

From the Stacks
By Julie Orf
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My memories of childhood are painted in the dusty whites and rich browns of the Missouri Bootheel, a place where the landscape was defined by rows of cotton and the changes of the farming seasons. I was a cotton farmer's daughter in the 1970s, and my playground wasn't a park, it was a field. My daddy's work was our life, and I learned about dedication and change long before I understood what those words truly meant.

My first job was "helping" Daddy with the harvest. This was before the days of modern machinery, when cotton was still loaded into tall, wire-framed trailers. My specific and favorite task was to "tromp" the cotton. After the picker ran the rows, it would empty the bounty into the trailer, and my siblings and I would climb up inside. Our job was to jump and stomp, packing the fluffy white cotton down as tightly as possible. The air was thick with flying fibers, and it felt like we were playing in a massive, soft cloud. It was a dusty, sweaty, joyous game that made us feel like we were an important part of the harvest. We weren't just playing; we were helping our dad, a feeling of pride that no toy could ever match.

Sometimes my view of the harvest changed from inside the trailer to a seat high above the field, riding with Daddy on the two-row cotton picker. This powerful machine was a marvel to me. I would sit on a small perch, my legs dangling, watching the rows of green and white disappear under the machine and emerge as a flowing stream of cotton into the hopper. The hum of the engine, the smell of fuel and damp earth, and the sight of Daddy's steady hands at the controls are all stored in my mind and heart. He would talk about taking the cotton to the gin, explain the importance of the weather, and simply enjoy my company. It was during those long rides that I truly understood the deep connection a farmer has to the land. It was a quiet love, expressed not in words but in the careful attention to every detail of the crop.

The 1980s brought significant changes. The familiar sight of trailers was replaced by something entirely new: modules. These massive, compacted blocks of cotton sat in the fields like giant, rectangular loaves of bread, waiting to be pulled into a truck and taken to the gin. The old wire trailers were gone. The joyous tromping sessions were a thing of the past. The efficiency was undeniable, but a part of the simple, physical labor was gone, replaced by a more industrial process. It was a stark visual representation of how technology was reshaping our world, even in the quiet fields of Missouri. The modules were practical, but they lacked the sense of hands-on labor that I had known as a child.

My father's life spanned an incredible arc of agricultural history. He went from hand-picking cotton with his family to operating a two-row picker and ultimately witnessed the

dawn of the module builder. He saw the shift from a highly manual, labor-intensive lifestyle to one dominated by powerful machinery and technological innovation. Despite all this change, one thing remained constant: his profound love for the land. He loved the smell of plowed soil. He wasn't just a farmer. He understood that the soil was a gift, something to be nurtured and protected. He taught me that the land gives back what you put into it, not just in terms of crops, but in the lessons of patience, resilience, and hard work.

My daddy's story is an example of the American farming experience. He embraced new technology to survive and thrive, but he never lost sight of the fundamental connection to the earth that had been passed down through generations. I am no longer a little girl tromping cotton in a dusty trailer, but the lessons I learned in those field, hard work, the beauty of the seasons, and the quiet dignity of a farmer, are a permanent part of who I am. Daddy saw many changes, but his love for the land was a constant, and it is a legacy I will always cherish.