

Minnesota

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

Provided by University of Minnesota (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

MINNESOTA

The history of agriculture and rural life defines the history of Minnesota. A wealth of published resources documents this fact. Minnesota's population was primarily rural and depended directly on agriculture until about 1920. The economic growth of early Minnesota was related closely to exploitation of its natural resources: soils, timber, and iron ore. Farming, lumbering, and mining, in turn, stimulated the growth of such ancillary activities as railroads, processing of agricultural products and natural resources, and services. Agriculture remains Minnesota's largest industry. The role of agriculture in the early state economy is explored in *Early Economic Conditions and the Development of Agriculture in Minnesota* (1915), by Edward V.D. Robinson.

Minnesota east of the Mississippi River was part of the original Northwest Territory, which came under the jurisdiction of the Ordinance of 1787. The portion of the state west of the Mississippi was part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Minnesota became a territory in 1849, with territorial boundaries reaching west to the Upper Missouri River, but most of its approximately 4,000 white settlers were located in the eastern part of the territory. Until the mid-1800s, two major Native American tribes occupied what is now Minnesota: the Ojibwas (Chippewa) in the north and east and the Sioux (Dakota) in the south and west. Though primarily hunter-gatherers, Native Americans did some farming in the Mississippi River Valley and have harvested wild rice in the northern regions for generations.

The first permanent U.S. settlement was at Fort Snelling, a military outpost established in 1819. When Minnesota became a state in 1858, its boundaries were cut back from the Missouri River to the Red River. Settlement was slow during the first half of the 19th century. Once the value of the forest lands and rich soils of Minnesota was realized, farmers and lumbermen from New England led the first large wave of permanent white settlers. In 1860, Minnesota was home to only 172,000 people, but the population increased rapidly, with most new arrivals moving to farms. The first major immigrant groups in the latter half of the 19th century were Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians. By 1870 the population had increased to 439,000, and by 1880 there were 92,386 farms in Minnesota. The most rapid period of settlement was during the 1880s when homesteaders rushed into western and southwestern Minnesota. During the same period, lumbering was at its peak and flour milling was becoming important.

Beginning in 1854 and until about 1870, agricultural experimentation, instruction, extension, and recreation were carried out by agricultural societies through state and local fairs. The first territorial fair was held in 1854 and that same year saw the organizational meeting of the Minnesota Territorial Agricultural Society, later the Minnesota State Agricultural Society. The Minnesota Horticultural Society was founded in 1866 and the State Farmers' Club in 1868. Similar organizations quickly followed for poultry, stockbreeding, dairy, and butter and cheese. The effect of these organizations on rural life and the economy of the state is documented in publications such as the *Annual Report of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society* (1887-1923), *History of the Minnesota Horticultural Society* (1873), and *The Minnesota Horticulturalist* (1866 to the present).

By 1890, more than 1,300,000 people lived in Minnesota. Additional immigrants arrived from Finland, Poland, Ireland, France and French Canada, Holland, Belgium, and Iceland. Danes, Swiss, and Welsh settled in scattered pockets. These were the people who changed Minnesota from a raw frontier to a thriving agricultural state. The tremendous appeal of Minnesota to the foreign-born is demonstrated by the fact that the figures for any census year during this period show that two-thirds or more of the population were foreign-born or the children of foreign-born. Minnesota's pioneer days and life on the homesteader's farm are remembered in the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Ole Rølvaag.

Agriculture during the early years was at the subsistence level, but as farmers cleared land, they increased the acreage devoted to crops. In 1858, wheat was shipped commercially from the state for the first time. Extreme climate conditions in Minnesota fostered the development of hardy crop strains and other innovations. German immigrant Wandelin Grimm developed an alfalfa acclimatized to severe Minnesota winters and superior to other forage plants for the Northwest. Peter M. Gideon moved to Minnesota in 1853 and spent forty-five years developing fruit, including the Wealthy apple, that could withstand the cold weather. When the hard spring wheat from the Minnesota prairie could not compete with the winter wheat grown further south, the traditional flat grinding process was replaced with smooth millstones that ran more slowly, minimizing heat discoloration and bran specks. Other techniques to improve processes and profits followed, including scientific methods of testing wheat and flour and new procedures for bleaching. Works such as *The Earth Brought Forth: A History of Minnesota Agriculture to 1885* (1949) and *Grimm Alfalfa and Its Utilization in the Northwest* (1911) describe the early years of agriculture.

Wheat was king in Minnesota from the 1880s to about 1920; it was shipped by rail and boat to markets all over the eastern U.S. and Europe. Minneapolis was known as the "Mill City," producing more flour than any other city in the world. The early mills -- General Mills and Pillsbury -- evolved into multinational conglomerates. Important publications include *The Northwestern Miller* (published in Minneapolis 1873-1973), *The Decline of Northwestern Flour Milling*, by Victor G. Pickett and Roland S. Vaile (1933), and *The Medal of Gold: A Story of Industrial Achievement*, by William C. Edgar (1925). The Minnesota wheat crop was 2 million bushels in 1860, and reached 95 million in 1890.

