

by Gary Moore

As a teenager, I worked for neighboring ranchers and farmers in Central Texas. I hauled rocks out of fields, poisoned mesquite trees, worked livestock, and sewed sacks of grain on a tractor pulled combine. But the worst job of all was harvesting broomcorn. It would make many of the jobs featured on the Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs* seem like child's play.

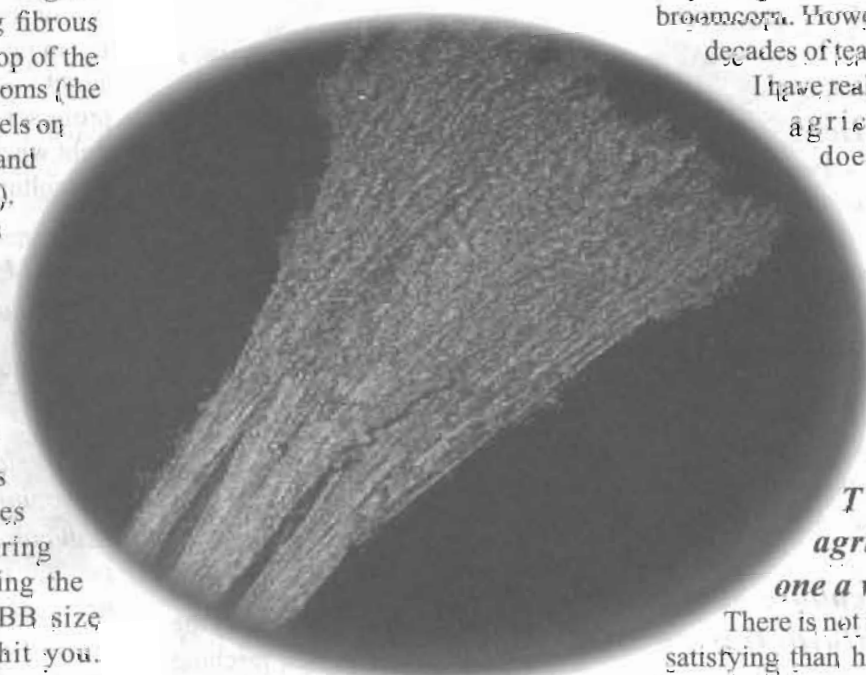
Even though broomcorn looks like a corn plant and grows as tall as corn (if not taller), it is really a type of sorghum (*Sorghum vulgare* var. *technicum*). The long fibrous bundle of panicles on the top of the plant are used to make brooms (the panicles are sort of like tassels on a corn plant but are wiry and stiff with a big seed head). Harvesting these panicles is hard work. One reaches up, often on tiptoes, then grabs the panicles in one hand, and gives a quick jerk downward to snap the panicles off the plant. Of course the itchy, seed heads at the top of the panicles shatter and come showering down on the person pulling the broomcorn. The flying BB size seeds sting when they hit you.

It is typically the hottest time of summer when the broomcorn is harvested so that the seed heads stick to the sweaty workers. This then itches. To minimize the itch, I wore long sleeve shirts and buttoned the top button, which made me hotter and sweeter. One doesn't have to work long to get a back ache from

stretching up to pull the broom corn.

When you get a handful of broomcorn, you bend two plants over and lay your harvested bundle of broom corn straws on these plants. You don't want to lay them flat on the ground because when you come back later with the wagon to load up the broom corn bundles, copperhead snakes would be laying under them to get out of the heat. Of course the wiry straws of the broom corn soon make one's hands tender, blistered and cut.

If this wasn't bad enough, you



came back later, tied the broomcorn into bundles and loaded them on a wagon. Then you would take the broomcorn to a tin shed where the bundles are stacked for curing. Working in the top of an enclosed tin shed in 100 degree weather is not fun either. In a few weeks when the threshing and bundling machinery came to

the farm, you had to unload the broomcorn out of the shed so that the remaining seed heads could be removed and the straws banded. So harvesting broomcorn is the worst job I had while growing up.

The reason I make a big deal of this is, that when I went to college to study to be an agriculture teacher, one of my professors kept stating that teaching agriculture beat working. And I would think back to harvesting broomcorn and would have to agree with him. As a matter of fact, anything would beat harvesting broomcorn. However, after several decades of teaching agriculture, I have realized that teaching agriculture really does beat working.

How Does Teaching Agriculture Beat Working?

Teaching agriculture gives one a warm feeling.

There is not much in life more satisfying than having a group of hard working students in the shop on a cold winter morning. The buzz of the welder and the smile on a student's face who is learning to run a bead just makes one feel good inside. Likewise, transplanting tomato seedlings in the greenhouse on an early spring morning is equally fulfilling. Or for that matter, nearly any teaching activity in

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the agricultural complex is just as satisfying. It might be teaching a group of new students about the FFA. When you are working with a group of students and see the excitement that you are creating, it just seems that everything is right with the world!

Most American's can't report that their jobs make them feel good. They don't want to go to work in the morning. MSNBC.com reports that Americans hate their jobs more than ever before in the past 20 years, with fewer than half saying they are satisfied. Forbes.com cites surveys that have found that 87% of Americans don't like their jobs. As an agriculture teacher I love going to work and working with students. It just makes me feel warm inside.

Teaching agriculture provides for variety.

One of the things I enjoy about teaching agriculture is the variety that is available. I can choose to work in the classroom, or go to the shop, or work in the greenhouse, or go to the land laboratory, or etc., etc. Most teachers and most workers have no control over their daily work environment. Agriculture teachers do. We are not confined to a small 4 x 4 cubicle.

Teaching agriculture allows one to maintain ties to agriculture.

The 172 acres I grew up on in Central Texas is not enough to support me, let alone a family. Yet, I have a love of agriculture. By teaching agriculture, I get to work in an industry I love. Thomas Jefferson stated, "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most

independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands." By being an agriculture teacher, I can belong to the group that Jefferson describes.

Teaching agriculture is like belonging to an extended family.

As I travel across the state of North Carolina, I know that if I had a car problem or a flat tire, I could just call up the local agriculture teacher. He or she would come to my aid. I am pretty sure I could travel across America and experience the same thing. Agriculture teachers belong to a close knit family. We help each other out. We are bound by a common bond. There are not many professions that can say this.

Teaching agriculture pays a living wage.

We all like to grumble about our pay. However, if we are honest we have to admit there are not lots of jobs where people are getting filthy rich. I know of a number of agriculture teachers who are making in the \$80,000 range. That is not bad. And I have neighbors who are constantly concerned that the factory or industry where they work is going to close or downsize. I do have neighbors who have been laid off. Making big bucks is nice, but then so is job security. And most teachers belong to a respectable retirement system. In the overall scheme of things, teaching does pay well and has good benefits. It sure beats the \$1 an hour I made pulling broomcorn.

Agriculture teachers change lives.

In my opinion, the greatest benefit of teaching agriculture is touching lives. Nearly any agriculture teacher in the country can tell stories of the

impact they have made on the lives of their students. I received a letter this summer from a student I taught 32 years ago. I had not heard from this student in all that time. He wanted to thank me for inspiring him to be an agriculture teacher. I never knew I had made any impact on this student. Henry Brooks Adams sums it up when he states, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

Conclusion

Teaching agriculture is a demanding job. Research shows that agriculture teachers put in about 55 hours a week. But the rewards of teaching agriculture far outweigh the negative aspects. And as I get older and realize that I am no longer physically capable of pulling broomcorn all day or roofing houses (I did that too in my younger days), I have to admit that my agriculture education professor at Tarleton State was right when he said that teaching agriculture sure beats working.

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