

North Dakota

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

Provided by North Dakota 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”

NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota and agriculture: agriculture and North Dakota -- words that are almost synonymous to many people, including its own residents. It is the land itself that has been a major factor in the development of the state and its culture. The farmers who turned the first sod were looking to replicate the farms of the eastern states or Europe, but the land forced them to adjust. And adjust they have, adopting farming methods uniquely suited to the northern Great Plains. It is through the publications documenting this fundamental change in dealing with the land on its own terms that the change can be understood and appreciated.

North Dakota is a state where trees are few and grass is short. On the extreme east is a narrow strip of deep rich black soils along the Red River of the North. These were the first to be cultivated in the modern age; in fact, except for this region, most of what is now North Dakota was untouched by the plow until the 1870s. The central portion of the state is dominated by the drift prairie, a region of gently rolling prairie and thousands of wetlands. To the west is the higher dryer grassland area of the Missouri Plateau. Major rivers are the Red River, flowing north to Canada, and the Missouri River, on the western side of the state and flowing south to St. Louis. Temperatures vary drastically from frigid winters to hot summers. Before European settlement, the state was mostly grassland prairie where huge herds of bison roamed, and elk, antelope, deer, and beavers abounded, as did prairie dogs, jack rabbits, and waterfowl.

North Dakota was home to the Chippewa, Sioux, Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa tribes. Although most of the tribes were nomadic hunters, the Mandan were agricultural, tilling the soil along the Missouri River and growing corn, squash, pumpkin, sunflower, and even tobacco. It was with this agrarian tribe that the Lewis and Clark party stayed during the winter of 1804/05.

Fur traders from Canada began to trade with the native tribes before 1750. Trading posts were established in the extreme northeast corner of the state by Alexander Henry, followed by Canada's Hudson's Bay Company and others. Henry probably became the first white agriculturist of the state: he was known as an avid gardener, and grew crops of potatoes, carrots, beets, cabbages and corn. Later in the 1800s, traders journeyed up the Missouri to trade with the Arikara and Mandan tribes. After the journey of Lewis and Clark, the fur trade grew rapidly, and numerous forts were built for its protection. These forts later served to protect the frontier farmers.

Like the first fur trappers, the first settlers in the area came from Canada. Scottish tenant farmers immigrated to Canada via Hudson's Bay in the early 1800s. They found their way down the Red River to Henry's fur trading post; there they could hunt buffalo and manage to survive. Knowledge of Henry's successful vegetable crops led them to stay and plant, and encourage other Scottish settlers to come. They sent a delegation to Wisconsin in 1820 to purchase wheat seed, purchased and drove to the state a herd of

cattle, and developed a thriving agricultural outpost on the frontier. Early histories of this era include *Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress and Present State*, written in 1856 by Alexander Ross. Further significant development and expansion of agriculture did not occur in the state until the coming of the railroads.

The fur trade relied on cumbersome and seasonal water transportation: ox carts traversed from St. Paul, Minnesota, to the Red River, connecting with steamboats plying the river north to Winnipeg. Steamboats also navigated the Missouri River, transporting furs from the western side of the state south to St. Louis. The steamboat era ended with the coming of the railroad. The Northern Pacific crossed the Red River into Dakota Territory at the site of present-day Fargo in 1871 and completed tracks across the state by 1881. In 1880, what became known as the Great Northern Rail Road crossed into North Dakota further north at Grand Forks, and soon railroad tracks extended north, connecting Fargo and Grand Forks to Winnipeg, Canada. River towns died, while railroad towns sprang up.

The railroads led the way to mass settlement of the state, and the evolution of agriculture depended on their coming. Railroad companies were granted massive tracts of land along the track rights of way by the government to finance the enterprise. The companies could sell these lands, or use them to exchange stock for land. It became vital for the railroads to attract land buyers, and they became active in enticing settlers to the region.

In the 1870s, a new milling process was developed by Minneapolis millers which enabled a superior flour to be made from spring wheat; prior to introduction of the new process, spring wheat, the variety suitable to the Dakotas, was thought to be inferior, and received low prices in the grain trade. Suddenly, spring wheat became highly valued and sought after. With a milling industry and grain market center in Minneapolis, with the railroads wanting business and needing settlers to buy their land, and with plenty of fertile land available either free or cheap, the stage was set for emergence of the area as a wheat mecca.

Railroads would exchange their stock for land; and some wealthy eastern stockholders recognized the opportunity and exchanged their stock for vast acreage. A new system of frontier agriculture developed, the bonanza farm. Unique in their time, bonanza farms were very large-scale operations, with some over 64,000 acres in size. The farms became a sensation, and served to demonstrate the opportunities offered in Dakota. Machinery was ideally suited to the flat land and deep, rock-free, fertile soil, and manufacturers used these farms to test new equipment: the gang plow, large combines, various drills, and large steam tractors, for example. Wheat became king, a dependence difficult to change even after the era of bonanza farms was over. Among the materials published about this time was *The Checkered Years*, the memoirs of Mary Dodge Woodward, who resided on a bonanza farm just west of Fargo.

The bonanza farm boom was short-lived, lasting only from 1879 to 1886. These were times of cheap land, a great climate, and a great grain market. The boom ended during a period of drought, low grain prices, and plagues of grasshoppers. Also, more people were immigrating into the state due to railroad and land company advertisements and the notoriety of the bonanza farms themselves. The new settlers were willing to buy quarter sections of land, and the bonanza owners sold rather than continue farming in a depressed economy.