Profits in wheat raising produced a special kind of farmer in the prairie lands of western Minnesota. Access to the railroads, growth and improvement of the flour industry, and improved machinery made devoting thousands of acres to wheat both possible and profitable. "Bonanza farms" flourished in the Red River Valley, where as many as forty plows in a row would turn the soil and a dozen reapers work the same field. This era is detailed in such works as *The Wheat Market and the Farmer in Minnesota* (1926) by Henrietta M. Larson.

The wheat frontier moved west and farmers turned their attention to other crops; milk, butter, and cheese were products of Minnesota farms from the beginning. In the 1880s, dairy products took a leading position in the state's agricultural economy. One factor accounting for the development of the dairy industry was the invention in 1878 of the cream separator. Other scientific advances, such as the discovery of the Babcock test for butterfat, improvements in refrigeration, and better methods of stock feeding, made dairy industries profitable. Within a few years, butter and cheese factories, both privately and cooperatively owned, appeared in most of the communities of southern Minnesota.

By 1900, under the leadership of Theophilus Haecker in dairying, Willet M. Mays in crop science, and other great teachers of diversification and improved farming, Minnesota agriculture swung toward a balanced crop program. Research conducted and published at the University Experiment Station included the development of crops resistant to cold and disease, such as Thatcher spring wheat; stiff-strawed varieties of oats and barleys that do well in heavy soil; and many hybrids of corn. In 1920, Evin Stackman began to chart the trails of wheat rusts from Minnesota to Mexico, documenting how the fungi are propagated and suggesting how they could be controlled. New techniques were promoted by county and extension agents. The Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation, created by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture in 1919, published its *Minnesota Farm Bureau News* (1922-1946) to help spread the word.

Minnesota railroads were established in large part to develop or meet the needs of agriculture and lumbering. Before 1862, transport depended on the river, which was frozen out in the winter months and hampered by low water during some summers. By the end of the decade, more than 1,000 miles of railroad track had been built in the state, and by 1867 Minnesota wheat could be shipped by rail to primary markets such as Milwaukee and Chicago. Railroad companies became land offices, encouraging settlement by promoting the rich farmland and ease of transport. The Northern Pacific, for example, had agents in England, Wales, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden to sell land and promote immigration. The 1862 Homestead Act was also a major impetus to settlement, and in 1867 Minnesota established a State Board of Immigration to persuade potential settlers. Both the Board and the railroads published pamphlets promoting Minnesota farmland and quality of life in English and many foreign languages.

Along with the growth of dairying came an increased emphasis on stock raising, particularly of cattle and hogs. Large packing plants were built in South St. Paul, Austin, and Albert Lea. Stock raising and dairying necessitated greater attention to the growth of forage crops and, as a result, corn soon became an important crop. Through the years the agricultural program of Minnesota farmers experienced a gradual shift. The changes followed the wheat frontier and even the farmers in the Red River Valley began to talk of crop diversification to conserve the soil and make it possible to continue to raise big crops on the acres that wheat was gradually wearing down. Diversification was

encouraged by scientists at the College of Agriculture in the University of Minnesota, which by the late 1880s was exerting a powerful influence over the state's farmers. Extension work through the University established many services for farmers: county agents, institutes, and farm management demonstrations; and included leadership in 4-H clubs.

With the coming of the railroads, the Minnesota lumber industry developed rapidly. Major sawmills were built at Stillwater on the St. Croix River and at the Falls of St. Anthony on the Mississippi River in the 1860s. However, lumbering quickly depleted the pine forests and the natural regrowth of birch and aspen was not commercially viable. Concern about the decline, and its effect on railroads and the economy, led Leonard B. Hodges of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad to establish the Minnesota State Forestry Association in 1876, the first such organization in the United States. The association's founders -- leaders of banks, businesses, and railroads -- promoted agricultural settlement and the planting of trees to break up the endless horizon and to provide pioneers with fuel, fencing, and shelter.

By the 1890s, the Forestry Association had expanded its position to embrace the new "scientific forest management." Publications in need of preservation address the concerns of the day: that widespread deforestation affected the soil, water, and climate adversely; that public lands belonged to all people in perpetuity; and that forests should be "cropped" and managed with appropriate scientific and economic principles. For the next fifty years, the Forestry Association labored to impress upon Minnesotans the benefits of tree planting and forest conservation. Important resources for the history of forestry and lumbering include *The Forest Tree Planters' Manual* (1879), *The Pioneer Woodsman as He Is Related to Lumbering in the Northwest* (1914), *Minnesota Forester* (1908-1911), and *North Woods* (1911-1923).

