



Reaping the Wheat

Text and Photographs by Diane Hamilton

THERE'S A MARKER IN KINSLEY, Kansas, that says you are exactly halfway between New York and San Francisco. You are also in the heart of wheat country, and at midsummer the fields buzz with the activity of the harvest. Phalanxes of combines inch through the crops, while fleets of dump trucks grind back and forth between field and elevator with their loads of grain. For more than a week, the conveyor belts on top of the proud towers that punctuate the prairie landscape never stop running.

Although machines have vastly increased the average size of farmers' operations, for some, growing and cutting wheat is still very much a family affair. Farmers Darrel and Karen Miller may be able to plant ten times as much acreage as Miller's grandfather, the first person to grow wheat in Edwards County ("He shoveled it right out of the wagon

Willie Jackson and Darrel Miller wait for the combines to come in ahead of an approaching storm.

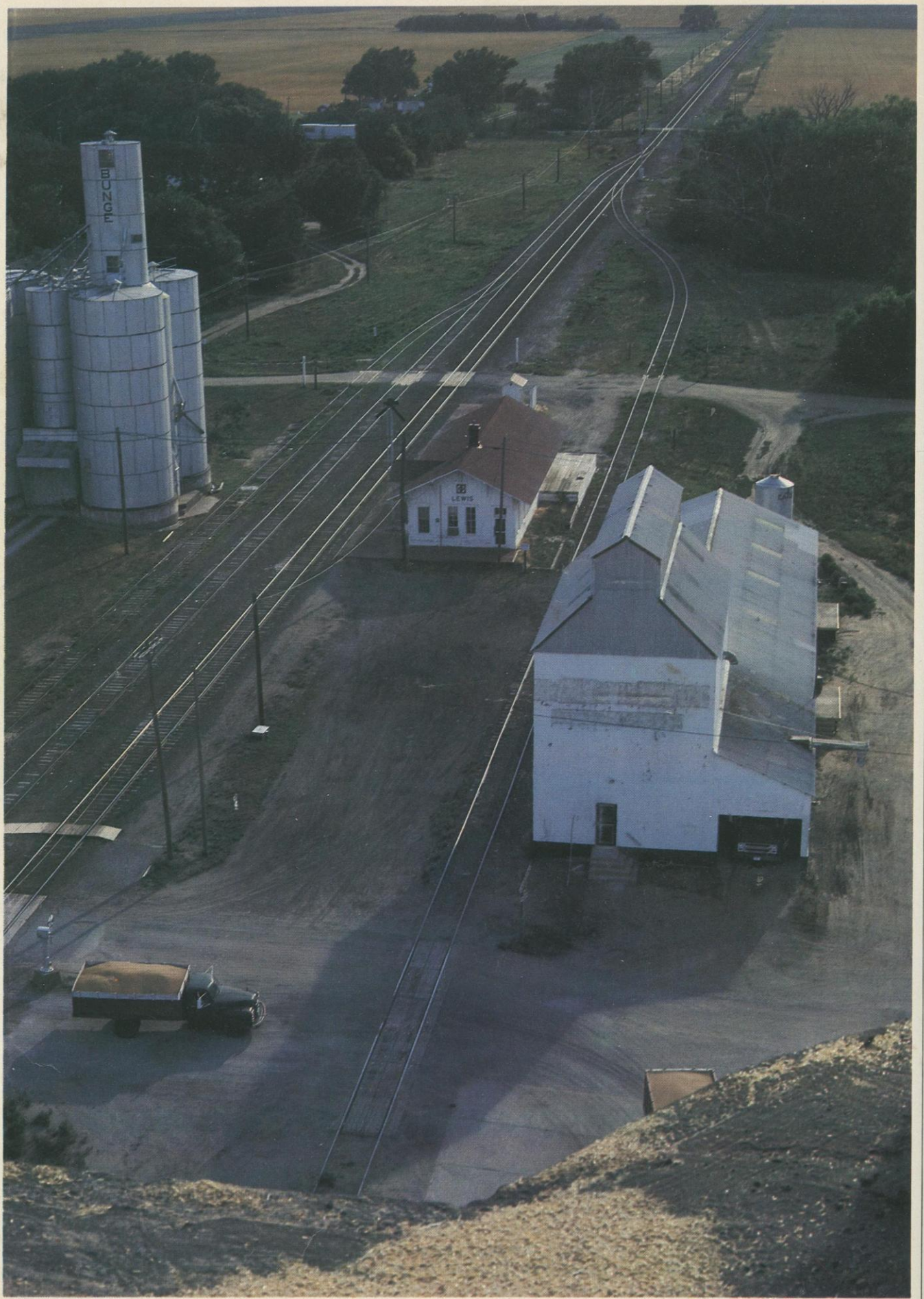
into the boxcar"), but the various parcels and quarter-sections they plant still belong to aunts, uncles, grandmothers, parents, and in-laws. At sunset, friends and relatives in pickups gather along the sandy roads bordering the wheat fields to watch the combines, trade stories about past harvests, and speculate on the size of the crop.

For custom harvester Willie Jackson of Roosevelt, Oklahoma, harvesting is a family business, too. While Willie and his crew run three combines, his wife Noreen shops, does laundry (she's famous on the circuit for starching and ironing her husband's work shirts and overalls), cooks chili casseroles, chicken enchilada pies, peach cobblers, and makes gallons of iced tea for everyone. The Jacksons' nephew Dave owns and operates one of the combines, while another nephew Mark, sixteen, is on the road for the first time this summer as driver of one of the trucks. Their daughter Jenny has spent nearly all her summers following the harvest, which

used to take the family up through Montana. They finish up in Kansas now, but Jenny couldn't stay away, even though she is now a school teacher and recently married. Harvest gets in the blood. It also gives the two families, who have worked together for twenty-seven years, a chance to catch up on a year's worth of news.

At the edges of many wheat fields stand farmhouses, empty now but for field mice and swallows, sheltered by groves of cottonwood and scrub growth. These deserted homesteads contrast silently—and sadly—with the bustle and excitement of the harvest and serve as memorials to families who took part in past harvests, who built windmills, dug storm cellars, and strung barbed wire on the patch of Kansas prairie that was their home.

"You're going to see a lot more farm sales this year," says Miller. The 1979 wheat crop was the biggest in Kansas history, and he made some money—not enough to pay off his bank debt, but enough to cover costs





During the height of the harvest there is a steady flow of wheat-laden trucks into the Lewis, Kansas, elevator, left. Above, a truck unloads its cargo of grain. At the right are Karen and Darrel Miller, with their son Bryan, who is a student at Kansas State.



and show a profit of about \$10,000. Early forecasts show the 1980 crop at only 75 per cent of last year's, however. And while costs have escalated (fuel is up by 100 per cent, fertilizer by 60 per cent, interest by 30 per cent) crop prices this spring were lower than last year's. At current price levels, size is no guarantee of success.

Testifying in Washington, D.C., recently, Crawford Barber, presi-

dent of an agricultural-supply business in Greensburg, Kansas, confirmed the bleak outlook: "We've been feeding our population at the expense of the farmer. We've constantly gotten into bigger and bigger units, and we've finally reached the point where we've gotten to the big guy. The typical operation in our area is two thousand acres—four times what it was twenty-five years ago.

"We might lose twenty per cent of our farmers this year and fifty per cent in two years. It's a problem of fantastic magnitude."

"I farm what thirteen families used to farm," says Darrel Miller's neighbor Alvin Wheaton. "I wonder if it wasn't better when thirteen families farmed it." ◇

DIANE HAMILTON, a professional picture researcher, wrote about farm economics in our September 1979 issue.