

Iowa

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and
Rural Life)**

Provided by Iowa State University (no author attribution) as part of “Preserving the History of United States Agriculture and Rural Life: State and Local Literature, 1820-1945. Phase VI 2006-2008. A proposal submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Preservation and Access on behalf of the United States Agricultural Information Network”

1997

IOWA

Iowa is agriculture. Since its first settlers crossed the Mississippi River in the 1830s, Iowa's history has been shaped by the richness of some of the best soil in the world. Bordered by two major river systems, Iowa's gently rolling countryside was originally covered by thousands of acres of prairie grass, some of it so high that to see over it required riders to stand on top of their horses. Nearly 35 inches of rain falls each year and the average annual temperature hovers around 50 degrees, providing Iowa with a growing season sufficient to raise abundant crops.

Native Americans whom the French fur traders first encountered in the 1700s were the Ioway, whose name means "beautiful land" or "this is the place." Others, including the Sac, Fox, Winnebago, Pottawattamie, Otoe, and Illini tribes, came into Iowa after losing their homelands to the westward advancement of white settlers. These varied groups blended the woodlands culture of the northeast with the existing plains and prairie civilization to produce a semi-nomadic lifestyle that relied primarily on hunting, fishing, and gathering of fruits. In small garden plots the Native American peoples also grew maize, tomatoes, potatoes, squash, and other vegetables. These New World crops were an important addition to the European food base and served as the foundation for future agricultural developments.

By 1833, most of the Native Americans had been displaced and the territory was opened to new settlement. The nearly treeless prairie offered little hindrance to the wave of pioneers that moved inexorably across what would soon become the 29th state in December 1846. Like their counterparts in other Midwestern states, Iowa's nineteenth-century settlers were a mixture of pioneers and foreign-born people. After the Civil War, many families moved westward from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, stopping in Iowa. Some settled permanently while others stayed only a short while. By 1890, nearly 20% were foreign-born, almost entirely from northern and western Europe, with the majority being of German ancestry. In the early part of the twentieth century, the burgeoning coal-mine industry attracted immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

Yet it has been the land that has shaped Iowa, its people, and its history. The men and women who toiled long days in the sun, or shivered in winter's icy blasts, developed a soberness, hardiness, and strong work ethic that buttressed them from the vagaries of the marketplace. They took their work seriously, their religion quietly, and their politics with a good dose of moderation. Perhaps historian Dorothy Schwieder has best summarized the essential characteristics of Iowans, calling them people of the Middle Land, not only geographically but socially and politically as well. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, most Iowans seldom strayed from within the fold of the Republican party. Even when the Populist Party chose a native son, James B. Weaver, as its presidential standard-bearer in the 1890s, Iowa farmers tended to look the other way and stayed with the tried and true Republican Party.

It was one thing to raise a crop; it was another to get it sold. In the early years, most Iowans were unable to grow more than they needed to support their homesteads. But as agricultural methods improved and machinery began to assert its impact on productivity, the issue of transportation became significant for Iowa farmers. They needed to acquire ways of getting their

surplus to market to generate the capital necessary for future success on the land. Fortunately, the two major rivers which serve as Iowa's east and west boundaries functioned as efficient and regular conduits for agricultural products. Despite the importance of water transport, it was the advent of the railroad that especially spurred sustained growth of Iowa's rural economy. By 1870, four major lines crisscrossed the state, linking the countryside with the rivers while establishing nodes of embryonic towns and villages. These small communities often consisted of a grain elevator, a few stores, a church or two, some private dwellings, and, of course, a public school; yet they were an essential ingredient in the integration of rural and urban life during the nineteenth century. It was not until 1918 that the first concrete highway was poured. For several decades, farm traffic moved from field to market along roads made either of dirt or, in some places, of wooden planks.

