Wisconsin

(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison (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"

1995

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The history of rural Wisconsin is characterized by environmental and ethnic diversity. Early settlers from New York and Vermont found prairies, hardwood forests, rolling hills, and marshes in the southern parts of the state; lakes, pine and mixed forests, and occasional oak openings covered the north. The fertile land drew immigrants from other states, Canada, and Europe. Among the settlers were English (including the Liverpool factory hands recruited for a temperance colony at Mazomanie), Germans, Irish, Norwegians, Swiss, Welsh, Poles, French Canadians, Belgians, Luxembourgers, Scots, Bohemians, Finns, Slovenes, and many others. Early settlers wrote books, pamphlets, or "letters home" to encourage more settlers from their home regions. Each of these communities tended to remain culturally distinct. School could be taught in German or Norwegian. A town could have two Catholic churches, one a "German" church, and the other an "Irish" church. One student of the Wisconsin landscape claims that he is still able to identify the ethnic background of a farm family by walking around its woodlot.

Wheat dominated early commercial agriculture in Wisconsin. Bad wheat crops in the early 1850's pushed many Wisconsin settlers to the California gold fields and other places to the west. Wheat monoculture led to soil depletion, chinch bug infestations, crop diseases, and a boom-or-bust farm economy. The Wisconsin State Agricultural Society was founded in 1851 (three years after statehood) in part because of the crisis in wheat farming. Through its *Transactions*, the society allowed farmers to report on conditions in the cultivated portions of the state and tell of their experiments with a more diversified agriculture. The State Agricultural Society began to hold a state fair and cattle show, and encouraged the organization of county agricultural societies and fairs. (At the 1859 Wisconsin State Fair, Abraham Lincoln made one of his few speeches on the subject of agriculture.) Leaders such as John Wesley Hoyt campaigned for "scientific" agriculture and against mining the soil through uncritical devotion to wheat. Extensive wheat growing in Wisconsin lasted about a generation, from the 1840's through the 1880's. The Wisconsin historian John Giffin Thompson has written that "In the rapidity of the rise and decline of the wheat industry, and in the extent of that decline, Wisconsin is unique among the states of the United States that have been important in wheat culture."

In the early 1850's, Wisconsin imported cheese and butter at high prices from other states. Wisconsin dairy products were insufficient to meet local demand and were often of inferior quality. (Wisconsin butter was sold in Chicago by the hundredweight as a base for axle grease.) According to historian Robert C. Nesbit, "The rise of Wisconsin dairying is a story rich in detail and apt quotations, in part because it was actively promoted by a crew of New York Yankees who loved an audience." William Dempster Hoard, who promoted dairying through his magazine *Hoard's Dairyman*, was elected governor and dairying, as a part of a more diversified and economically sustainable agriculture, spread among Wisconsin farmers regardless of ethnic background. Many German-American families began dairying on farms abandoned by Yankees who had left to seek unspoiled wheat lands on the Great Plains. Unlike wheat farming, milk production created the need for cooperation among farmers in processing and marketing. Community cheese factories were established, and farmers learned new procedures for making

timely deliveries of fresh wholesome milk. The Wisconsin Dairymen's Association was founded in 1872; it established boards of trade for dairy products and negotiated favorable freight rates for Wisconsin dairy products. In 1924, the states of Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma sent a trainload of 135 prominent citizens to the "Land of Milk and Money" to attempt to learn the secrets of a profitable dairy economy.

The University of Wisconsin's outreach to farmers began in 1868, but did not reach its full stride until 1880, when William A. Henry became the first full-time professor of agriculture. The documentary record shows that one of the University's chief problems was bridging the gap between the "gentlemen farmers" who were likely to be members of the Wisconsin Agricultural Society or another organization promoting scientific agriculture and the "dirt farmers" who mistrusted anything savoring of "book farming." The University of Wisconsin pioneered the "Short Course" by which farm youth could come to the Madison campus for twelve weeks during the winter and a special dairy short course trained personnel for the creameries and cheese factories. Through the establishment in 1885 of Farmers' Institutes, University faculty went to farm communities to lecture. The University also participated in establishing a network of county extension agents, who in addition to promoting agriculture, fostered local theater groups, homemakers' clubs, 4-H clubs and other cultural and social activities at the local level.

Theses and dissertations tell much about early agricultural research conducted at the University of Wisconsin and also provide scholarly information regarding early rural society in Wisconsin. However, there have been no comprehensive microfilming projects carried out on these materials. The first UW-Madison agricultural PhD degree was granted in 1902 to Benjamin Hibbard, whose dissertation was entitled *The History of Agriculture in Dane County*, and later agricultural histories of the state relied heavily on theses and dissertations as primary source materials.

