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## Review of Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains and Plains Folk II: The Romance of the Landscape

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*Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains.* By Thomas D. Isern. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990. Preface, illustrations, tables, notes, index. xiii + 248 pp. \$29.95.

*Plains Folk II: The Romance of the Landscape.* By Jim Hoy and Tom Isern. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990. Preface, illustrations, indexes. xiii + 202 pp. \$19.95.

For thirty years or so, I've wondered how to spell the word that referred to those little metal nipples I used to pump grease into when I was helping my dad grow wheat. It's not in any dictionary I've ever seen, but it is in Thomas Isern's account of the culture surrounding the reaping and threshing of small grains before the advent of the combine.

The word is spelled "zerk" (p. 44) and I rest easier knowing it.

That's typical of the up-close look at the harvesting process Isern presents in his history. He focuses on the bringing in of wheat, oats, barley, and rye from Texas to the prairie provinces of Canada during the first third of the century. It's a process that mostly ended in the early 1930s when combines began doing the job for about half the previous cost.

The book will tell most of us more than we want to know about the huge steam engines that ran the "bull threshers" that separated the grain from the chaff after it had been cut with binders (which tied the unthreshed grain into bundles) or headers (which moved it onto a "barge" that dumped it into huge stacks). Most of the work was done by "bindlestiffs"—migrant threshermen who, like today's custom combiners, followed the harvest from Texas to Canada.

There's a wealth of photographs and arcane (to the outsider) information here. We find out where the migrant workers came from (mostly the tier of states just to the east, Missouri being the largest supplier), how they got here (some railroads gave them special rates), and how much they typically were paid (in 1909, for example,

from \$2.50 a day for hands who forked the grain into the bull thresher, to \$5-6 a day for the steam engineer—including meals).

Isern mentions the heroic efforts of farm wives and daughters—there's only an occasional male cook—to feed the threshers as many as five meals a day. I suppose the record here is sparse, but I would have liked more on the subject.

The book will be most useful to researchers who really want to immerse themselves in reaping and threshing—who want to get chaff down their necks and swig water from a burlap-covered jug and see how many bundles they can get on their three-tined pitchforks.

The collaboration by Isern and Jim Hoy is much more a surface treatment of a broader area of plains culture. It's a continuation of a 1987 volume, a compilation of syndicated newspaper columns by the two colleagues on the Emporia State University faculty. The columns are categorized into sections on the people of the Plains, the animals, the food, the games, the tribulations, and the remnants of earlier times. The writing is breezy and engaging, with individual pieces on folksy subjects like killing chickens, donkey basketball, making lard, the runsa (or bierock), and the natural affinity of pickups and dogs, including one who liked to ride atop the cab and alarm the occupants by "looking upside down into the front windshield" at forty miles an hour.

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