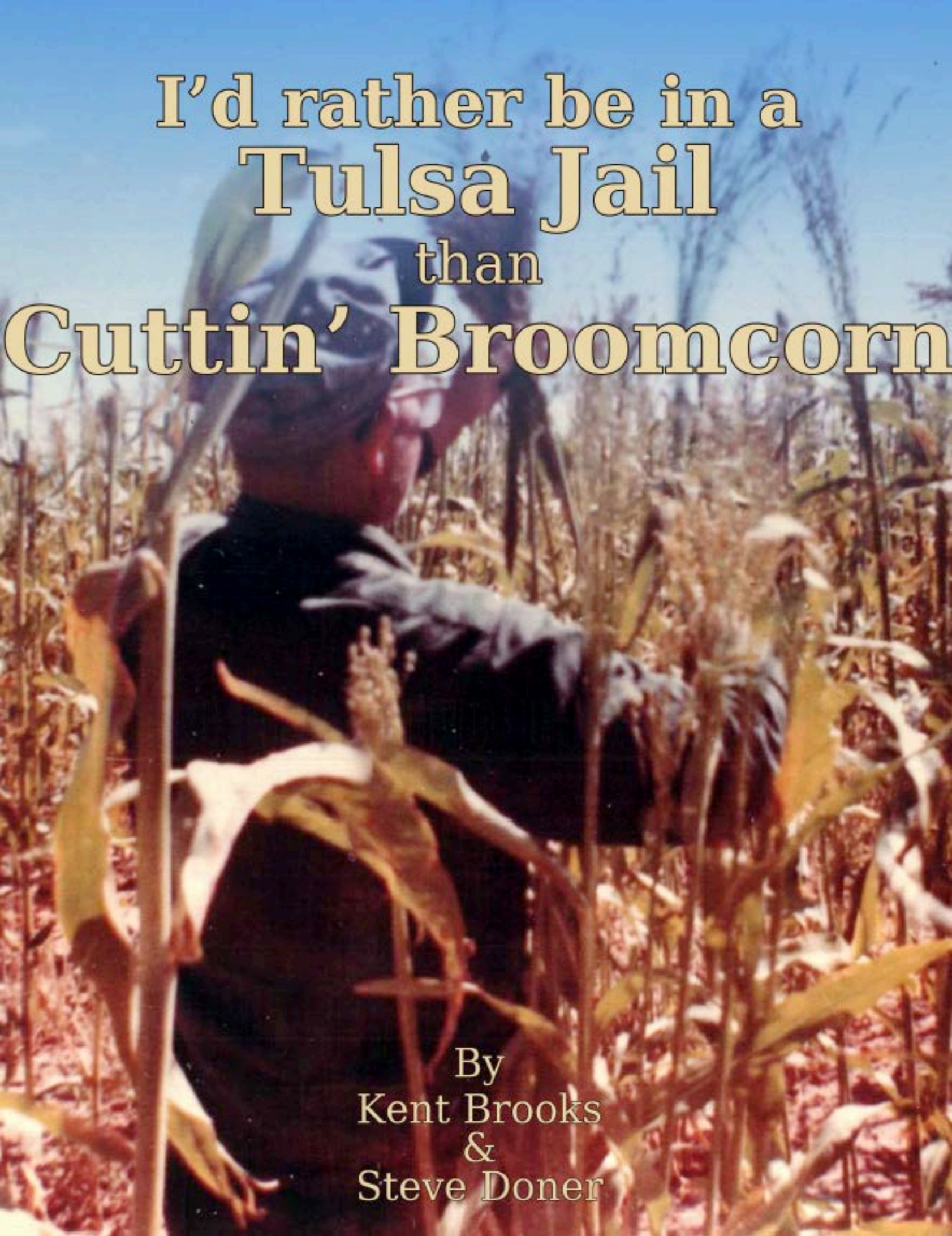
I'd rather be in a Tulsa Jail than Cuttin' Broomcorn



By
Kent Brooks
&
Steve Doner

The Broomcorn Years

For nearly a century, Baca County, Colorado, was swept up in the rhythm of a plant few outside the region truly understood. Broomcorn—a tall, stiff-bristled variety of sorghum—was not just a crop. It was a livelihood, a seasonal migration, and, for decades, the backbone of the county's rural economy. By 1945, Baca County had earned its title as the "Broomcorn Capital of the World," with over 75,000 acres planted and every stalk harvested by hand.

This book tells the story of that broomcorn era—not just in facts and figures, but through images and memories etched into calloused hands, dusty boots, and kitchen tables stacked with plates for a hungry crew. The Broomcorn Johnnies, as the seasonal laborers were known, came from across the country—some from Cherokee families in Oklahoma, Missouri farmers, others from skid rows or even German POW camps—drawn to the work that was as grueling as it was essential.

They cut with curved knives, bundled under a blazing sun, and endured "the itch"—that infamous sting of broomcorn bristles in the folds of every shirt and every crease of skin. They slept in bunkhouses and barn lofts. They worked from dawn to dusk, six days a week, fueled by the tireless efforts of cookshack wives who cooked three meals a day, every day, for men they barely knew but counted on.

It was hard work, dirty work, and often dangerous work—but it sustained families, towns, and a way of life in Baca County. From cutting and ricking to baling and loading trains bound for Baltimore or New York, the broomcorn business kept dollars flowing through local shops and communities.

[1]

Hauling Broomcorn via horse and wagon from Two Buttes, Colorado.

"Even when I told them what I did for a living, they still had no idea what I was talking about."[2]

-John Morrison,
Broomcorn Buyer


BROOM-CORN AND BROOMS.

A TREATISE ON

Raising Broom-Corn

AND MAKING BROOMS,

ON A SMALL OR LARGE SCALE.

ILLUSTRATED.

New-York:

ORANGE JUDD COMPANY,

No. 245 Broadway.

[3]

[1] Photo courtesy of the Eldon and Virginia Campbell Collection.

[2] Conversation with the author approximately 2014.

[3] *Broom-Corn and Brooms: A Treatise on Raising Broom-Corn and Making Brooms, on a Small or Large Scale.* New York: Orange Judd Company, 188

Usually, when the topic of broomcorn comes up with someone not from Baca County, Colorado, there is inevitably the question

"What's that?"