The University of Wisconsin also pioneered in establishing a radio station to bring weather forecasts, market reports, entertainment and instruction to rural Wisconsin. Radio station 9XM was licensed to the University of Wisconsin in 1915 and in the uncrowded airwaves of 1921, could frequently be heard in Boston, Texas, or North Dakota. However, the university's involvement in the rural life of Wisconsin was not uncontroversial. The Wisconsin Society of Equity charged the College of Agriculture with favoring increased production over the welfare of the small farmer. Some complained that the college was more devoted to pure research than practical results; others said the opposite. The College of Agriculture was early allied with the Wisconsin Dairymen's Association and the published record documents that small dairy farmers and farmers in other branches of agriculture complained of this influence.

Steenbock Library and the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin contain a variety of books touching on the rural and agricultural history of Wisconsin that are in need of preservation. Some books by Wisconsin authors, such as William A. Henry's self-published *Feeds and Feeding: A Handbook for the Student and Stockman* (Madison, Wis.: W. A. Henry, 1898; 657 p.) were classics in their disciplines and went through many editions. Henry also wrote *Northern Wisconsin: A Hand-Book for the Homeseeker* (Madison, Wis.: Democrat Printing Co., 1896; 192 p.) *Queen Vashti: The Autobiography of a Guernsey Cow*, by A. J. Philips (West Salem, Wis.: 1906?; 375 p.), presents moral instruction and the history of the

Wisconsin dairy industry through the eyes of a dairy cow. Printed materials relevant to the history of rural Wisconsin include brochures written in several languages inviting immigrants to settle in Wisconsin, materials relating to the early days of the logging industry in Wisconsin, and reminiscences by early settlers.

Though Wisconsin calls itself "America's Dairyland," the state's involvement in agriculture extended to many other crops. Oats, corn, and hay were grown as livestock feed. Tobacco for chewing and cigar wrappers has been grown by Norwegian-Americans in southern Wisconsin since 1840. Farmers raised vegetables for canning throughout the state, grew potatoes in the central sands region, apples in the Kickapoo River Valley, and sour cherries in Door County. In the depression year of 1858, many Wisconsinites earned money by digging wild ginseng in the woods, and cultivated ginseng is still a major export crop. Northern Wisconsin was known for its forest products and cranberries.

The lumbering industry in northern Wisconsin provided farmers with winter employment and a market for food crops. However, by the turn of the century, unchecked exploitation of the forests eroded the North's economic base. During World War I, an attempt to reclaim the cutover land for agriculture began with the cooperation of the University of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Banker's Association, the Wisconsin Society of Equity, and northern communities themselves. Tracts were published arguing that colonizing the cutover would increase the food supply for the war effort, provide relief for the urban poor tempted by Bolshevism, and ensure the prosperity of the north. Real estate and railroad companies printed glowing brochures. However, most of the land available for settlement was not suitable for farming, and the colonization project was an undisguisable disaster by the time of the Great Depression. In 1927, only six percent of the total acreage in the seventeen northern counties was under cultivation, while 2.5 million acres were on sale for payment of back taxes. The state and federal governments moved to re-establish forestry on a more sustainable basis in northern Wisconsin and, later, tourism and recreation became an important source of income.

Wisconsin developed a variety of farmer's organizations that supported farmers and rural communities through publications, field days, and demonstrations. Besides the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, the Wisconsin State Horticultural Society, and the Wisconsin Dairymen's Association, there were organizations that sought to speak for the financially distressed farmer. The Grange was active, and the Society of Equity promoted farmers' cooperatives in the state. Attacks on exploitative pricing by railroads provided one of the first issues for Robert M. La Follette and the Wisconsin Progressive Party, although La Follette's popularity with farmers often depended more on their ethnic background than anything else.

Many Wisconsin agriculture serials are significant sources for the study of social and cultural history. Among these are the transactions of statewide agricultural organizations, such as the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, the Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Association, and the Patrons of Husbandry, and the Wisconsin State Grange. For example, the Transactions of the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society can be used as a source for study of social relations and of

the diffusion of scientific and social ideas in Wisconsin for the time period 1851-1896. The proceedings of the Wisconsin State Grange document the many cultural and social events which the Grange sponsored in rural Wisconsin, as well as presenting an agrarian view on economic and political events from 1887 to the present.

Wisconsin claims the first kindergarten, the first hamburger, and the first ice cream sundae in the United States. It has always been conscious of its past in Europe and America; it had a historical society two years before it became a state. Its social, cultural, and political life have been enlivened by the variety of immigrants on its farms and by the public figures who were only one generation away from the farm. Wisconsin rural life provided material for such novelists as Zona Gale, Hamlin Garland, Glenway Westcott, and August Derleth. Ethnic pride still provides the theme for many small communities' summer festivals; New Glarus has its William Tell Festival, Stoughton its Syttende Mai, and Phillips its Czech Heritage Days. Wisconsin's rural life is documented in farm newspapers; in books written to encourage new immigrants from Germany or Poland; in the transactions of statewide societies; in novels, local histories, and reminiscences; and in numerous other documents which now are threatened by deterioration.