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ARTISANS OF THE LAND

By Dr. Dale Teeters



“The colorful quiltwork of the ground struck me as being as beautiful as any piece of artwork I had ever seen.”

I can remember flying back to Oklahoma several years ago to visit my parents. I had been reared on one of those Western Oklahoma farms below and had farmed with my father from the time I was old enough to ride on a tractor until I finished college. It was natural for me to look at the land below as the plane approached Will Rogers Airport. The colorful quiltwork of the ground struck me as being as beautiful as any piece of artwork I had ever seen. This tapestry of fields of wheat, hay, and tilled soil made me think and appreciate.

My father was an artisan as sure as the one with an easel, a brush, and a canvas. His paints were the seeds and fertilizers that he put in the ground. His brushes were

Illustration by Lisa Bradford

tractors, combines, balers, and plows. His canvases were the sandy fields on our farm. His works were framed with fences made of barbed wire and posts of steel, creosote wood, and cut trees.

He would start his work in the spring each year by plowing, which turned the winter-dulled hayfield into the browns and red of fresh Western Oklahoma earth. I can remember as a child the almost hypnotic effect of standing behind the tractor and plow after it had passed and watching the soil tumble in a continuous, perfect way bringing up the rich-smelling soil. The mounds of dirt turned over by the shears reminded me of coils of rope that were being wound in a circle as the tractor went around and around the field. I can remember the sharp contrast of the old and new soil until finally everything was new and ready for the seeds to be sowed.

Father and I would watch the hay come up, first as little specks of green so tiny and slender. The field would change from soil to bright green before our eyes, a living piece of art. The hay would be cut when it was time; and as it lay on the ground drying, it would change colors to pastels of yellows and greens. The field would become concentric rows of color when the hay was raked in preparation for baling. The rolling fields would then become works of art with the rectangular hay bales lying on the fields, giving an unaccustomed geometric look to the land.

Fields of wheat were my father's other canvases. These were works that took all four seasons to complete and changed with time. First there was the sandy brown of the land ready to be sowed. Then the green of the wheat added brightness to the subdued colors of winter. Winter itself would add its touch sometimes by making the fields blinding-white with snow. With the progression of spring, the wheat grew tall, first oceans of green finally turning to oceans of gold as summer approached.

He was not alone in his artisanship, however, for he and nature worked together. The tension between the two added drama to the fields. Sometimes the rains would come and wash the seedlings from the ground and make veins of orange subsoil visible. Sometimes no rain would come, and

browns would eventually replace all other colors. The winds would blow until patches of off-white sand, like worn spots in old paintings, would be in the middle of fields of wheat. Hail might crumble the golden wheat, making it look like a wrinkled gunnysack.

But then there were the times when the two worked in unison—times when the rains came, making the fields turn green with life, times when the winds would dry the rows of hay so that it could be baled and dry the waving wheat so that it could be harvested. My father would look at me and smile, and I could feel the passion and pride he had for his art.

My father died this year. He will no longer practice his art—at least not in Western Oklahoma anyway. I apprenticed under him for those many years and then chose to leave. Sometimes I wish that I had stayed and worked the fields. But one thing is certain: other farmers will always carry on the work. They will till the soil, plant the fields, fight with nature, and raise crops so that all of us can enjoy the masterpieces created by the artisans of the land. ●

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