 [4]

Seeding Broomcorn in the 1940s or 1950s. Note the Tractor in the background.[5]

[4] Lee, Russell. *Broom corn, Baca County, Colorado. One of the main cash crops of this region.* Photograph, August 1939. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017740900/

[5] Photo courtesy of Keith Thomas.

Photo and caption appeared in the May 11, 1961 issue of the Plainsman Herald. Three Baca County men recently visited with Rep. J. Edgar Chenoweth while in Washington, D. C. Ray Bishop, John Morrison, Jr., and Don Williams were in Washington, D. C. to attend a hearing on tariffs for imported broomcorn.[6] [7]

[6] *Plainsman Herald*. (Springfield, Colorado) "Three Baca County Men Recently Visited with Rep. J. Edgar Chenoweth While in Washington, D.C." May 11, 1961.

[7] Original Photo courtesy of Dick Bishop.

Geo. Bohl has a good crop of broom-corn.

[8]

—Herzhburger, the broom corn man from Baca county, Colorado, was in town this week, and says the crop is looking fairly well.

—Oakes and Waldon, of Baca County, Colorado, have been running their broom corn seeder and baler in our vicinity for the past week. They are hustlers and the ricks of bales scattered over the country where they have been at work, show the extensive crop of corn, and places the anticipations of our farmers several notches higher with a brighter outlook than ever before.

[9]

Dave Greathouse of Stonington, the big broomcorn man of Baca county was doing business in town Monday. It is his purpose to plant 200 acres of his ranch to broomcorn. He has been running his factory at Vilas nearly all winter.

Broom Corn Seed.

Frank McGowan of the eastern part of the county is selling choice Mo. Evergreen broom-corn seed at 65cts per bushel, 1895 crop. Has 40 bushels left.

[10]

S. J. Konkel and A. A. Yowell are holding their broomcorn for higher prices.

[12]

GOOD PINTO BEANS, $6.50; AMBER CANE seed, $3; Dwarf broom corn seed, $4; all per cwt. Recleaned, in new bags, F. O. B. Lamar, Colo. J. W. Hoover, Joycoy, Colo.

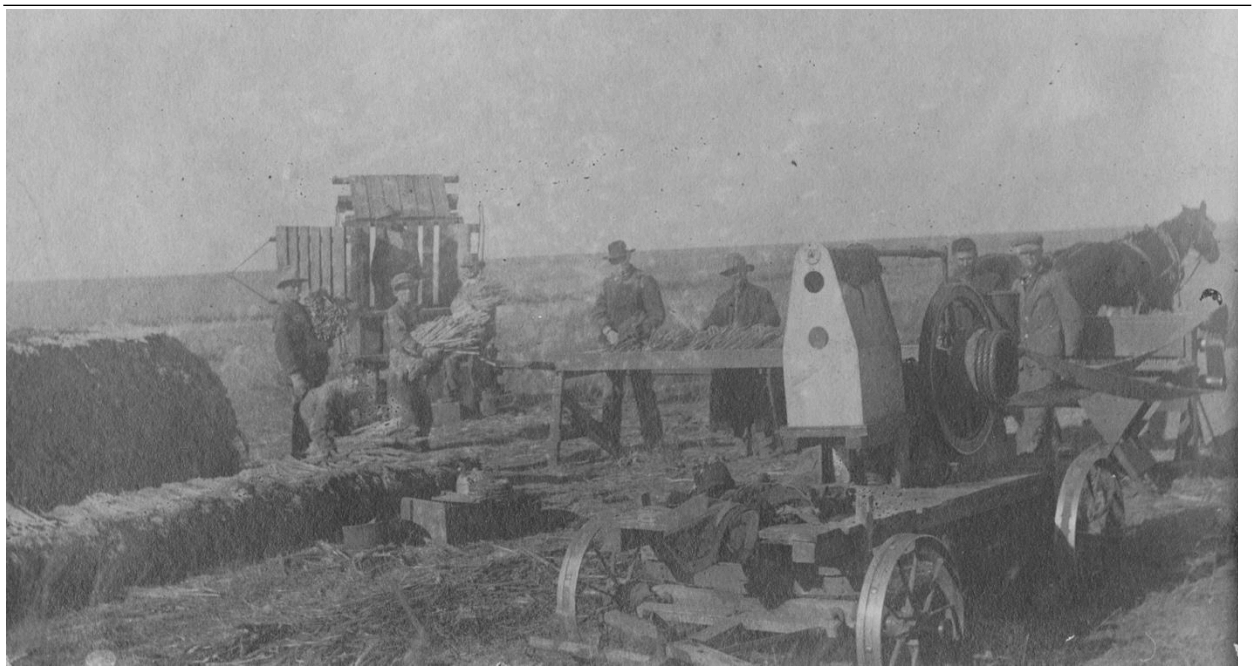
The Bryan brothers are seeding broomcorn in this neighborhood.

B. F. Lamport has gone to Syracuse this week with his last load of broomcorn, and will bring back a load of freight.

[11]

[13]

[8] Johnson City Journal (Johnson City, Kansas) August 29, 1896, Pg. 1.
[9] *The Richfield* Monitor (Richfield, Kansas) November 22, 1895, Pg. 3.
[10] The Democrat-Herald (Springfield, Colorado) March 26, 1897, Pg. 4.
[11] The Democrat-Herald (Springfield, Colorado) February 26, 1897, Pg. 4.
[12] The Democrat-Herald (Springfield, Colorado) March 19, 1897, Pg. 4
[13] Photo courtesy of the Baca County Museum.



Note on the back says "Broomcorn 1911." Ron Wilson says, “Would suppose this was around Vilas/Walsh.” The seeder is not clearly visible in this picture. There is a stationary engine that must be powering it. The “ricks” are visible to the far left, as is the baler, with the lid and side door open. This is a small crew of only 10 men visible in the picture.[14]

“It has been reported that 99% of all American households have at least one broom, and that a broom is vital to everyday living.”

-Los Angeles Times 1988[15]

16

[14] Photo courtesy of the Ron Wilson.

[15] Kenneth Reich, “Broomcorn Industry Swept Aside by Modern Technology,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 1988. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-09-17-fi-1898-story.html.

