

Agriculture, past and present,

As the meaning of agriculture, is simply the science of the husbandman or farmer brought to a successful issue, the text of the paper, would imply, that in some respects at least, there must be a difference in the two periods. The past in this case is supposed to extend back, only to the period, when the 'Genessee Country' was settled by those sturdy sons of New England, who in search of more available lands on which they might use their strength and ingenuity, to procure an honest livelihood, pushed forth from their eastern homes, and through many privations, and arduous labor, establish for themselves, new ones.

If we consider the difficulties which the early pioneer, was obliged to meet, and overcome, in the prosecution of his labors and compare them with the obstacles which confront the present tiller of the soil, there would seem to be a marked difference.

Leaving his eastern home, usually in the winter season, and with the aid of domestic animals, bringing the few necessities required, he found himself, in a fertile country, but surrounded by a dense growth of forest trees,

To fit that country for the various uses of man, was his direct-object. His first-work, after securing for himself, a shelter from the elements, was to remove a portion of the forest, which required many a well directed stroke of his axe, without the which simple tool he would have made but little progress. When a proper space was filled, he brought to his aid forces of nature, to assist in preparing the soil for seed. The wind and the sun to evaporate a portion of the sap of the timber, then by consuming with fire, the surface of the ground, was made more available for the reception of the seed, the potash formed by the combustion, adding to its fertility. His tools for the various purposes were of the simplest kind; his first-seed was often planted with the aid of ^{his} axe, by striking it into the ground between the roots, which still remained, dropping the seed, and covering in any manner most convenient.

The fresh soil, often responded bountifully to his exertions, by increasing his seed many fold; his harvesting machinery was mainly the sickle gathering by hand-sful, As he caused the forest to recede from his home, and the space for tillage was increased, the necessity for better and more available implements was also increased.

But the ingenuity of man was equal to the need, the plow and the harrow, though rough and crude were brought into use, and with aid from his domestic animals, the soil was put in better preparation for seeding; the cradle was made, whereby one man could accomplish much more in the way of harvesting, than he could have done with the sickle.

To thresh his grain, his horses and oxen were made to do by treading, what he once did with the flail; to separate the grain from the chaff, the fanning mill was used in place of the slow process of winnowing in the wind.

All this increase, brought him and his neighbors, in time, to plenty, and even surplus, and unless this surplusage could be exchanged for other comforts or pleasures, he felt that he was not requited for his toil. Thus markets became one of the prominent features of agriculture. The towns and cities of the older parts, needed all the extra products, which the farmer of the 'Genessee Country' could furnish. but they being so far distant, the expense of transportation was greater than that of production.

The city of Albany, being the nearest market where the pioneer could exchange his surplus products for others which he required.

or for money, the most convenient of all exchanges, he was compelled to draw them there, to haul a load 200 miles to market, was indeed a laborious task.

When through the exertions of Gov. Clinton in 1825, the Erie canal was completed, a water-way was established, from the western boundary of New York state to the Hudson river, then indeed were the hearts of agriculturists made glad, for it brought the markets nearby, as it were to their thresholds. Every hamlet along the line of the canal, became a ready market for surplus products. As the soil of western N.Y. ^{seemed} especially adapted to the growth of wheat, that article soon became the prominent one of agriculture; not only in quantity, but in quality, was Genesee wheat a noted product.

As it would generally command cash when exchanged, it was quite customary for the farmer to depend on the sales of that article, to liquidate his debts, or if they had been cancelled, to 'lay by' the amount of his wheat-money. His pork money was counted on to pay his taxes, and if the remainder of his crops proved short, his living expenses were shortened accordingly. So well established was that idea, that in the recent past, when the price of

wheat fell so much, that it became a cheaper food, than the coarser grains, it was almost impossible for the older farmers to allow such use to be made of it, while the younger ones, only saw the commercial value of it, and could more readily make the exchange,

The raising of wheat continued to be the main crop of western N.Y. for various seasons

