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Meet the *real* children of the corn

By ZACH BROKENROPE
The Tattoo

"GREAT, EASY, FUN! DOES THIS SOUND LIKE THE SUMMER JOB FOR YOU?! IF SO CONTACT YOUR S&J DETASSELING SPONSER NOW!"

That's what the flyers all across Aurora Middle School boldly proclaimed as they were plastered on every wall near every drinking fountain in the building. The advertisement was, of course, a flat out lie; and having detasseled a year previous to middle school I knew it, but yet I also knew my parents would force me to once again enter those dreaded Nebraska cornfields.

What? You've never heard of detasseling? Oh, cherish that sweet innocence. Okay; since you *don't* know about it I'll explain.

Detasseling takes place in a cornfield, which of course has corn stalks. On top of every corn stalk is a bushy green sprout called a tassel (no, not like the ones on graduation hats) and the detasseler's job is to walk through the field and pull these tassels off one by one in order to produce a better quality plant for the farmer's field. Sound easy? Well, read on.

Rise and shine

Detasseling requires its workers to get up early, and I'm not just talking six o'clock early. I'm talking God-himself-doesn't-get-up-this-dang-early. I'm talking four o'clock, and for a teenager, that's beyond comprehension.

The morning starts with the loud rhythmic drone of my alarm, which by the end of the summer I hated and feared. By that point, the mere sound of an alarm going off on TV would freak me out.

I sluggishly and grudgingly pull myself from the bed and try to complete the almost impossible task of inserting my contacts into my eyes. In my first year of detasseling, my mom had to put them in for me, prying open my sleepy eyelids with the fingers of one hand while popping the contact in with the other.

As we board the rickety old school bus that will take us to the first of possibly four cornfields, we all are silent, each knowing and accepting that what lies ahead may be the most awful job of our lives.

Mud

When we get to the cornfield, it's usually wet from rain or irrigation. To us, that means one thing - mud.

It means the cornfields will be gooey, and with every slow step, your shoes will sink deeper and deeper, resulting in a sucking sound as you attempt to extract your foot and shoe at the same time.

Later that day, this same mud will dry and cake around your shoes, making them heavy and weighted to the ground as if you were carrying adobe bricks on your feet.

Everyone gets split into groups of four, one kid for each row. Each row is a mile and a half long. When you walk up one and down another, this is called a round. Usually most good groups can do up to eight rounds a day.

Our bosses don't just throw us into the fields



Craig Ediger / The Tattoo

Dwarfed by the Nebraska corn, are, left to right, Katie Zapka, 15, Travis Gustafson, 15 and Jessica Cervantes, 14.

Real pleasant.

Both of our bosses are teachers. Dana Thompson is the computer teacher and Ivan Soper teaches agricultural education, but Thompson is the one you most often see in the fields.

Nicknamed Mr. T, Thompson is a big, burly guy who at times is fun and great to be around but at other times can be terrifying, especially if he's talking to you about your work and if it's not being done right. Soper is different. He is usually more relaxed and is the guy that tells you where you are going to enter the fields next. Plus he's also the guy that tells you when you get to go on lunch break, so you've gotta like him for that.

So how many years did my bosses detassel in their youth? Not one. Oh, the irony.

In the morning

The morning hours of detasseling are horrible. Farmers irrigate their crops during the wee hours of the morning, which results in muddy fields. This water also keeps moisture in the field. The humidity makes it feel like you're dying in an unbelievably hot sauna when it's not even that hot in the regular air outside the cornfield. Oddly enough, when the fields are dry, it can be cold enough to see your breath in the crisp air.

In addition to the sauna effect, the corn rows have the tendency to fill with water, and I'm not talking about little puddles. These muddy water pits are one to two feet deep. In the center of the field where the land tends to dip, it can get even deeper. Here the water congregates in a mixture of molding, rotting corn and chemicals, producing a horrible stench that smells like a cross between a cesspool and a putrid pile of vomit.

Walking through these pools is disgusting, and trust me, we all despise it. The worst part about this is when the water rises to your waistline and sloshes in ripples up to touch your shirt and flows through your shoes and clothes.

There is a silver lining, though. For us, it's the annual tradition of pushing other kids into the water as they wade through it. Sure, it's a little juvenile, and yes, it's a little mean. But it's fun and no one really cares by the end of the day because everyone realizes it's something we do to keep the boredom from driving us crazy.

Afternoons in the sun

The mornings end at about 11 as the heat of the pounding sun beats down relentlessly from the sky. By now the moisture in the fields has evaporated, and the mud has dried into dirt, crusting itself around shoes, ankles, pants and legs.

Sending the full force of its blistering heat onto your neck, the merciless midday sun tempts you to risk taking off your rain slicker and leaving you unprotected.

The worst thing for many detassellers is the eerie silence that seems to smother you in the middle of the fields. Out there, all you can hear is the chirping of crickets and other insects. For many of us, this is too much, so we begin to sing.

It begins with someone gently humming a barely audible tune to themselves, and then other people begin to catch on, slowly singing the words: "Sweet home Alabama, Lord I'm coming home to you."

Of course none of us can possibly carry a tune, but that's beside the point. I think everyone singing together is kind of a cool thing because even though every one of us comes from different school cliques and social classes, here in the cornfields we're all equal.

No one is different because we face the same situation and problems. No one has better clothes than anyone else because they're all tattered and filthy. None of us cares about our looks because we're all dirty, and no one is glam-

orous. That's why we can sing.

When the field reaches its hottest point in the day, a smell - a sickening smell that permeates your body and lingers long after you exit the field, making you want to cut off your nose - takes the place of the dampness.