[16] Lee, Russell. “Brooms and charcoal for sale, Jeanerette, Louisiana.” Photograph, October 1938. Library of Congress. Accessed [date you viewed the image]. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017738413/

A bale of broomcorn. The bale is approximately 300-400 pounds[19]

Walter Doner's 1949 broomcorn ricks with seeder waiting to do its job.[20]

[19] Photo courtesy of Dennis Dunivan.
[20] Photo courtesy of Steve Doner.

A long wooden table for arranging the broomcorn brush as it enters the seeder. The Baler door and lid are open, with the finished bale to the right and the rick to the left. "Off bearers" are to the right of the seeder.[21]

Kirk Guder's 2021 Broomcorn in Springfield, Colorado. A single broomcorn head or brush or tassel, rather too green and heavy with seed.[22]

My Grandpa Dave Peters always said that his daughters, Fae and Florence, could out-cut any of his field hands...Grandpa told the guys that he would give any of them $1.00 more if they could out-cut those two redheaded girls. None could, and a few even quit (those who couldn't handle being outworked by a couple of girls.) I remember how Grandpa would chuckle, telling the story. Fae was the oldest, and my mom remembered her planting the corn with a one-row planter...pulled by horses. It had a spring seat on it...ha! I always loved hearing Grandpa tell these stories...he was sure proud of his daughters.[23]

—Deede Lowery

Broomcorn bales ready for delivery.[24]

Bus for hauling the Broomcorn crew near Walsh, Colorado.[25]

[21] Photo courtesy of Norma West Miller.

[22] Bradford, Ruth. Video taken of Kirk Guder's broomcorn, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sy1meQDb778&t=2s - accessed 8/18/2025.

[23] Deede Lowery, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,

[24] Photo courtesy of Norma West Miller.

[25] Photo courtesy of Virginia Bitner.

Melvin Scott, putting broomcorn in the baler on the Bishop broomcorn crew. Others unknown.[26]

[26] Photo courtesy of Anita Bishop.

NEED HARVEST HANDS IN BACA COUNTY BROOMCORN

An appeal has come from Walsh Col., for harvest hands to help harvest the big broomcorn crop in that vicinity.

"One hundred men are needed," says a telegram. "Send us what you can. $2.50 up and board for good men."

The broom corn crop in Baca county is the largest ever grown there and farmers who suffered a wheat failure are expected to profit considerably from this new crop.

[27]

Broomcorn in pile row (called a "saddle") on Don Self's farm, 1967.[28]

Freighting broomcorn with the Dunivan Children.[29]

[27] The *Hutchinson News* (Hutchinson, Kansas) October 22, 1927, Pg 19.
[28] Photo courtesy of Anita Bishop.
[29] Photo courtesy of Dennis Dunivan.

Baca County Broomcorn [94]

[94] Courtesy of Anita Bishop.

[95]

[95] Courtesy of Anita Bishop.

Broomcorn Johnnies

The earliest broomcorn cutters to arrive in places like Arcola, Illinois—where the industry began around 1856—were likely Southern laborers from Tennessee and Kentucky. Many of these men may have been ex-Confederate soldiers, driven north in search of work during the economic collapse of the South following the Civil War. By the late 1860s, broomcorn harvesting was expanding, and these seasonal workers became a fixture of the annual labor cycle.

The nickname "Johnny" may have originated with these Southern migrants—perhaps carried over from "Johnny Reb"—as a way to distinguish them from Northern workers. Whether embraced or assigned, the name stuck. It traveled with them and eventually made its way west, arriving in places like Baca County, Colorado, where broomcorn became a dominant crop and the need for migrant labor grew.

Although many in Baca County recall the Broomcorn Johnnies with fondness—men who returned year after year and became familiar faces—there was often a more complicated, sometimes negative reputation attached to the term. It's not unlike the way people often view politicians: they like their own but distrust the rest. The same could be said for the Johnnies—valued on the farm, viewed warily in town.

Newspaper archives show the term was in use as early as 1897 (*The Daily Review*, Decatur, IL, October 1), and by 1913, descriptions of their seasonal migrations had taken on a poetic tone. One paper noted,

"Their coming was as unannounced as that of the birds, and they just sort of oozed into town about the time they were needed."
(*Mount Carmel Daily Republican*, September 16, 1913).

Spelling evolved too—"broom corn," "broom-corn," and eventually "broomcorn." But the essence remained: these men, tough and transient, were a critical part of the harvest and the culture that grew up around it.

As broomcorn spread westward, so did the legacy of the Johnnies. Whether hired hands bunking in barns or dusty crews arriving in the back of trucks, they brought labor, stories, and complexity—shaping the broomcorn fields of Baca County with every pass of the blade.

-Cotton Huffman[97]

These pictures need text!

[97] Cotton Huffman, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,

99

Johnnies came in all shapes and sizes and often with colorful nicknames whose hard work might only be surpassed by the colorful tales of wild Saturday nights when they came to town. When the fall harvest began, the towns would fill up with men with an array of colorful names,

Rabbit Rocking Chair, Johnson Runabout (Nicknamed Cowboy Copus, who started at age 14), Cesler Feathers, & Noland Noisy Water. There was Tom Duck, the Wolf Brothers (yes, they were brothers, but their last name was Wolf Brothers). Don Wright nicknamed me Feathers, a name that stuck with me throughout high school because of a fishing trip the three of us went on. Last time I went to Stonington, Don was under a combine and heard my voice, "Feathers, is that you?" It is thought that if you call out their name, they will live forever in spirit."

— Ted Burhenn[100]

101

[99] Alva Farmer with Broomcorn Johnnies 1920s. Courtesy of Baca County Museum

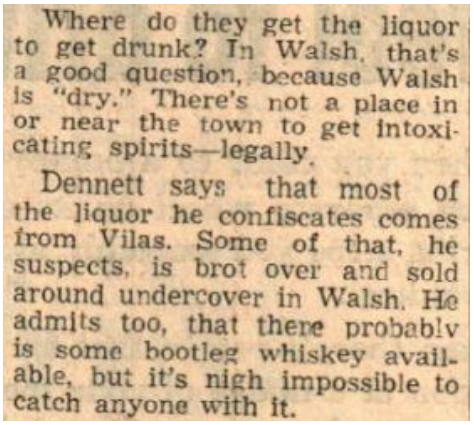
[100] Ted Burehnn, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day

[101] Photo courtesy of Dennis Dunivan.

