

Parts person

Breaking down just won't be the same

June 21, 1999

There aren't many positive angles to breaking down in the hay field.

But, in Towner, we had one thing to look forward to when the wobble-head on our mower exploded or a bearing decided it couldn't bear another day of our hard labor – we could look forward to jumping in the pickup with our collection of steel fragments and going to see Nancy, a.k.a. “the parts lady.”

Breaking stereotypes

If someone asked you to paint a picture in your mind of a person behind a mechanical parts counter, you might picture some burly, grumpy guy in a sleeveless snap-front shirt with a five o'clock shadow and a 4:55 p.m. attitude.

You might imagine hearing him growl, “What do you mean you don't have the part number? You expect me to waste 15 minutes looking up your \$2 tube? I got better things to do. Why don't you go buy some new equipment that won't break down so I can take a break and get back to reviewing my 1984 baler babes swimsuit calendar!”

That may be a stretch, but we've probably all run across a parts man that resembled at least portions of that stereotypical description on certain days.

Nancy blew that stereotype right out of the water when she got into the parts and repairs business. She was a regular ray of sunshine in a dimly lit world of broken down machinery.

She could cheer up the grumpiest of frustrated farmers and cranky cowboys. Her attitude was contagious and, before you knew what hit you, you'd forgotten about the hay that was down, the rain that was coming and the dirty, greasy job you had ahead of you.

Nancy's business was a place where you kinda liked to spend a little time in reflection and small-town conversation. It had a good long parts counter with comfortably cushioned stools for sitting customers and lots of leaning room for those who preferred to stand and visit.

She could find your part, with or without a number and a detailed description, as good as anyone in the business. And she could do it in a way that made you wish you'd broken a few more pieces so that you could give her a little more business and help support one of the last businesses in a dwindling rural town.

Prime of life

One day I was in at Nancy's to pick up some grease or anti-freeze when the conversation turned from the weather and the farm markets to something that made thunderstorms and the cattle on feed report look like the most trivial topics in the world.

“They found cancer in me,” she said as I sat next to her counter drinking a Styrofoam cupful of coffee. I tried to handle the news with a trait common among folks in agriculture – hope.

We both talked of the hope that the doctors could remove it, treat her and that we could add her story to the list of successful fixes made at Towner Parts and Repairs. The whole community shared in that hope.

Last summer, our community held a funeral for a 58-year-old lady who made breaking down and going to town for parts a pretty positive experience. I wish I knew what the part number was that we needed to help repair a cancer. I wish I could have looked it up, gone to the shelf and gotten her back in the field.