In the beginning Iowa farmers grew mainly wheat, with some barley, rye, oats, and corn on the side. Additionally, they maintained a few head of cattle, some hogs, and sheep, especially in the pre-Civil War period. By the 1870s, Iowa farmers began to raise corn and hogs, which provided the diversified basis for agricultural production that is in effect today. In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act which gave federal support to the creation of land-grant agricultural and mechanical arts colleges. Established by the Iowa General Assembly in 1858, the Iowa Agricultural College and Model Farm (IAC) was designated the nation's first land-grant college when Iowa became the first state to accept the terms of the Morrill Act in 1864. The school was the first land-grant institution to be co-educational from the beginning, opening its doors in the fall of 1868 and establishing firm connections with its rural citizenry. This relationship was enhanced by the creation of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Ames as a result of the 1887 Hatch Act. In 1879, the college established its Department of Veterinary Medicine. In 1906, another important service to Iowa's rural constituency commenced with the founding of a Department of Extension, whose mission was to inform farmers in every corner of the state about new agricultural developments.

From the start the college enjoyed dynamic leadership in its agricultural programs with such individuals as James "Tama Jim" Wilson, who later became the longest-serving U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, with appointments in the McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft administrations. This leadership attracted able students, such as Iowa State's first African-American alumnus, George Washington Carver, who went on to a distinguished career at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

To the academic triad of college, experiment station, and extension should be added the prominent role of agricultural publications such as *Wallace's Farmer*, edited by the redoubtable "Uncle" Henry Wallace, whose son and grandson would later succeed James Wilson as secretaries of agriculture in the twentieth century. Beginning in 1893, *Wallace's Farmer* promoted scientific agriculture coupled with an emphasis on practical application and a concern for the entire rural community. The *Iowa Homestead*, launched in 1856 and absorbed by the Wallaces into their publication in 1929, also served as an effective vehicle for information about Iowa agriculture.

The combination of education, outreach, and wide dissemination of current agricultural research instilled a desire in Iowa's farmers constantly to improve their farming methods. Agricultural press titles such as *Iowa Agriculturist* (1903 to date); *Iowa Homestead* (1856-1929); *Iowa Farmer* (1925-28); *Western Stock Journal and Farmer* by Seaman Knapp, who later became IAC president (1893-1899); and *Successful Farming*, begun in 1902 by Edward T. Meredith of Des Moines, provided information regarding the latest scientific farming methods as well as commentary of the day on the economic, political, and social conditions of the Iowa farmer.

Since the state entered the Union in 1846, Iowa has had a rich tradition of agricultural publishing. The National Agricultural Library holds approximately 2,000 Iowa titles. Many more exist in Iowa's public and private colleges, public libraries, and historical societies. The Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service and Experiment Station have published more than 1000 titles. The State of Iowa Departments of Agriculture, Public Instruction (Education), and Natural Resources; and the Highway Commission (Transportation) have all produced publications relating to Iowa agriculture and rural life. These include the *Annual Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture*; *Transactions, Proceedings and Reports of the Iowa State Horticultural Society*; and *Report and Proceedings of the Iowa State Agricultural Society*; among others.

In addition to university publications and the agricultural press, agricultural organizations and agribusiness have played a key role in disseminating agricultural information. Groups like the Iowa Farm Bureau, the Iowa Grange, the Iowa Agricultural Society (which was instrumental in founding Iowa State's forerunner, the Iowa Agricultural College), the Iowa State and County Fairs Association, and the Iowa Beef Producers Association have published information aimed at improving farmers' agricultural productivity and quality of life. Commercial agricultural interests provided this service as well. *Dorr's Iowa Seeds Catalog* (1881-1886) is a premier example of a publication that documents the range of agricultural supplies that were available over one hundred years ago.

It is this published record that the Iowa State University Library seeks to preserve for future scholars interested in Iowa and U.S. agriculture and rural life. An extensive collection on the history of Iowa agriculture is held by the University Library at Iowa State University, including Iowa State Department of Agriculture publications such as its *Bulletin* (1907-1949) and its *Annual Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture* (1900-1951). Also included are prominent statewide periodicals like the *Official Proceedings of the Iowa State Grange* (1874-1977). Another group of important materials in need of preservation is State Extension publications, of which the University Library has over 100 individual cataloged series. The Library also contains extensive holdings of serials relating to research conducted in agricultural engineering, home economics, and animal and plant sciences. These titles all contain irreplaceable historical information about the story of agriculture in Iowa, and their identification and preservation is a challenge and a responsibility.