Part of a Dunivan crew at the ricks.[102]

Your whole family spent Saturday in Springfield shopping, visiting, and going to either the matinee or evening show at the Capitol Theatre. Main Street would be packed, and during broomcorn harvest, you saw all the farmers bring their "johnnies" into town in old school buses.

— Anita Bishop[103]



Where do they get the liquor to get drunk? In Walsh, that's a good question, because Walsh is "dry." There's not a place in or near the town to get intoxicating spirits—legally.

Dennett says that most of the liquor he confiscates comes from Vilas. Some of that, he suspects, is brot over and sold around undercover in Walsh. He admits too, that there probably is some bootleg whiskey available, but it's nigh impossible to catch anyone with it.

[104]

[102]Photo courtesy of Dennis Dunivan.

[103] Anita Bishop, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day.

[104] Plainsman Herald (Springfield, Colorado)

Jackie Whiteshield, left and Daniel Magpie jr., Cheyenne Indians from Oklahoma, shred foliage from pile of broomcorn they have cut and piled for the sled trip to the field baler. In the background some 23 others, mostly Indians, are cutting and piling in Leon Kerr's field.

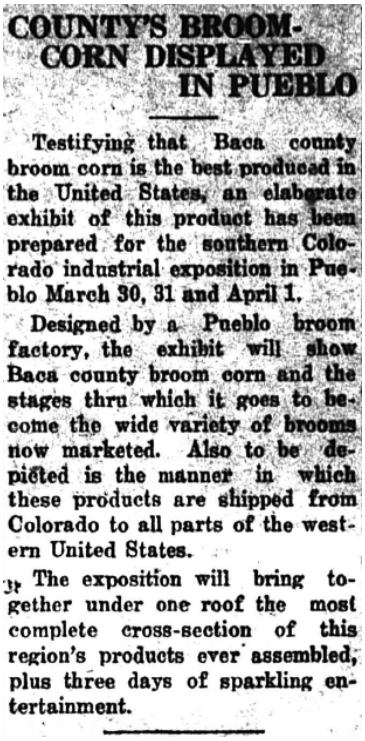
VOLUME 12 THURSDAY, OCT. 4, 1951

BROOMCORN HARVEST PUSHING TO FINISH

This Banner Photo illustrates the activity in Baca County's broomcorn harvest which is expected to wind up soon. The straw is used to make brooms and they said usually is used for stock feed. Pictured is Walsh Town Marshal Joe Dennett posing beside ricks of the harvested corn to demonstrate size of the rows. Most of the broomcorn is being bought in the rick and on the vine. Prices are running $390 to $450 per ton with the bulk of the sales between $415 and $425. The harvest is about two-thirds over and although there still is a shortage of labor most of the growers are getting their crops harvested all right.

Broomcorn "Johnnies" were some pretty amazing people. They worked from sun up to sun down and got paid Lord knows what. But Oh, the stories. My granddad, Ed Hey, ran the old broomcorn camp south of Stonington for Roy Haney. My memory of those days are mixed. Some good and some bad. Seemed Friday after they got paid they would commence to drink what they could get their hands on. Most would end up in jail in Walsh, and Granddad would get them out Sunday afternoon. Some could play guitars, spoons, and almost anything else they could get their hands on. Some were great artists and craftsmen, whittlers, and such. Some were very quiet like they didn't want anybody knowing anything about them and others were great storytellers. I never once felt threatened by any of them.

— Ben Acre[105]



COUNTY'S BROOM-CORN DISPLAYED IN PUEBLO

Testifying that Baca county broom corn is the best produced in the United States, an elaborate exhibit of this product has been prepared for the southern Colorado industrial exposition in Pueblo March 30, 31 and April 1.

Designed by a Pueblo broom factory, the exhibit will show Baca county broom corn and the stages thru which it goes to become the wide variety of brooms now marketed. Also to be depicted is the manner in which these products are shipped from Colorado to all parts of the western United States.

The exposition will bring together under one roof the most complete cross-section of this region's products ever assembled, plus three days of sparkling entertainment.

106

When I was 16, I straw-bossed a crew of Johnnies working for my uncles' and a few of their neighbors. My job was to drive around in a little Ford tractor with a large cooler on the back and provide water to the cutters. I was also to make sure they didn't escape until those who had been bailed out and worked off the cost of their bail. We had about 10-15 in Uncle Ode's bunkhouse, and they would gain 10 pounds or so during the season because they were provided with 3 good meals and snacks. Very interesting experience. We had one worker go mad and my cousin, and I went looking for him and found him in a tree. Too much "green lizard" if you remember what that was. One of them was a man who would work for Uncle Ode for about 4-5 months out of the year. He was a small man who was about 50-60 by his appearance. He took the name "Mexican Joe" and claimed to be 1/2 Mexican, 1/2 White and 1/2 Black. He received $20 every Saturday and we would drive him to Springfield. He would buy a new shirt or pair of pants and hit the liquor store. We would drive him back on Sunday. The remainder of his earnings were sent to his sister in La Junta who doled it out to him for the remainder of the year to supplement his janitorial work at several bars and restaurants there. [107]

— Ron Wade

[105] Ben Acre, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,
[106] *Plainsman Herald* (Springfield, Colorado) (Date?)
[107] Ron Wade comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,

Feeding & Housing the Harvest Crews

No broomcorn harvest succeeded on sweat alone. Behind every row cut and every bale bound stood the quiet, relentless labor of cooks—mostly women—who rose before the dawn and worked long past dusk to keep the crews fed. These were the unsung engineers of the broomcorn era: stirring pots, peeling sacks of potatoes, butchering flocks of chickens, baking mountains of hot rolls, opening truckloads of gallon-sized can goods, packing field lunches, cleaning after meals, and managing food for dozens—sometimes hundreds—of men.

We now shift the lens from the field to the cookshack. Through firsthand accounts, family memories, and hard-earned recipes, we explore the vital role of harvest kitchens in Baca County's broomcorn heyday. From the organized chaos of the operation to the long tables of Sunday dinners and coffee poured by the gallon, this is a portrait of care, endurance, and the meals that kept the broomcorn Johnnies coming back.

