David Creamer/The Sower

Huskers hold nostalgia, robots reap the future

"Those good old days have come and gone
When it took no brains, but lots of brawn
For farmers to pick corn, ear by ear
At harvest time in the fall of the year . . ."

—Mrs. Harold A. Wheatley,
"Bangboard Brigade"

America was younger, simpler back then: fall meant cooling weather, reddening leaves, anticipation of an ample harvest. Farmers and hired hands gathered in the field to pick corn from dawn until dusk, fingers flying to beat Jack Frost.

Speed wasn't everything; it was the only thing. Friends and neighbors started competing to see who could husk the fastest.

Iowans organized a "national" competition in 1924. The contest drew fast-handed, thick-wristed huskers from Iowa, Illinois and Nebraska. Word of the contest spread, and huskers came from eight other states to compete for cash prizes.

Crowds as large as 160,000 swarmed to the cornfields, admiring the skill and endurance of these remarkable men. But World War II suspended cornhusking events, and national contests never regained their former glory. By 1942, many farmers were picking corn with farm machinery three times faster than human hands.

Old corn huskers were forced to give up their ways . . . until nostalgia brought the huskers back.

Kansans and Iowans revived national contests in 1975, and Nebraska re-started its state contest three years ago. This year, 27 pairs of nimble hands competed in Nebraska's husking contest at Howard Helwig's farm near Richfield.

About 150 spectators — mostly concerned wives, daughters, sons and grandchildren — stood together beneath a hazy blue September sky to watch the huskers.

The contest was touted as "just for fun," but the contestants tackled their corn with a ferocity not unlike their college football namesakes.

Competitors waited tensely for the rifle signal —

BANG — and the race began, eyes stared pointedly at each ear of corn, feet moved rhythmically to the next stalk, the left hand grabbed corn, while the right hand pulled the husk . . .

THOCK! THOCK! the sound of corn ears hitting against the bangboard. Harnesses chinked on the plodding Belgian and Percheron horses. Discarded corn husks crackled under the wooden wheels of old-fashioned painted wagons. The putter of old John Deere tractors echoed through the 20 acres of whispering corn as the tractors pulled the makeshift wagons.

Howard Carson, co-sponsor of the contest and a national competitor since 1976, won the 30-minute state contest. The 65-year-old Lincoln man picked 665 pounds of corn, netting 645 pounds after "gleaning and husk reductions."

A UNL agronomy technician, Carson said he helped revive the contest for "nostalgia's sake."

"For some people, it was drudgery; for others, it was fun," he said. "If it was *easy*, it was fun."

Janet Mann, 17, of Papillion, said she wanted to try husking after she watched her uncle, Herb Mann, husk corn. Netting 94.5 pounds didn't place her anywhere, but she said she enjoyed competing.

"I left a lot of shucks on the ears of corn," Mann said, "but for the first time, I did really good."

Albert Bruns, 77, found he still could compete with the best of them after winning the 75-and-over Old Timers division.

Bruns, a retired Union Pacific railroad worker from Nehawka, netted a hefty 215 pounds.

He said he "didn't even work up a sweat."

—Gah Y. Huey

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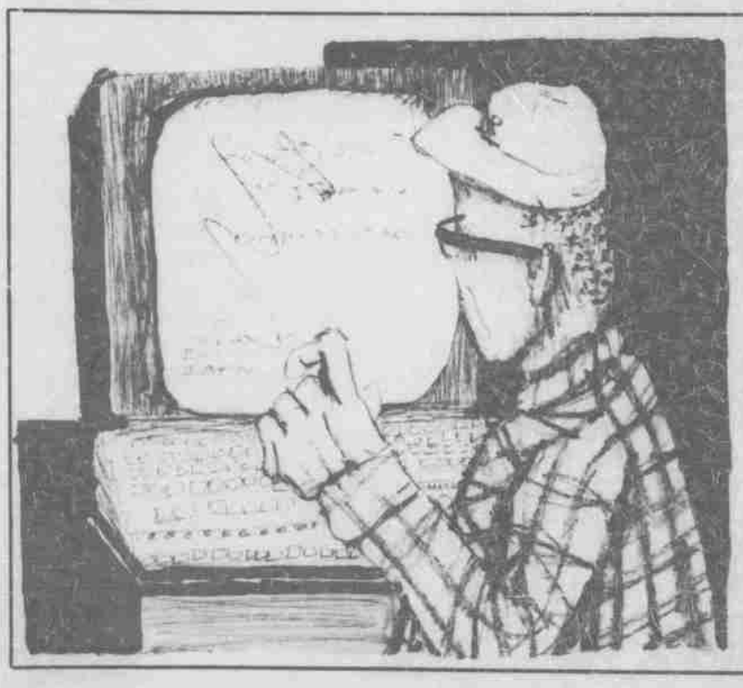
Heinz Kreiger, 64, of Lincoln, nimbly shucks his way to fame at the state husking contest.