The Minnesota Pioneer Press played an important role as news organ, literary medium, forum for boosting Minnesota, and provider of leadership in politics and culture. The first agricultural periodicals published in Minnesota in the 1860s were the *Minnesota Farmer and Gardener* (1860-1862), the *Farmer's Union* (1867-1873), and the *Minnesota Monthly* (1869-1870). Others followed, such as *The Minnesota Farmer* (1877-1896) and the *Independent Farmer and Fireside Companion* (1879-early 1900s). These periodicals are a treasure trove of information not only on agriculture, but on economic, social, and political history in Minnesota.

An essential element of Minnesota agricultural history is the cooperative movement. Carle C. Zimmerman and John D. Black describe farmers' attitudes toward cooperatives in *The Marketing Attitude of Minnesota Farmers* (1926). From the earliest days, farmers banded together to sell and ship their own grain. Between 1866 and 1869, farmers in Vasa Township formed the Scandinavian Transportation Company of Red Wing; the first cooperative elevator was formed in 1876 in Meeker County.

The history of rural cooperatives lies at the intersection of political history, economic history, and the history of immigration and ethnicity. Minnesota's rural cooperatives performed essential functions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in an egalitarian, democratic manner that suited rural society. They helped to preserve ethnicity by enabling immigrant farmers to handle many of their economic transactions through their own member-owned, ethnic-language cooperative. They helped to complete the network of trading centers by significantly aiding the construction of many small crossroads communities. They served as important auxiliaries of agrarian protest movements. They brought needed services to rural communities when private investors did not regard it as profitable to do so. They helped parts of rural Minnesota diversify agriculture in response to declining wheat yields and prices.

The cooperative movement achieved its greatest penetration into American life in rural communities dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Between 1865 and 1917, local Minnesota cooperatives were organized by farmers without significant governmental assistance or help from any outside institution apart from sponsoring groups such as the Grange and the Farmer's Alliance. After World War I, local cooperatives increasingly joined together to form sizeable regional cooperatives such as the Land O' Lakes and Midland Cooperatives. Agricultural experts at the University of Minnesota, such as Theophilus Haecker, who promoted Danish cooperatives, were encouraged by state government to initiate the organization of cooperatives at the local level.

The first major cooperative sponsoring organization in Minnesota was the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, popularly known as the Grange. The Grange was successful in uniting farmers (primarily "Old Stock" farmers, who had come from New England) into one statewide quasi-political unit with many democratically run local units. For Minnesota, the Granger period began in 1868, when Oliver Hudson Kelly began forming the first Granges in Minnesota. Between 1868 and 1878, the Grange grew from an idea in the fertile mind of a failed farmer from Itasca, Minnesota, to a vigorous agrarian movement with 538 local units and thousands of members in Minnesota, plus thousands more around the nation.

The Grange had four features that made it especially appealing to many Americans: secrecy, an elaborate ritual, exclusiveness, and full participation by women. The Grange was intended to benefit the farmer by education, by brightening his social life, and by protecting members against discrimination by the big corporations. The Minnesota Grangers took up the plea of farmers for reasonable railroad rates; they fought for railroad regulation through state laws; and their interest resulted in the Minnesota legislature's establishing, in 1871, the office of state railroad commissioner. Minnesota took the first step toward the regulation of its public utilities.

The second major force behind cooperatives in Minnesota was the Farmers Alliance, which was much more successful in recruiting immigrant farmers than the Grange. The Farmers Alliance was launched in Chicago in 1880. Minnesota's eighty Alliance locals in 1881 grew to almost 1,000 by 1890. Initially apolitical, the Farmers Alliance moved into indirect political action by the mid-1890s and allied with the Knights of Labor.

Late 19th century Minnesota witnessed the development of a “culture of cooperation” in which earlier successes such as township fire insurance mutuals encouraged and facilitated later attempts such as cooperative creameries, cooperative stores, and rural telephone associations. Through organizations that grew out of a desire to improve their lives, farmers learned the lesson of cooperation and gained experience in public life. This tradition of citizen involvement, originating in the early farming communities, continues today, and can be seen in the many neighborhood and community organizations in the state, and in the active and progressive political environment.

A wealth of published resources documents the history of agriculture and rural life in Minnesota. University Regents' documents from 1868 on first mention a University Library in 1868 and an agricultural library in 1872. The growing agricultural collection was moved to the College of Agriculture on the St. Paul “farm campus” in 1895. The Magrath Library (formerly the St. Paul Campus Central Library) and the St. Paul Campus branch libraries now house over 650,000 volumes. While a major portion of agricultural literature is located at the University of Minnesota, important collections may also be found at the Minnesota Historical Society and other Minnesota universities and colleges. The University of Minnesota has been acquiring agricultural monographs and serials since the 1870s and became a repository for state publications at nearly the same time.