I remember the bunkhouses. My aunt washed all those sheets for those beds and kept them clean and she washed all the towels for their showers. And cooked all those meals. She had one woman who helped her. My uncle used to contract out to cut others people's broomcorn so his crew could be working anywhere in Baca County. My aunt used to have to load the trunk of her car up with food and drive to the fields and feed them and then drive back home and wash all the dishes and then have another big meal ready for supper. They would slaughter 2 beef cattle and a couple of hogs and have all that meat frozen and ready to cook for the crew. I also remember in the mid 60's the government inspectors started coming in and said that the cookhouse wasn't acceptable and the bunkhouses weren't acceptable, etc. How ridiculous. My aunt was so clean and those men got good food and slept in clean beds and got showers every night. I bet the rest of the year they wished they had such good living conditions.

- Denise Lewis[8]

FEEDING BROOMCORN HANDS AT THE DUNIVAN'S CAMP IN WALSH

This picture was taken in the late 1940's at Chris Dunivan Senior's cook shack and bunk house during broomcorn harvest. The table seats 34 and there was another table across the room. At times the women would cook for as many as 80 in two shifts. The second person on the right in the picture is Chris Dunivan, Jr. and next to him is Bill Dunivan. Dennis Dunivan became a part of the family business later on.

Submitted by Chris Dunivan, Jr.[9]

[8] Denise Lewis, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,

[9] Echoes of Other Days, Plainsman Herald May 2000.

I remember in the late 1960's my Father, Sid Harrison, ran a crew of 30 to 40 men cutting broomcorn. At the start of harvest, when Dad was rounding up "Johnnies", the ones that had worked for him before would always ask, "Who's cooking?"

For a lot of years Dad hired Tom (I don't remember his last name) from Trinidad. They all wanted to come to work if Tom was cooking.

We had a cookhouse separate from the farmhouse. Tom would cook 3 meals a day and serve buffet style in the roundtop, which also served as bunkhouse and had showers in the back half. The front was the dining area.

We had a pop machine (10 cents) and most nights one of us kids would come around selling candy and cigarettes.

I was with my Dad most times when he bought groceries at Traders. This amounted to several cases of gallon cans of vegetables, spices, soft drinks, cigarettes, etc. Along with that, the big freezer was full of beef and pork raised on the farm.

One thing I think my Mom enjoyed during Broomcorn harvest was she didn't have to cook. We would go out to the roundtop and fill a plate to bring back to the house. I remember Tom cooked for Dad for many years.

— Richard Harrison[10]

[11]

Broomcorn crew at meal time.

The people that worked for us stayed in the loft in the barn and would play their drums at night! The drums were made using a gallon size can with something stretched over it. I was young and didn't pay enough attention to the details. They were Indians from Oklahoma. Jerry Walkingstick is a name I remember.

— Dale Oliver

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[10] Shirley Close, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,

[11] Photo courtesy of Virginia Bitner.

Teresa Silcox's grandad, Gladden Scott, inside his Johnnie bunkhouse.[12]

Rex Ridden and Lloyd O'Brian at mealtime on the Leon Kerr crew.[13]

[12] Photo courtesy of Teresa Silcox.
[13] Photo courtesy of Leon and Lida Kerr.

PAGE ELEVEN.

NEED HARVEST HANDS IN BACA COUNTY BROOMCORN

An appeal has come from Walsh Col., for harvest hands to help harvest the big broomcorn crop in that vicinity.

"One hundred men are needed," says a telegram. "Send us what you can. $2.50 up and board for good men."

The broom corn crop in Baca county is the largest ever grown there and farmers who suffered a wheat failure are expected to profit considerably from this new crop.

14

We scared a poor drunk Johnny one night. I let out a terrible scream and the poor guy peed his pants. At the time we thought it was funny, but now guess it wasn't. But what do teenagers know or think about when they do it? Otto Moss used to make a fortune on his home-made brew during harvest season. Don't know if you know about Otto Moss. He was the town's lawn person. He would cut the grass, weed the flowers and clean it up and put it in the compost holes he had. It sure smelled strong during the summer too. When fruit season got there, he would buy or people would give him all kinds of fruit and berries. He would take the little flimsy wooden crates off caskets, take them to his trailer out by the fairgrounds, and make his stills. He would make all kinds of wine and corn mash. He would go into town to one of the bars on Main Street north of the car dealer, sit on a stool and sing "Shall We Gather at the River," and then go out and direct traffic. One night he fell down in front of a semi going thru town, was hit, and died that night. People would always complain about his wine making to the police, but they watched and knew when he was thru brewing and bottling his hooch, and then go tell him he had to take it down. My Dad sure sold him lots of propane during the summer. More than the winter. We had lots of characters in Springfield. We all seem to accept them though. I don't remember really harassing any of them.

— Jana Albers[15]

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[14] Hutchinson News (Hutchinson Kansas) October 22, 1927.

[15]

One of the toughest tasks was keeping the Johnnies fed for the task of cutting the broomcorn. I always looked forward to getting to eat in the cookhouse. Talk about good food. My aunt was a great cook and they fed those men really well. My uncle always told her--I'm going to work them hard so you feed them good. And she did! Homemade bread and cornbread. Roasts, pork chops, fried chicken, meatloaf, veggies galore and the cakse and pies. Oh my, she did feed them good!! Three squares a day. I'm sure in these days the government would regulate her to death about whether that kitchen met their specifications. Wouldn't matter that those guys probably didn't ever eat that well the rest of the year. Everyone raved about the good meals they were served. Miss that good country food!

- Denise Lewis[16]

In line waiting for lunch in the field.[17]

Pete Grimm, Claude Maddox, Raymond Ogle, and Ray Roles after a hard day. 1945.

Photo from Baca County History Book, pg. 39.

Delivering lunch to the field.[18]

[16] Denise Lewis, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,
[17] Photo courtesy of Leon and Lida Kerr.
[18] Photo courtesy of Leon and Lida Kerr.

Benches constructed by Walter Doner in the 1940s for Broomcorn Johnnie's mealtimes.[19]

[19] Photo courtesy Steven Doner.