The adaptability of the soil for its growth, and in the general rotation of crops, it seems to be the best for 'laying down' or for the various grades to follow. The opening up of immense tracts of land in the 'great west' of the U. S., and also in foreign countries, and the improved machinery for seeding and harvesting, so increased the total of the great cereal, that the supply exceeds the demand, and necessarily the market price is reduced,

During the present century, and especially the latter half, the brain of man has indeed been busy in invention, the agriculturist sharing in the improvements which have been made in his implements. From the scythe ^{and} the cradle of the pioneer, which were only used by the physical efforts of himself, came the Reaper, wherein the motive power was the faithful horse, soon followed by the Binders

whereby the team is made to cut, gather and bind the grain, while the driver sits in his seat, controlling the power and the machinery.

The horse has been superseded by steam to separate the grain from the straw. And who is able to say, what next may come?

But with all these ^{additions of} labor saving machinery, the present seems not to be as prosperous, as the past. With the pioneer, every tree felled, every rail split and laid in place, added to the sale value of his belongings. It is a fact, that some of the early settlers of this town, received as payment for each day's labor an acre of land, the same being valued at $18\frac{3}{4}$ cents, each year, and each betterment increased its ^{sale} value, until about 1870, when ordinary farms in the town, were rated, at 75 to \$100, per acre and were sought as investments by capitalists.

Since that period, there has been a depreciation of at least 33 per cent, and an ordinary sale of real estate, seldom occurs.

When the market value of the main product, fell below what seemed the actual cost of production, it drove the average farmer to a more diversified cropping, until the question was often debated, what shall I plant or sow to be able to receive a fair compensation, for

the cost of production? Potatoes, Cabbage, and all other products which support animal life, have been experimented with, still the same fixed laws seem to be in force, the supply is greater than the demand, and each new venture frets with but partial success.

Several farms in the town, have recently been producing milk, for use in the near by cities, which product, is said to come as near compensating the producer for his out lay, as almost any other.

The expense of labor would seem to be greater in proportion to actual returns than it once was. Until about 1855; the amount per month, for the services of a competent farm hand, through the season of active operations, was about \$13.⁰⁰ and found, i. e. board and washing. During the internal war of the U. S. from '61 to '65. prices of all commodities were abnormally increased, labor scarcely receiving its proper share; but when the price of products, and manufactured ^{articles} receded, the compensation for labor, did not fall in the same ratio. Today all the necessities of life can be purchased at lower rates, than before the war, yet in competent farm hands, demand and receive, as pay for a month's labor from 15 to \$20.⁰⁰

Thus, though the early settler was compelled to undergo many privations, and to use great physical exertion, to accomplish the desired end, yet he was buoyed with hope, in that the progress toward the realization of his wishes was plainly discernable. The forest gradually disappeared by his determined efforts, the soil was naturally productive, and repaid him bountifully; his home comforts were greatly increased, by the exchange of his surplus products. In the accomplishment of these ends, the soil parted with much of its original fertility, so that the agriculturist of the present time, is obliged to add various ingredients to bring forth the desired results.

Beside the application of all manures made at home, the use of commercial fertilizers, in a quarter of a century past, has gradually increased, until now hardly a crop is raised in town, without its use, and that at an expense of from 3. to \$5. per acre, for each one planted.

By the multiplicity of improved implements for agricultural purposes, the necessity for laborious exertion, on the part of the farmer has been greatly decreased, but not so with the mental labor.

It requires much greater fore thought - and better judgment - to produce a crop, within the,

limit of receipts, than formerly. The total products of the world have been vastly increased, and that with the present facilities for transportation, have caused the receipts to the producer to shrink to a minimum.

As the swinging pendulum, after reaching the extremity of its arc, is brought again to a perpendicular position, by the laws of gravity, and thereby gained force, sufficient to carry it to the other extreme, or as a revolving wheel, does not always have the same point of its perimenter at the bottom, so let us hope that the honest labors of the true agriculturist - of to day, may soon again receive its adequate reward.

The above article was written for the M. C. H. Society, and read before it, at the home of H. B. Hicks, Feb. 8th, 1897

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