

# Two Cents a Bale

*by* Con Chapman

Ronnie and Jim picked me up around nine. I thought it was kind of a late start, but they said they couldn't start baling hay until the sun burned off the dew. I don't know whether they knew that for a fact. Both of them lived in town, like me.



They were juniors going to be seniors in the fall. I was a freshman going to be a sophomore. They were going to be co-captains of the football team. I wanted to make the team and get my letter. They had both gotten letters when they were sophomores—it was a big deal since it was the first year you were eligible. I had told them I wanted to bale hay with them if they ever needed somebody because I wanted to build myself up. I didn't have anything else lined up.

They drove up to the curb in Jim's flat-bed truck with their usual shit-eating grins on. I knew I was in for a fair amount of abuse—that's the way they operated. I'd be the low man on the totem pole all day. Being defensive captain of the freshman team didn't mean a thing to them, except maybe an excuse to give me more grief than somebody who wasn't going to amount to anything.

"We couldn't find anybody else," Ronnie said out the passenger side window. He didn't even say "Hi" first.

"Yeah," Jim said. "So we thought of you."

"Thanks for callin' me. I didn't have anything to do."

"You will now, pal," Ronnie said. "You got any work gloves?"

I had never baled hay before. "No—do I need them?"



Ronnie looked at Jim like that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. Ronnie looked up to Jim, who was taller and better looking.

"You'd better bring some if you've got 'em," Jim said.

I ran back to the house. It was Saturday so my dad was home. "Do we have any work gloves."

“There's some old leather gloves out in the garage, but they're handball gloves, not really work gloves—that's all I've got.”

My dad owned a clothing store, so he didn't need work gloves. I ran out to the garage and found the gloves; they were old and cracked and I could barely get my hands in them. My dad hadn't used them since he lived in St. Louis where there were handball courts, that must have been twenty years ago.

Jim honked the horn—Ronnie probably put him up to it. I ran out to the truck, trying to stick the gloves in my back pocket but they were so stiff they wouldn't fit.

“What the hell are those?” Ronnie asked sarcastically.

“They're all we've got.” I started to get in, but Ronnie didn't open the door.

“Let me see 'em,” he said and he grabbed them out of my hands. He looked at them and showed them to Jim.

“Those will do you for today, but you'll probably get blisters. You should get some real work gloves if we don't finish today.”

“The stores will be closed tomorrow.”

“Tough shit,” Ronnie said, then looked at Jim to see if he thought it was funny. Jim just looked straight ahead.

“C'mon, we got to get going. Get in.” he said.

It was Jim's truck, so he called the shots. Ronnie got out and let me in; he wanted to ride shotgun, not sit in the middle.

We rode out to LeClair's farm south of town. I knew Rowena—she's two grades behind me, but she's already stacked. She and her mom were sweeping the porch as we drove up the road to the back lot where the barn was. Old man LeClair was working on an auger.

“Hey there, Mr. LeClair,” Jim said as he got out of the truck cab.

“How you boys doin' today?” LeClair asked. I got a pit in my stomach once we were all standing up together, thinking of what was ahead of me. Old man LeClair was tall and thick, Jim was tall and thin, Ronnie was short and thick, and I was short and thin. I wondered if I'd even be able to pick up the bales, much less thrown one on the truck bed.

“Pretty good,” Jim said. “You got some hay you want us to put up?”

“Yep,” Leclair said. “It’s supposed to start raining Sunday around noontime. I figure it will take the four of us today and a good part of tomorrow. Any of you church-goers?”

Ronnie kinda laughed, then he stopped when he saw that old man LeClair was serious. “No sir,” he said once he was under control.

“I don’t mind if you are, I’m just trying to time things,” he said. “I might have to go see Doc Lowe in the morning. I’ve got the gout.”

None of us knew what that was, but LeClair didn’t look like he wanted to be walking around. “You gonna use that truck of yours?” he asked.

“Might as well,” Jim said. “Save you the gas money.”



“Well, I appreciate that.”

We got back in the truck and followed him down into the low fields just behind his barn. He was driving his hay baler, which looked to be in pretty good shape. He was going to bale the hay, Jim would drive the truck, Ronnie would throw the bales up and I would stack them for starters.

We got going and I made a mess of things pretty quick. I didn't know how you were supposed to stack the bales and was just pushing them up against the cab of the truck.

“Hold it,” Ronnie yelled out to Jim, while LeClair drove on. Then he said “Don't you know anything?” to me.