Leon and Lida Kerr

Leon and Lida Kerr

Cuttin’ & Rickin’

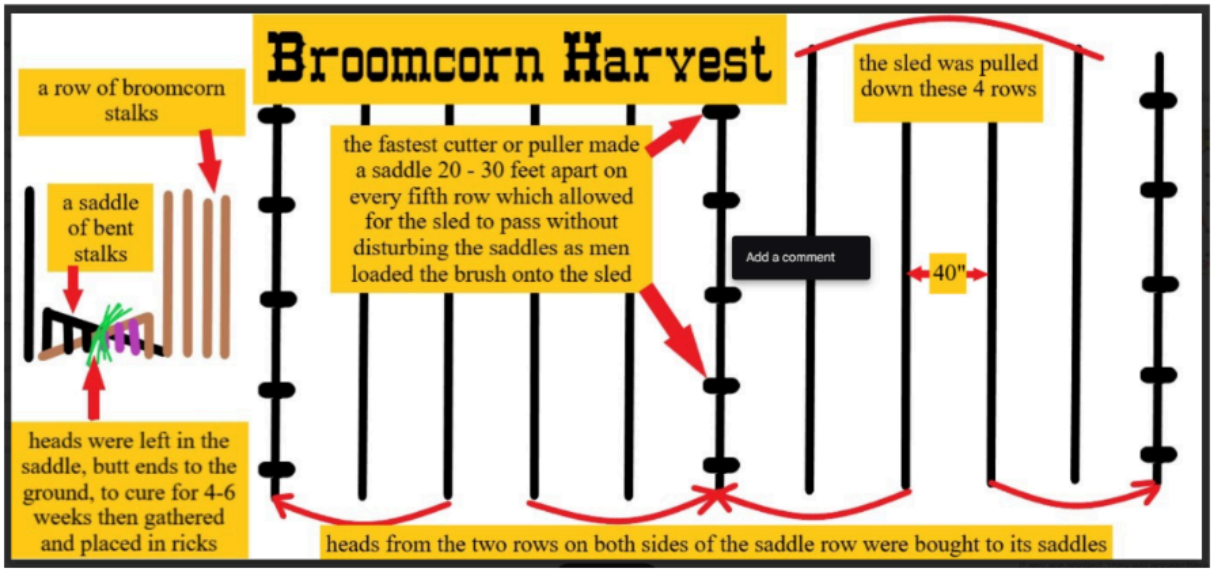
Get ready for the itch. Most mornings start calm on the short-grass—that’s your window. Tape the knife handles, tape your fingers, top off canteens, and string the crew down the rows before the breeze builds toward midday. “Cuttin’” is simple and exacting: hook and slice just below the brush, leave the right length of straw, and drop small, tidy piles every few steps so they’re easy to haul. Keep a file handy and the pace steady. Rush it and you’ll scuff the brush or shatter seed—and you’ll pay for it later at the seeder and on the scale.

“Rickin’” protects what you’ve cut. Pick firm, slightly higher ground. Build a saddle of stalks to lift the brush off the dirt, then stack heads in and butts out, with the open side turned away from the prevailing wind you know is coming. Tight enough to ride out a blow, loose enough to breathe. Cap the top to shed a stray shower, set ricks where cattle can’t knock them, and mark them for the wagon. A good rick stands true and cures straight; a bad one slumps, gathers grit, and costs you.

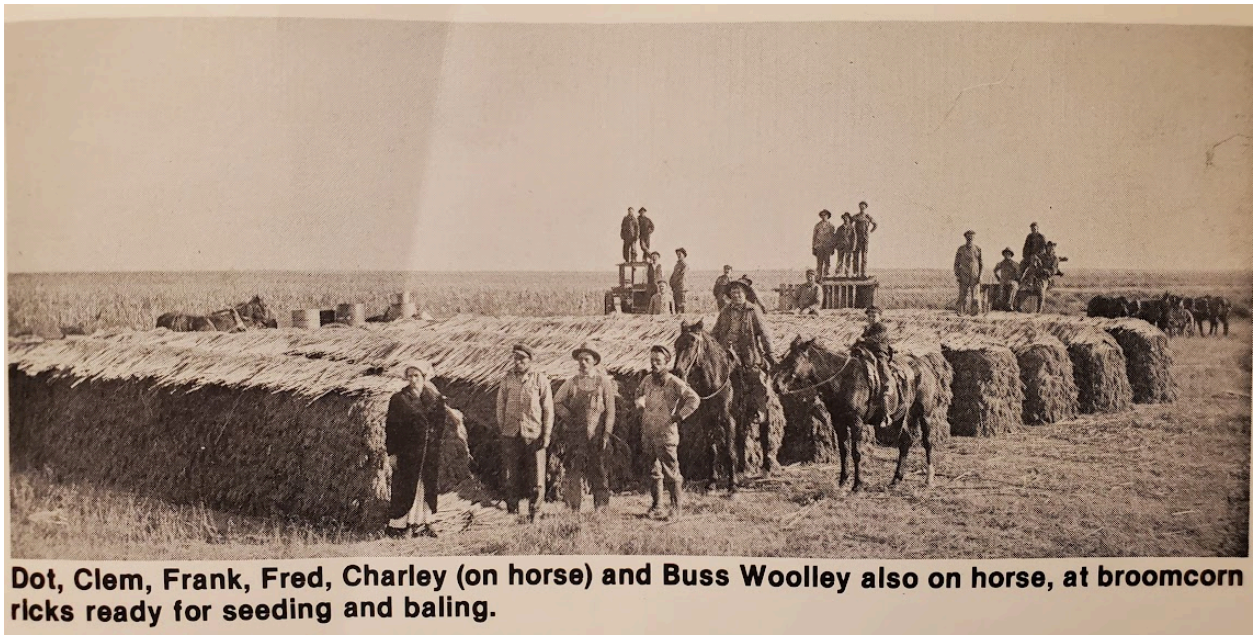
Everything that follows—seeding, baling, hauling—depends on these hours done right. This chapter walks the work the way it was done here in Baca County: stance and grip, cut and pile size, saddle and cap, wind-wise placement, spacing for the wagon, and the small field habits that turned a patch of broomcorn into a crop that came home straight.