The year 2001. A typical spring morning on the homestead of Farmer Jones.

At the cock's crow, Farmer Jones rises and dons his blue overalls and heavy flannel shirt. He walks into the sunlit kitchen for a hearty breakfast, gulping an eye-opening cup of coffee to prepare himself for the day ahead.

He then tackles daily chores: after milking the cows, feeding the chickens and collecting the eggs, it's time to head out to the fields.

Hmmm. Blue sky, puffball clouds — looks like there won't be much rain today. Is it time to fertilize, he wonders. Old-fashioned farmers would probably try to second-guess nature. But not good ol' Farmer Jones.

He can rely on his computer to tangle with Mother Nature.

A fantasy? Not according to two UNL agricultural engineering experts. They say uses for computers are as limitless as the imagination.

By the year 2000, most farmers in the country will use computers to help with management decisions, experts predict. Beyond that, robotics could replace humans in tedious, repetitive farm chores.

"Many farmers will actually own small computers. It will be almost like the telephone," said George E. Meyer, UNL agricu... ...gineering professor. "A computer will be an electronic hired man."

For 10 years, Meyer has worked on a "computer plant," to someday help farmers cheat Mother Nature. On Meyer's computer screen, the model plant appears as a three-dimensional graphic image of a soybean plant. Meyer can make the image grow just like a real plant grows. By simulating different plant environments, Meyer uses the computer plant to see how a real plant grows under different circumstances.

Meyer's work would help farmers determine how much light their crops get, when to fertilize and water their crops, and the best time to harvest.

The computer plant model is still in the experimental stage. Meyer grows young soybean plants in a computer-controlled growth chamber. An IBM computer's memory stores the plants' responses to simulated weather sequences.

Meyer's experiment isn't far from commercial use, Meyer said. Part of the dilemma many farmers now face is that they don't know where they stand managerially, and in crop production.

"A farmer can have a lot of managerial information at his fingertips," Meyer said.

Computers have more far-reaching significance in the field of robotics. Neil Sullivan, UNL agriculture engineering instructor, specializes in equipment automation. Sullivan said robotics may someday relieve farmers from tedious work so they can concentrate on management decisions.

"Robotics are nothing more than a natural extension of computers into automation," he said. "There is good evidence that certain kinds of automation make it possible for labor savings."

Many factories have already implemented robotics on assembly lines where work is repetitive and human labor can be replaced. Robots can work much faster, carry heavier loads and eliminate rest breaks in the working day.

Sullivan said robotics could be used to do humans' work more safely. He said he would like to see automated machinery correct itself when something goes wrong. Researchers are at the point of successfully programming a robot to stop itself if it malfunctions, he said.

Robotics are already being used to help with field work in some places. But researchers face many challenges, Sullivan said. They must overcome obstacles in field work — unlevel ground, for example. But Sullivan said he is optimistic that researchers will solve the complications of agricultural robotics.

"Between now and the year 2000, there will be many vehicles controlled without human operation," he said. "We're right on the edge. We're starting to do some things that we think are pretty exciting."

—Gah Y. Huey

By the year 2000, most farmers in the country will use computers to help with management decisions. Robots may do farm work more safely and efficiently than farmers. A computer will be an electronic hired hand.