

Manufacturers in Iowa—A Note On Iowa Agriculture in 1873

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In 1854 the Iowa State Agricultural Society was organized to further the development of agriculture in the state. The Society carried the burden of agricultural improvement from the 1850's to the 1880's. The state and local fairs allowed the farmer to exhibit his products, view those of his neighbors and friends, and to become acquainted with the latest wares of the town merchants. Most Iowa farmers ignored the agricultural periodicals and paid little attention to agricultural items in local publications. For this reason the fairs were of enormous educational benefit to the farmers. A report on the first fair at Fairfield in 1854, published by the newly organized State Agricultural Society, marked the beginning of the annual Iowa State Agricultural Society Reports. These reports provided the farmer with a five-hundred page volume that contained information on many varied aspects of agriculture. The progressive farmer was particularly interested in the essays on farm problems and the reports from the county societies.

The reports are one of the best sources of agricultural history in Iowa. Particularly interesting are the prize essays that describe a facet of the state's agricultural development, and often these essays revealed some fairly typical agrarian opinions on the future of husbandry. Such an essay appeared in the 1873 report. L. L. Ayer's prize essay "Manufactures in Iowa: The Facility and Necessity of Their Introduction, and Their Relation to the Agriculture and Commerce of the State" illustrated the traditional optimism of the agricultural frontier and the hope for the farmer's future.

The first permanent settlement of Iowa was made barely forty years ago, and up to this time most of the steady influx of population has become identified with agriculture and agricultural pursuits, the government census of 1870 showing

that of the population of nearly 1,200,000 in Iowa, the whole number of persons engaged in manufacturing was 25,049, or one in every forty-four of population. This has been but natural; for the great fertility of the virgin soil, and the ease with which it is made to produce the prime wants of the settler, have made the acquisition of land very desirable. Then there is the absolute certainty that the new farms will advance rapidly in value, so that the settler looks forward to the day when his farm will, in itself, be a little fortune, besides affording him a comfortable livelihood until that time comes. This advance, which is almost invariably many hundred per cent, enables him to spend his latter years in quiet and affords him a means to provide for his children that he could hardly have hoped for in Europe, or in his native state.

While the growth of our state has been vast, and the measure of material prosperity so great, it should be always borne in mind that our soil will sustain a population of five times the present number. To secure so numerous a population and means for their comfort and prosperity should be our ambition and that of our children after us. When that number of inhabitants is counted in our borders, Iowa lands will be worth two hundred dollars an acre, and desirable at the price. It would seem to be a proposition worthy of political economists that the world's population should be placed where the necessities of life can be produced easiest and cheapest, and surely no country under the sun can surpass the great Mississippi Valley in abundance and variety of productions that minister to the wants, the comforts and the luxuries of humanity.

Iowa farmers have realized so fully the rewards of enterprise and pioneer hardships that it is not likely that they would ever submit to the doctrine put forth by John Stuart Mill, that the increase in the value of lands belongs to the State rather than to the Individual. This proposition is directly antagonistic to the well-settled and wholesome law, derived from the barbarous ancestors though it be, that the right and the permanent possession of land rests in him who first reclaims it from the natural state, and continues to hold it. But while land-owners will probably never have their

allodial possessions disturbed by this agrarian doctrine, still the tendency of modern activity is to combine individual efforts to secure a desired end. This is noticed in the town-meeting that votes a tax for a new school-house and along the whole line of a projected canal or railway. To this system of joint contributions of money and credit is largely due the splendid advance in progress so characteristic of the nineteenth century and of the great Northwest.

Even now the farms of the Upper Mississippi Valley furnish a large part of the breadstuffs of the world, and were every arable acre there planted with wheat, corn, and barley, part of it could never be sold, for there would be no need of it anywhere for human food. Last winter corn was stored in thousands of cribs because the owners of that splendid crop could not afford to sell it at less than twenty cents per bushel, and even now it is just barely available for shipping purposes, owing to the somewhat deficient crop of the year just closed.

So far, the principal manufactures that have followed our pioneer farmers are those requiring little capital, simple tools and hand labor. Workers in wrought iron and tin, and wood workers, are the first to follow agriculture westward, forming the nucleus, with the pioneer tradesman, around which clusters the embryo town or city; then comes the grist mill, the first hint of capital to be employed in western manufactures.

It is to be expected that capital will not be unlocked to any extent for the development of manufactures in the Western States, as long as other investments offer more remunerative interest. Thus thousands of dollars have annually been invested in wild lands, and allowed to remain untouched until lands near by have been improved. This favorite and very profitable investment is now materially abridged by reason of the homestead and bounty laws, and the recent immense grants to railroads. At present, a favorite form of investment is the purchase of mortgages given by buyers of improved lands, and loaning to those who wish to extend their farming operations. In either case, so active is the present demand for money and credit, that cash loans are made to equal an average of at least twelve per cent. This in

itself is a good reason why manufactures are tardy in coming, for the manufacturing classes are even freer borrowers than western farmers, and cannot afford the rates now obtained. But the farmers, the writer believes, are now in a fair way to rid themselves of the heavy taxes they have paid for school houses, churces, bridges, railroads, farm buildings, and machinery, and in a few years, at farthest, will relieve their farms from mortgages. It is safe to predict that in a short time the school fund and local capital will quite suffice for the farmer's needs, for he has always his crop to hypothecate, if necessary. Hence we may look hopefully for a time when money can be obtained for any legitimate purpose at even better rates than the ten per cent, and more, we have so long paid.¹

¹ Report of the Iowa State Agricultural Society for the Year, 1873 (Des Moines, 1874) pp. 270-78.

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