Walter Doner's 1949 broomcorn ricks with seeder waiting to do its job.

In the Fall of 1979, Walter and Steve Doner were inspecting broomcorn in the rick belonging to broomcorn buyer Johnnie Morrison. This might have been the last crop raised in Baca County.



Unlike other broomcorn areas where the bush was tried in sheds, Baca County broomcorn, placed in "saddles," was allowed to dry in the field.



Dot, Clem, Frank, Fred, Charley (on horse) and Buss Woolley also on horse, at broomcorn ricks ready for seeding and baling.

Photo taken from Baca County History Book, pg. 37.

20

Even the pigs wouldn't eat it!

-Dick Bishop[21]

First Broomcorn Harvested Tuesday

Richards Farmer Expects to Begin Cutting This Week

Mr. and Mrs. William Gilman and family of Richards were in town Monday. They expressed their intentions of beginning to cut their broomcorn, Tuesday. So far as we have heard, this is the first field of broomcorn ready for cutting.

22

[20] Photo courtesy of Robert Ownbey.

[21] Dick Bishop commented during a discussion about broomcorn seed at a Baca County History Book presentation August, 2, 2025 in Springfield, Colorado.

[22] *Democrat Herald* (Springfield, Colorado) August 20, 1931.

Broomcorn harvesting machines
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1frwjnbYxvzB8V5Z_Hw1ZpyFAl_mUGkCatnm65o9DXEo/edit?usp=sharing

> ***"No machine has yet been invented to successfully replace the hand labor. The men, using broomcorn knives with sharp five-inch knives, move down rows in a field, bending the heads or brush with one hand and cutting the stalk about six inches below the bottom part of the brush with the other hand. "***
>
> -Pueblo (CO) Chieftain October 25, 1971

Trying to Teach a Machine to Cut Broomcorn

For a century the industry said it couldn't be done. Machines could mow, shell, thresh, and bind—but they could not **cut broomcorn** the way a crew with knives could: bending each head just so, reading the height of the brush, and making a clean cut six inches below the panicle. That human judgment—performed thousands of times a day—was the quiet technology no engineer could bottle.

It's easy to stop the story there, as if no one tried. In truth, **inventors tried constantly**. Dr. Sam Moyer once told me that patents for broomcorn "harvesters" stretch back to the **1860s**—dozens of designs meant to cut tall plants, carry the brush intact, sometimes even strip seed or form a bundle on the go.[23] They were detailed engineering ideas designed to cut, and usually partially process, the normally tall plants. It is generally not known if most of these were actually made or if they worked. Starting with the information above and Dr. Moyer's list I decided to dig into this topic and see what else I could find. With the power of the Google patent archive I found many additional broomcorn harvesting inventions which include harvesters, seeders, balers and sizers which date back to 1851. Many lived only on paper. Some were built. A few reached a field—and that is where broomcorn had its say.

Why machines struggled

Broomcorn is grown **for the brush**, not the grain. That flips the usual harvesting logic on its head. A good harvester had to:

- **Cut below the brush without bruising it**, on plants of **uneven height** even in the same row.
- **Keep heads aligned** so the butts stayed even for later seeding and baling.
- **Handle green, flexible material** without twisting, matting, or tearing the panicles.
- Work in **deep sand and wind**, over ruts, piles, and rick-yards—without chewing up the very quality the buyer pays for.

[23] Conversation with the author approximately 2018.

Seeding, Hauling, and Baling

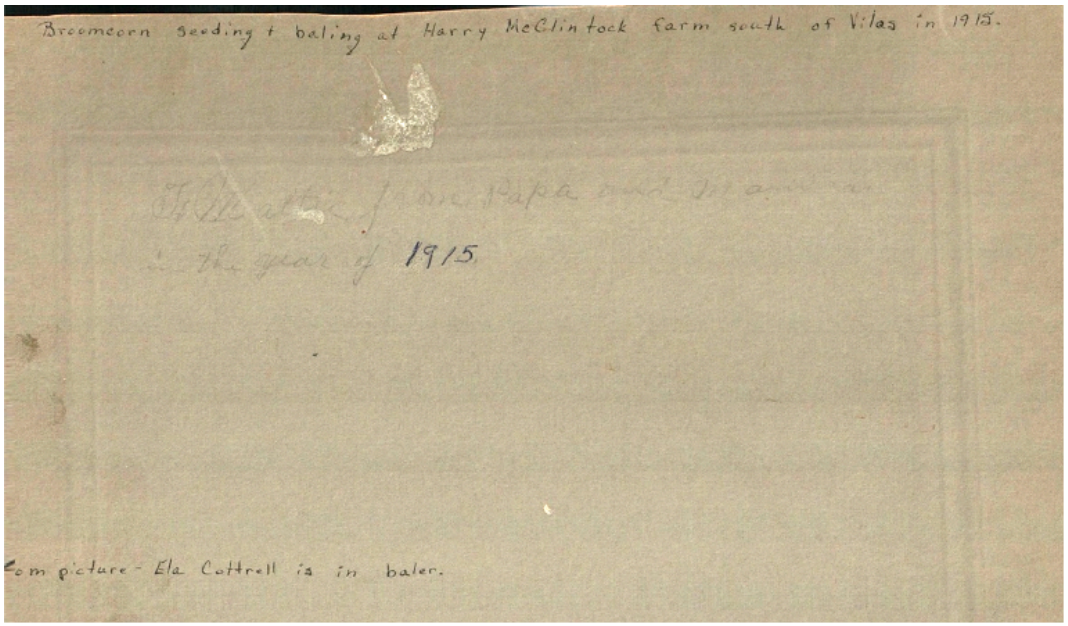
If cutting broomcorn was tough, what came next was tough as well. After harvesting by hand, the broomcorn was hauled to the "rick" and high, waiting its turn at the table. There, clouds of itchy dust rose as men pulled brush from the pile and lined it out for the seeder—a noisy, unforgiving machine that stripped seeds from stalks with relentless efficiency. Powered first by horse, then by tractor and belt, and eventually by small engines and hydraulics, the seeder couldn't pause. Crews of 20 or more worked in a rhythm—pulling, sorting, feeding, and "off bearing"—each man dependent on the next to keep things moving.

