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Life on the Farm in the Old Days

Sunny Stutzman

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Story: "Life on the Farm in the Old Days"

Storyteller: Sunny Stutzman

Town: Sangerville, ME

Collector: Pauleena MacDougall

Date: August 27, 2011

Sunny Stutzman's story relates some basic differences between life on the farm in the old days and now, but also generally differences between life on the farm and anywhere else in society. The story begins with a simple instruction to clear the fields of rocks, an odious task any farmer, or even gardener, in New England has at some point undertaken. But unlike most of our experiences, this story involves an aid we only dream about every spring: dynamite. Without spoiling the story's finale, suffice to say that things go awry. It is not entirely clear when, where, or from whom Sunny learned the story, but the evidence places this before his time, with his father as the original storyteller. The presence of the Model T suggests the events occurred sometime in the early twentieth century. The somewhat cavalier use of dynamite also suggests that this story took place some time ago. Though not likely to be used in this manner now, at least not by unsupervised thirteen year olds, dynamite was an important tool for farmers (as heard here), loggers (for clearing logjams), and other professions in "the old days." Stories that include dynamite are usually warnings or laments about the dangers involved, and where this story really stands out is its humorous take on what is otherwise a very dangerous activity. But, as Sunny says, "That's kinda how things go on the farm."

This story was recorded at the 2011 American Folk Festival. Sunny Stutzman was a member of the panel on the Narrative Stage called "Maine Farmer Poets." With him on the panel was poet Pat Ranzoni of Bucksport. Sunny's father and band-mate, Sid, was supposed to be a member of the panel but was unable to attend for health reasons. In addition to telling a few stories, Sunny performed several songs written by his father about life on the farm.

Transcript:

My father told me I have to tell one story of the way things were, I guess, on the farm. This is one I can tell in public. But it just gives you an idea of, maybe, the way farm life is different from everyday life, I guess. So, years ago there were two kids, about thirteen years old, on the farm. Their job was to take the rocks out of the field so that they could plant. So, of course all the rocks had to be removed with oxen at the time, this quite a while ago, and oxen can only move a rock that is so big. They gave these two kids who were only thirteen years old a box of dynamite and told them to go out and clear the field of rocks. And this was pretty much common practice in the neighborhood, apparently, back then. So, down the road, I'm imagining some kid a little bicycle with a box of TNT on the back, I don't know. They were probably riding both on one bicycle, who knows? Or maybe they brought the oxen down first. But, anyway, so they're in the field and they're blowing up rocks, having a great time I'm sure. I don't even know if they paid them really! One of these stray rocks goes through a window of a Model T Ford that was for sale on someone's lawn. The owner comes out all mad, "You kids bought that now. You're going to have to pay for that." These two kids looked at each other and the box of dynamite, and they said, "Well, we own it, what are we going to do with it?" They took the dynamite over, and they loaded the car up with dynamite, and they blew the car up right there on the guy's lawn. And apparently, I guess the guy didn't come back out; I don't know if they ever paid for it or not, but that's just, that's kinda how things go on the farm.