*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**The magic of morning fog**

The downhill ride of summer is heading straight toward fall. Nowhere do we notice it more than in the shortening days. From the beginning to the end of August we lose 34 minutes of sunlight in the morning and 46 minutes in the evening in the La Crosse area.

It’s also the time of year when early mornings in the Coulee Region are a magical time; fog and mist hang in the valleys.

The scientific explanation is that a cooler overnight temperature matches the dew point. Water vapor condenses into liquid-water droplets suspended in the air. All I know is that it creates a backdrop of mystery and beauty.

One recent morning I was heading out about 6 a.m. for a business meeting two hours away. The sun had not yet risen above the eastern hills as I entered the Beaver Creek Valley only a couple of miles from my home.

Beaver Creek was a post office at the turn of the 20th century. Upper Beaver Creek Lutheran Church still stands near the junction of county roads C and N about 9 miles south of Taylor, Wisconsin.

A classic red barn stands on a farm homesteaded in 1857 by Tollef Nelson, a Norwegian immigrant who came to America with his parents. Norwegians like my great-great-grandparents descended upon our area during that era. Typical of families at that time, Nelson raised a large family and served in the Civil War.

Nelson’s obituary from September 1913 said, “Mr. Nelson may be said without any show of exaggeration to have been one of the very best and truest men in Jackson County. His word was always good, he met his obligations promptly, and was always mindful of the feelings and rights of others. His was true Christian character and he held the high esteem of everybody who knew him. He was truly a good man, as well as a successful one in his chosen following, farming.”

The farm passed on to his son, Louis Nelson. Louis and Mabel Nelson had 10 children, according to a 1931 Atlas and Farmers’ Directory for Jackson County. The farm passed in 1993 from the Nelson family to John and Carolyn Hogden. Raymond and Emma Wagler bought the farm in 2016.

Four years ago, as I passed through the same valley on a foggy morning, I stopped to take a photo of the red barn on the old Nelson place. The fog was so thick the photo looked like a painting. Across the road, the sun was breaking through the fog on the steeple of the church.

That more-recent morning, the orange glow of the sun coming up set a backdrop for a patchwork of clouds. Fog hung in the valley. Amish horses were grazing in a pasture. Trying not to spook them, I pulled over to capture the image.

The morning fog is part of our landscape and contributes to its development. Todd Rieck and Dam Baumgardt of the National Weather Service office in La Crosse analyzed valley fog in our area. The Upper Mississippi River Valley with its bluffs and radiational cooling often results in widespread fog — sometimes with visibilities of one-quarter mile or less.

A study of river-valley fog during an 11-year period found there is a relationship between dense-fog formation, dew-point depression, surface winds and depth of light-wind layer. Small differences in both the dew point and surface winds have a big impact on the thickness of the fog and how long it will stay. A shallow light-wind layer acts to inhibit dense-fog formation, while a deep layer of light winds promotes dense fog.

The fog takes me back to early mornings of late summer days as we prepared to milk the cows. Sometimes we could call the cows in from their night pasture. Other times I’d walk across the creek bottoms to gather the herd from the shrouded hills.

But the mist quickly becomes just a memory. The sun strengthens, the temperature warms and the fog burns away.

Summer may not be as strong but it’s still here.

For a little while longer.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*