



## *THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS*

### *18 October 2007*

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Tom Skiff can fix just about any machine. He has worked on all three of my tractors, doing everything from simple oil changes to switching the Allis Chalmers' electrical system from 6 volts to 12. He got our old box truck going again and worked on one of our cars. He has rebuilt engines on pulling tractors, fixed up tractor trailers and transformed an old fire truck into a diesel-powered mobile water pump. He can discourse at length on the finer points of a 1953 Chevy flathead six (which I think is some kind of engine but could be a do wop group) and debate the merits of Oliver tractors (reliable, it is true, but they just don't have that torque a Deere delivers). Replacing a blown radiator on a Farmall M demands about as much of his attention as replacing a blown light bulb demands of mine.

But Tom does not just work on engines. He will put back together just about any piece of equipment you bring him. He has fixed a front wheel bearing on the Kubota, got the tailgate on our pickup to open again, welded a cracked gear box on the bush hog, replaced the blades on the tiller, put the grain drill back into working order, modified the mold board plows, straightened the shanks on the hilling disks, transformed the decrepit manure spreader Red English gave me into a wagon and replaced the chains and paddles on the functioning spreader I bought from Bill Connor. He has worked on potato planters, potato hillers and potato diggers. He has repaired chisel plows, disks, hay rakes, balers, seeders, flex tine and S tine cultivators, spin spreaders, tedders, combines.

When just about anything on the farm breaks I head over the hill to Tom's workshop. He built it into the end of the old dairy barn where his ancestors--Skiffs and Beadles—tended their herds for generations. The milk cows have been gone for decades—his father keeps some beef cows—and the milking parlor is home now to welders, sheet metal benders, air compressors, drums of grease and hydraulic fluid, racks of hand tools, jacks and piles of odd pieces of steel and aluminum that might come in handy some day. If I am lucky Tom's there too, working on something or just talking with a pal who stopped in for a beer and a laconic chat about deer hunting or Eric Pearson's chances at the Schaghticoke tractor pull (Eric has strange and magical ways of souping up old Internationals and Farmalls). Tom's father, Stewart, is often there too, puttering around, working on the little horse-drawn buggy on which he like to take his grandchildren for rides around the neighborhood. Eventually the conversation will come around to what I have broken that week and Tom will tell me to bring it over and park it by the shop and he will take a look at it. And if he is not too busy hauling silage for the Wolffs or laying drainage tile or helping the road crew replace culverts or driving a town snowplow or dealing with some more urgent breakdown he will turn up a day or two later to let me know he has mended whatever needed mending.

What he likes best, though, is making things. He does repairs because people need things fixed and he can fix them. But he would rather be putting something together than putting it back together. Show him a photo of some attachment you want and he will get the metal, tanks, fittings, bearings, hoses, bolts, brackets and whatever else he needs and assemble it for you and paint it nicely too before he lets you take it away.

Given Tom's skill and speed, plus his willingness to make house calls and attend to urgent repairs right away, he could certainly charge more and have more work if he wanted. He could take out ads, attend agricultural conferences, get a web site, go out and find customers. And then he could take on a couple of assistants, guys to deal with the greasier issues and boring jobs, to fetch parts and find the right sockets, to climb under trucks and sweep the metal shavings and mud off the floor at the end of the day. If he wanted.

**This week's share: Beets, Broccoli, Carrots, Celeriac, Chard, Garlic, Onions, Peppers, Hot peppers, Fingerling potatoes, Pie pumpkin, Rutabaga, Spinach, Acorn winter squash, Rosemary or thyme**

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Like most of his friends, however, Tom has no interest in being any busier with work than he has to be. Not that he is by any means a lazy man. He will drive a snowplow all night and be at the shop in the morning welding up a busted three point hitch some hapless vegetable farmer neighbor just brought in before getting back to building a new flat bed on a logging truck. But he will do it as he sees fit, when he sees fit, for whom he sees fit. And when he has something better to do—mostly deer hunting and tractor pulls—he goes and does it. He has found a way to make enough of a living doing something he enjoys to have the freedom to take time off to do all the other things he likes.

No doubt many people would say he lacks ambition. They would worry about this odd lack of entrepreneurial spirit, this inefficiency, this sad evidence of our fading work ethic. They would shake their heads and tut tut impatiently and foretell our economic defeat at the hands of eager third world workers. They would observe Tom's preference to make do with very little—and to make much of what he makes do with—and launch into deep economic arguments in favor of unfettered consumer spending. They would note his tendency to give much of his time to doing favors for his friends and dismiss it as some sort of anachronistic, naïve and unsustainable attempt at communal living. They would wave around flow charts and managerial guides and case studies and prove that our economic vitality relies upon everybody learning to work all day and shop all night.

Fortunately, Tom does not give a damn about what such people think of him. Fortunately for me since his indifference means that I get my equipment fixed quickly and cheaply and well. Fortunately for him since his indifference means he leads a reasonable life instead of rushing frantically from one pointless appointment to the next. Fortunately for his friends since his indifference means he is always ready to help them with a bit of trucking or pig butchering or a midnight Halloween hayride. And maybe even fortunately for all the too busy people who might find in his indifference a reminder that always having something to do is not necessarily a virtue or even a good way to get much done.

I trust you have enough free time to deal with this rather hefty bag of vegetables. I had for some reason imagined that the shares might get a little lighter at the end of the season as the cold weather did in various crops. But the unseasonable warmth, large crop of winter squash and a particularly good fall roots patch have conspired to create bags that are just getting heavier. I suppose we could hand out fewer vegetables (does anyone need rutabagas, beets and celery root all in one week?). But we have lots, they look good now, and we don't have many more chances to give them to you. There are only two more weeks left in the CSA season. You will get your last bag on November 1. Not that you have to eat all these roots right away. They store fairly well. Celery root, rutabaga and beets can be perfectly presentable after a couple of months in the refrigerator and potatoes and carrots store just about as well. You can put all those hot peppers you have amassed on a string and hang them up to dry. The onions, garlic and squash will probably sit out on the counter happily until some time after Christmas (we were using last year's garlic in June). All you have to eat now is the chard, spinach and broccoli.

If you feel like you have simply not gotten in enough field work this season, do not despair. You could come out to the farm this Sunday (10/21) and help with garlic planting. Give me a call (692-9065) if this sounds like an irresistible offer and we can figure out a time.

If you brought a dish to the Open House and left it at the farm, let us know what it looks like and we will send it back to you. We also have a pair of glasses with blue frames that one of my workers found in the field recently. We would be happy to return them to their owner too.