

Excerpts from:

The Story Farm: How Hogs, Dogs, and Dirt Taught a POW's Family to Live

I sat in the pickup holding the new boot box that contained my old gym shoes. We always wore our new shoes out of the store unless they were dress shoes. Leather boots are a lot heavier than sneakers and the weight pulled on my legs as my new boots swung on my feet, which barely reached the rubber floor mat of the Ford.

“They will make your legs stronger,” Augie said.

It was going to take some time to get used to the feeling of having boots tied higher up on my legs.

“Always lace them all the way up to protect your ankles. It will keep them from getting sprained.”

Work boots prepared you for anything.

The fresh leather of my new boots smelled like a new car. They wouldn't smell like that very long, not on a hog farm. The first task when we got home was rubbing the boots with boot paste. We sat on the downstairs steps together and Augie showed me how to dab some paste on a rag and rub it into the boot.

“Be sure to get the paste rubbed into the seams to help stop water,” he instructed.

I already knew how to polish and shine shoes; Grandpa Soberg paid me a quarter per pair. Now I had to take care of these boots so they would take care of my feet.

“You have to polish your boots with paste whenever they dry out after getting wet, otherwise they will crack and the holes will let water and other stuff on your feet.”

I knew what “other stuff” was on a hog farm.

It's often said that clothes make the man, but as far as I was concerned, it was boots that made you a man. Wearing boots made you part of the work, made you a member of the farm crew, and gave meaning to your day. Boots made you walk differently: prouder, more purposeful, stronger.

Elaine made a big deal about my boots; now I would be working outside more. Even my brothers noticed. They teased me about my little boots, but that was OK; I had work boots. Work boots meant responsibility. I felt like a man.

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Any house builder or construction manager can tell you the importance of a good foundation under a building. Augie believed our feet were the foundation for the rest of our bodies. But he and Elaine laid a lot of foundations in our lives: foundations like responsibility, hard work, self-reliance, helpfulness, truthfulness, and compassion. They also taught us that these foundations required regular maintenance, just like our work boots. Sometimes you need to take time to polish your boots to keep them from getting holes or cracks. You always need to know where they are, so they are ready to be worn in our lives.

The Bible references feet and footwear many times, but Augie and Elaine taught us that our strength relies on our foundations, and they taught it with work boots.

Your sandals shall be iron and bronze; As your days, so shall your strength be. Deuteronomy 33:25 NKJV

From the chapter "Polish Your Boots".

We were nearly done baling for the day. Bubba and I stacked the first two tiers and began the third. Bubba was tall enough to place bales on the fifth row without climbing up, so

he rarely stood on the bales. I stood on the top completed tier while Bubba pulled the bales from the chute with a hay hook and tossed them up so I could place them. As we got close to filling the wagon, Bubba and Chuck, who was driving the tractor, decided we could finish the field without stopping to get another wagon. I stayed on top of the tiers and stacked extra layers while Bubba stood in a small spot at the front of the wagon and tossed the bales up over his head. When I was standing on the eighth layer, Bubba got off the wagon because he had stacked bales so close to the front that he couldn't stand there anymore.

"Have your hook ready," he yelled up. "I'll pull these last few bales off the chute and throw them up the side from the ground."

Bubba Joe was not only tall, he was strong. In high school, he played defensive and offensive tackle on the varsity football team. He also threw the shot put and the discus for the track team. Because of his size and strength (and because he sometimes seemed gruff) I was more than a little intimidated.

I had tried my best that day to keep up with the pace to impress him. This was my last chance to show him what I could do. I would be ready. When his bales hit the side of the stack, I would hook them and pull them up to the top by myself. I knelt on the edge of the eighth layer and looked over at Bubba walking on the ground 13 feet below. He pulled off the next bale, glanced up to see if I was ready, swung the bale back a little, and launched it.

It was not a classic shot-put throw, but a little more like a discus throw without the spinning. When the bale hit me in the chest it was still gaining altitude. I was glad I had the hook with me, not to catch the bale, but to dig into the stack and keep myself from falling off the other side of the wagon. I scrambled up and put the bale in place, then looked down at Bubba, who was chuckling as he wound up another bale. I just sat on the first bale and hooked the second one as it went by.

“That’s OK, Bubba,” I hollered down to him. “You keep throwing them up here and I’ll just make sure they land in the right spot.” You had to be ready with Bubba.

We always had to be ready when we baled straw, since neither bales nor hay wagons (nor people) are always the same. The crop rotation plan on the farm always included rye for straw, and that plan included being ready for whatever happened when baling. Planning ahead is not the same as being ready; you must plan how you want things to happen and be ready for when things don’t go according to plan.

Therefore be ready also, for the Son of Man is coming in an hour that you don’t expect him. Luke 12:40 WEB

From the chapter “Baling Straw”.

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