-driven giant tractors. These days, two people can mow, dry, rake, bale, load, unload, and stack 30 or 40 acres within a couple of days, practically without lifting a finger.

When the sun shines, that is.



*Making hay on Echo Valley Farm in 2021.*