“I told you, I've never done it before.”

"It's just common sense. Git down and I'll stack for awhile. Watch how I do it."

Jim started to drive again, and I picked up the bales and watched Ronnie stack. He laid some bales down cross-wise, and some length-wise, so the levels criss-crossed a little. "You got to rip-rap 'em, so the stack don't tip over when you go around a curve," he said.

Jim was going faster than I could keep up with; I couldn't really throw the bales on the truck bed, I had to walk them to the edge and push them up.

"You okay?" Ronnie yelled at me, "'Cause if you stack and it falls over it's going to set us back."

"I'm okay," I said. I kinda figured out how to do it without seeming like a weakling; you had to get your knee under the bale and boost it onto the truck bed in one motion. If you missed, the truck was moving and you had to get up some speed before you tried again; there'd be other bales along the way to get too, so the truck would have to slow down and wait for you.



We kept at it until the sun was straight overhead, then we headed back to the barn with a load. Ronnie said we'd already done a thousand bales and bragged that he'd barely broke a sweat. "How you doin'?" he asked me with a smile that had some contempt in it.

"Fine," I said.

"You don't look fine."

"I'm all right." I didn't want him to see it, but it had already been the worst day of my life; dirty, hot and hard.

We unloaded the truck into the barn, which was easier but still hard in a different way. Jim would throw the bales off the truck onto a chute that would carry them up to a door on the second story, then Ronnie and I would drag the bales back into the loft. Since it was easier to throw bales off the truck than it was to stack them, you had to hustle to keep up.

When we were done Mrs. LeClair brought dinner out to a table under a big tree and we ate. "You reckon you boys can keep up this pace?" LeClair asked.

"Don't know why not," Jim said. "We got a rookie here who's bascially child labor, but he's catching on."

LeClair smiled at me, nicer than Jim or Ronnie had. "It ain't hard once you get the hang of it," he said. "Anyway, we keep up like this we might finish tonight, I wouldn't need you tomorrow. Be good to get it all in before the rain."

Jim gave LeClair a sideways glance, looked down at his hands, then spoke. "We haven't talked about price yet."

You could tell LeClair was surprised at what Jim said. He probably wasn't used to football players or farm boys haggling with him.

"It's two cents a bale, like it always is," LeClair said.



"Price has gone up," Jim said. His head and his body were still, like a deer's when it hears something. "It's three cents a bale now."

Mrs. LeClair had brought out another pitcher of iced tea, and she caught the tail end of this exchange. You could tell she didn't like Jim's attitude, and she didn't want LeClair to give in. After she put the pitcher down she picked up the empty bowl that the corn had been in but instead of going back in the house she just stood there.



"I've never paid three cents a bale before," LeClair said.

"You don't have to now," Jim said, real cool-like. "And we don't have to finish the job."

I heard Mrs. LeClair give a little snort while the old man ran the numbers in his head. "Three boys times three cents a bale is nine. Thousand bales would be \$90."

"And you probably got another two thousand out there, don't ya reckon?" Jim said. "That's \$270." That sounded like a lot of money to me. I looked at LeClair—he didn't look like a rich man, that was for sure.

"Well, I can get somebody else to do it for two cents," he said.

"Fine with me," Jim said. "Pay us two cents a bale for this morning's work and we'll be on our way."

LeClair looked up at Jim, then up at the sky to the south. There were clouds but they were white, not gray. He was probably trying to figure how much time he had before the rain came.

"I wouldn't pay that much," Mrs. LeClair said. LeClair didn't even look at her, he just stared at Jim, who stared right back at him.

"Well, I wish you would've told me before we got started," LeClair said, sounding resigned. "I don't know of anybody else who charges that much, and I could've got them."

"Suit yourself," Jim said. If he'd said it to his own dad in the tone he used it would have got him in trouble for smarting off, but we were out there doing business. I could see that made a difference. LeClair needed us more than we needed him.

"All right," LeClair said finally. "Let's finish up and get back to work."

Mrs. LeClair exhaled with disgust. I imagined she had visions of something she wanted, something she'd have to do without for some time. Maybe something my mom had that she didn't, like a washing machine, that would make her life easier.

Jim and Ronnie stood up, all serious-like, as if they'd been made grown men by the experience. LeClair walked down to the gate where he'd left the hay baler. Ronnie asked if he could drive for a while and Jim said yes. I got up in back on the truck bed and as I stood up behind the cab I saw Ronnie give Jim that grin of his.