The seeded brush was handed off to the baler man, who stood in a wooden baler box, stomping down broomcorn layer by layer until the bale could be wired tight. The broomcorn itch was constant—so bad some men wore goggles and sometimes stopped to move the baler upwind. Horses turned sweep arms. Wire was threaded through narrow slots. Balance was key. Timing was everything.

Every part of the process—rick to table, table to seeder, seeder to baler, baler to truck—was an itchy, dusty, noisy ballet of sweat and coordination. Finished bales, weighing up to 400 pounds, were loaded onto trucks or train cars and sent to market. Some went to Pueblo, some to Springfield and Walsh, some to destinations beyond and all of them bore the marks of backbreaking labor and quiet pride.

This chapter captures the men, the machines, and the muscle that made it all happen.

Broomcorn seeding and baling on the Harry McClintock farm south of Vilas in 1915. Ela Cottrell is in the Baler (See Below).[27]



It would be a more efficient use of space to take the handwritten caption from the back of the picture, but then it would lose some of its personality! "Broomcorn seeding and baling at Harry McClintock farm south of Vilas." "To Mattie from Papa and Mama in the year 1915."

[27] Photo Courtesy of the Baca County Museum.

Seeding broomcorn on the Ray Bishop farm south of Springfield, 1967.[30]

My childhood was all about this! It was around the house, we fed and housed 35-50 "johnnies" , seeded and baled. And if John Morrison (broomcorn buyer) told your dad he would give a nickel more if you jumped in the seed pile (ITCHY), you jumped!

—Sheryl Self Ausmus[31]

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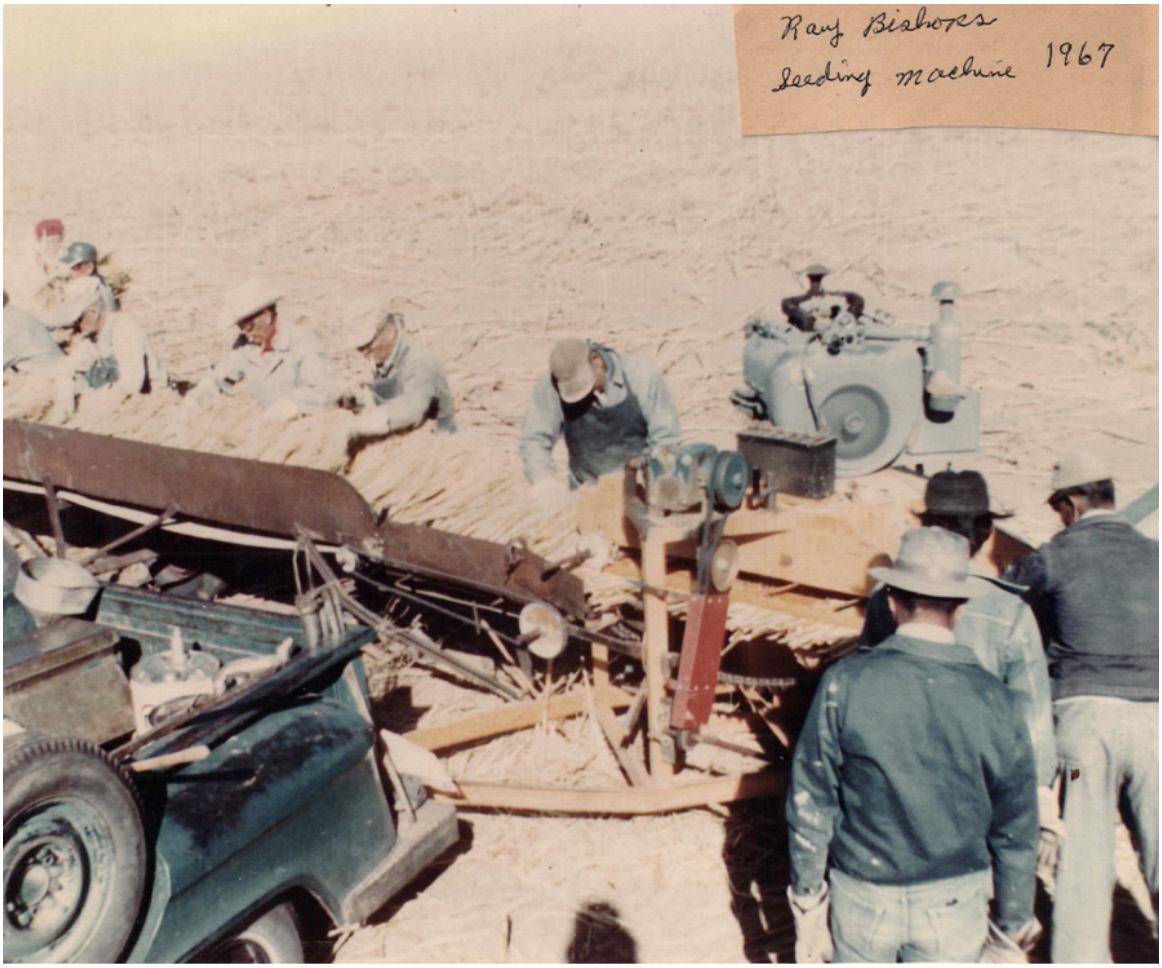
[30] Photo courtesy of Anita Bishop.
[31] Sheryl Self Ausmus, comment on "You Might Be from Baca County," *Facebook*, Month Day,
[32] Photo courtesy of Norma West Miller



In this 1967 picture, you can see the stalks at the end of the brush as it passes through the more modern seeder powered by a Wisconsin engine. The threshing cylinders are set at the same angle to the stalks as the engine is, ensuring that the seeds are stripped the entire length of the brush. The men in the foreground on the right are "off bearers' that transport the de-seeded brush to the "baler man." Photo courtesy of Anita Bishop.

 [33]

Art Bunting, 96, at Kirk Guder's broomcorn demonstration, Sept. 2021, describing the extreme "itch" associated with seeding broomcorn. "All I have ever experienced was milo itch after driving an old Oliver 40 combine with a poor excuse for a cab, but those in the know tell me broomcorn itch was several times worse than milo itch. I am more than content to take their word for it."[34]

[33] Photo courtesy of Ruth Bradford.
[34] Conversation with Steve Doner.