The railroads facilitated the slaughter of the bison until all of the once great herds had been eliminated. The grassland, especially in the western part of the state, was suitable for cattle, and it was not long before cattle ranching took the place of the bison. The first trail herds came into the state in the 1870s; by the mid-1880s the cattle industry was booming. At first Texas style free-range year-round grazing was practiced. During the severe winter of 1886/87 most of the great ranches were ruined, most losing 80-90% of their herds. The industry survived, but a different style of ranching was developed; year-round grazing was changed to a system of summer-fall grazing, supplemented by feeding during winter and spring.

Until the depression of the 1930s, the railroads, the territorial government, land speculators, and land offices all used a variety of means of luring settlers to North Dakota. Publications, newspaper articles, and flyers painted glowing pictures of the area. The Dakotas were portrayed as a virtual farming utopia. Titles of these flamboyant publications reflect their tone: "Red River the Eden of the Northwest"; "Land of Fine Horses, Fine Cattle, Fine Sheep, Good Health, Good People, and the Best Bread in the World"; "Land of Golden Grain"; or "North Dakota; Land of Peace, Prosperity, and Plenty, where the Farmer makes the Laws." *Resources in Dakota*, published in 1887 by the Territorial government, was a veritable handbook for the Dakota settler. Later *North Dakota Magazine* was published by the state government to encourage immigration to the state: it proclaimed on one of its covers a "battle cry for 1909 -- 100,000 new settlers." Between 1878 and 1890 the population increased from 16,000 to 191,000, and settlers continued to stream into the state until the 1930s. Probably half were emigrants, especially from Norway, Canada, Russia, Sweden, England and Ireland. There was also significant internal migration from nearby states as well as from the East Coast.

Settlers could acquire land cheaply by purchase from railroad companies or by homestead claim or purchase of public land according to the provisions of the Homestead Act and other public land settlement acts. They coped with the challenging climate by building sod houses (or log cabins along the rivers where wood was in supply), dugouts, and tar paper shacks. Homestead life was a frontier agriculture existence: subsistence farming, entailing hard work by men and women. Most newcomers needed to adjust their way of life and method of farming to survive the Dakota setting -- those who could not soon departed, selling out to new waves of newcomers. North Dakota became a rural state with small towns and farms, populated sparsely and with no large cities. As with the bonanza farms, settlers relied on wheat, continuing the precarious dependence on monoculture and the dangers inherent in it.

As time went on, the railroads began to charge rates the North Dakota farmers believed excessive. Also, the grain merchants in Minneapolis began to grade North Dakota wheat low -- low enough that the North Dakota farmers cried foul. Unrest erupted, and developed into political agitation; political agitation developed into political activity. Political action organizations were formed, first the Dakota Farmers Alliance, and later in the 1910s the powerful Non-Partisan League. League candidates controlled the state legislature by 1918. Bills were passed to reform grain grading and trading, develop a state highway commission, approve women's suffrage, establish a North Dakota-owned mill, establish state hail insurance and workmen's compensation, and guarantee bank deposits. Although anti-League interests were in control again by 1920, many of the League's actions have legacies today: North Dakota still has a state-owned mill and a state-owned bank. Other farm organizations were formed in the 1920s and 1930s and the reports, newsletters and other documents published by these organizations and growers associations are a wealth of source material for North Dakota agricultural history.

The agricultural evolution of the state would have been completely different without the North Dakota Agricultural College (the state's land-grant institution); the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, both established in Fargo in 1890; and the Extension Service, established in 1914. Early on, research centered on development of new seeds, new farming methods, plant disease, and weed control. Multiple routes of getting this information out to farmers were used: publications, farmers institutes, demonstration farms, and packaged libraries (including cultural materials such as amateur plays and discussion materials). The *Bulletin* published by the Experiment Station included some of the research most important to the state: from crop and livestock disease, to baking qualities of durum wheat, to equitable grading of wheat, to paint quality exposés. Important publications geared to the farmer included the *North Dakota Farmer and Sanitary Home*, begun in 1899 and continuing for eighteen years; the monthly *The Extension*, begun in 1908, with practical articles for farmers; and the journal called *North Dakota Farmers' Institute Annual*, comprising the research and new farming methods presented in the farmers institutes.

These information and research services produced a slow shift in crop patterns in the early 1900s: the percentage of hard red spring wheat dropped, and oats, durum wheat, barley, flax, sugar beet, forage crops, and potatoes increased. The livestock business evolved and began to include more dairying. By 1920, due in large part to the College, Extension, and the Experiment Stations, agriculture was no longer a homogeneous wheat culture.

The severe drought of the 1930s, with the resulting grasshopper plague and economic depression, affected North Dakota farmers severely. The Non-Partisan League was reorganized, again gained strength, and won political power and the governorship, implementing a number of progressive actions.

The drought depleted the grazing land, causing ranchers to reduce the size of their herds drastically. Crops were decimated by drought, disease, and insect infestations. A wheat allotment plan organized by the state Extension Service, assistance provided by the

Federal Agricultural Adjustment Act, and other government assistance programs helped to see North Dakota people and agriculture through. An estimated 45% of the people of the state were receiving some form of Federal grants, relief, or public works administration assistance. With the ending of the drought, and with the advent of World War II and the resulting extra market for meat and crops, the ranching and farming industries recovered and prospered until the end of the World War II.

Although the age-old problems of cold weather, blizzards, floods, drought and pestilence remain, the agriculture of the state is still evolving, and in many ways has come full circle to pre-settlement days. Current crops include corn and sunflower, and the livestock industry is re-discovering bison, with their supreme suitability to harsh plains conditions, as an alternative to cattle. Long distrustful of outside control, growers are forming new cooperatives and associations to process, market, and promote their own livestock and crops. Farm size is again increasing as it did during the bonanza farm era; and farms are being managed as large-scale businesses rather than family operations. As the state continues to adapt to changes and new opportunities, its historical literature serves as an important resource to document these changes in its agriculture and rural life.