Around 3 p.m. your feet begin to hurt. The rows of corn are slanted - growing toward the sun - so you have to walk at an angle and your shoes rub against the skin, causing an awful condition called planters warts.

Planters warts grow inside your feet instead of on the outside; I have had about 15 of them. It's extremely hard to get rid of these stubborn warts - they have to be burned off with liquid nitrogen.

Still think detasseling is an easy job? Maybe you're inhuman.

Corn rash

My least favorite part of the job is corn rash, another delightful side affect of my dear summer job, along with killer headaches and going to bed before 5 p.m. Corn rash occurs when you walk through the rows and the corn leaves scrape up against any uncovered piece of skin, like your arms, legs, neck, or even your face.

The leaves cut a small gash into your skin that isn't deep enough to bleed, but in time produces scabs. When this happens it irritates your skin beyond belief, making you itch and squirm and your arms burn in agony.

Everyone gets corn rash, no matter how much you try to avoid it. It's just a normal part of the job, something we detassellers joke about. In my first year on the job, the company gave all the employees a t-shirt listing "The Top Ten Reasons I Detassel." Number five was, "Hey, Who Doesn't Like Corn Rash?"

Going home

Despite all the bad things that come with detasseling, there is one good thing that I can say the job offers.

It's the feeling of respect.

When you hop on that bus at the end of the day - dirty, smelly, and tired as hell - you know that you just *accomplished* something. You know that if you hadn't done your job, farmers wouldn't have their crops and people worldwide wouldn't have corn.

Respect also comes from the people who see you when you arrive in town - it's the all-knowing look on their faces as they realize that you just finished doing something that many of them couldn't do.

That's why I detassel.

Zach Brokenrope, 14, is a freshman at Aurora Middle School in Aurora, Neb. and has been a member of *The Tattoo* for a year. This is Brokenrope's first major piece for *The Tattoo*.



Joe Keo / The Tattoo

There's no need for a shower before detasseling, so I just pull on my clothes. It's the usual for the job: a pair of shoes that my feet threaten to burst out of at any second, a pair of almost-too-tight blue jeans with shorts underneath, and of course the required ball cap to block at least some of the sun's harmful rays.

Next I go to the kitchen, careful not to make much noise as I don't want to disturb my still sleeping parents and siblings. Here I pack my lunch - a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a Ziploc bag of Funiyuns that will be soggy by lunchtime and a Frappuccino, the sole quencher of my affair with caffeine.

Water, of course, is an essential. If you don't have it, you risk becoming deathly dehydrated and passing out in the fields.

By this time it is about 4:45 a.m. and the bus is leaving the middle school parking lot in 15 minutes. I go into my parents' room and wake my mom up to drive me there.

My mom detasseled forever, putting in about 10 years in the fields, and that was back in the medieval times for detasseling. Back then the only bathroom they had was the cornfield. Portapotties were a distant dream.

About 60 kids arrive every morning. The crew is larger than that, but not everyone comes every single day.

Nebraska state law allows kids as young as 12 to work up to 40 hours a week in the cornfields. Most of us earn minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour, though some are paid by the row and can earn much more - or a lot less - depending on their speed.

and say, "Hey, do your job." There are some insurance issues they have to go through first.

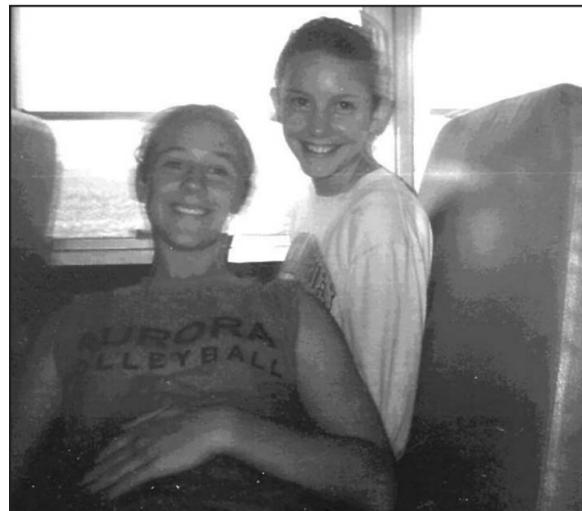
1. Every child must at all times wear protective eyeglasses and gloves to prevent cuts and infection from the sharp corn leaves.

Why Insurance Rule #1 sucks: The glasses are big and green and steam up easy in the humid cornfields, making you look like you have gigantic bug eyes. Eventually when you get far enough into the field you can take them off as long as you don't run into the boss. The gloves are all right but they begin to smell like mold after the first week and no matter how many times they go through the washer, the stench lingers.

2. Every group must contain a checker, preferably a youth over the age of 16 whom the boss considers responsible.

Why Insurance Rule #2 sucks: Checkers are older kids who walk behind your group of four and pull the tassels you miss. If you miss too many, they are required to tell the boss and you could be fired. This rarely happens, however, as it is hard enough to find people to do the job to begin with.

This rule doesn't always suck, but it can, depending on the checker. Some of them are unbelievably cool and you can click with them in an instant. Others? Well, some seem to think their life's goal is to be miserable and make other people miserable, too. On my first day, I got stuck with a bad checker who would intentionally pick on someone. She'd take your tassels and if you missed too many, she'd slap you across the face with them at the end of your row.



Jessica Cervantes / The Tattoo

Left, Lizzie McDaniels, 13 and Carrisa Sanders, 13, heading home from the cornfield on the detasseling bus.

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