

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY RUTH A. GALLAHER

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## Green Pastures and Tall Corn

The beginning of Iowa's semi-centennial year might well have been a time of deep discouragement for the farmers. Years of accumulated deficiency in rainfall, prolonged financial and industrial depression, along with acute uncertainty regarding future governmental policies, were enough, it would seem, to cast a deep gloom over the annual meeting of the State Agricultural Society when it assembled at the State capital on January 7, 1896. On the contrary, the whole spirit of the gathering, as indicated in the proceedings, was hopeful and confident. Plans were made for an active year which anticipated a reviving and extending prosperity.

Any doubts that may have remained were dispelled by an inspiring address from the dynamic president of the State Agricultural College, William M. Beardshear, who took as his text the prediction of the United States Secretary of Agriculture in his recent report that the success of the

American farmer would in the future depend "more upon mental than upon manual effort."

A discussion of the paper was enlivened by vigorous expressions of personal opinions, pointed by racy stories. Following this, a resolution was offered that since Iowa was "the greatest agricultural state of the American union" and as the corn crop was "the chief source of wealth to the state", the Society would "adopt the stalk of corn as its permanent badge". Thereupon, John Cownie, the energetic Scotch leader in livestock improvement who was shortly to become the head of the State Society, moved an amendment, which was heartily accepted, to add to the design "A Fat Pig". The emblem well symbolized the peculiar intermingling of the interests and activities of cultivation and husbandry which has characterized the economy of the Corn Belt.

Traditionally, from the time of Cain and Abel and from earliest agricultural records, there have been bitter and at times exterminating conflicts between the herder of flocks and the tiller of the soil, as well as between rival groups of husbandmen. These ancient feuds were reënacted in most realistic fashion upon the American plains. Rival stock companies overstocked the range and fought for watering places. The rancher sought, legally and illegally, to enclose the open range, while the

range interests endeavored to destroy all obstructions to the "free grass". Both claimants abominated the home-making "nester" who started the process of breaking the virgin sod. Most violent and internecine of all were the desperate "wars" between cattlemen and sheepmen.

Iowa's unexampled advantages for cultivation made the transition from the open range to enclosed fields remarkably rapid. From the beginning of settled farming in the late thirties, livestock was kept for family needs and for limited sale or barter: a few cows provided milk and butter, scrub sheep furnished wool adequate for household processing, and coarse, sturdy hogs rooted out an existence on the "mast" in the timbered areas. Power for cultivation and hauling was provided by yokes of oxen or, when necessary, of oxen and cows.

By the next decade, with the extension of settlement onto the open prairies and the gradual growth of markets, flocks and herds began to be built up. The abundant, succulent grass on public or absentee-owned lands was utilized by individual families or by groups of neighbors who hired, for a small fee per head of stock, a youthful shepherd or cowherd.

But it is significant that, while there was this communal use of the unbroken prairie, the inter-

ests of the individual proprietor were recognized and safeguarded from the earliest days. The settler's "rights" to his holding, whether based on government warrant or "squatter's law", were recognized. Territorial laws provided for taking up estrays and gave protection against roaming bulls and stallions. In 1870 voters in each county were allowed to vote for the "restraint" of stock from the neighbor's crops. Two years later this right of voting on the "herd law" was extended to townships.

The most positive inducement for the settler and his plow was, however, the land itself. Farms quickly supplanted the range. By the seventies "the range" had moved westward from its first base in the southeastern counties to the Missouri River and northward into the swamps of the Wisconsin drift. By another decade herding on any important scale was confined to the northwestern counties, and by the nineties organized grazing had moved north and west outside Iowa's borders. What preëmption and the swamp land, railroad, and educational grants left, the homesteader acquired.

In the earlier days the wide expanse of unsettled prairie with its natural plant and animal life brought a certain thrill of adventure and sense of freedom to a boy mounted on a fleet pony and ac-

accompanied by a dependable dog, as Hamlin Garland and Herbert Quick have recalled from first-hand experiences. Later, in the midst of cultivated areas, herding had the tameness and tedium of "baiting the cows" in the older regions. Lawrence Larson found such supervision a tiresome chore, though his brothers in northern Iowa relieved the monotony by preëmpting the pasture area of a hill which they defended against rivals in a miniature cattle war.

Conflict between settlers and herders — especially those working for cattle companies — for the limited open areas of the western counties in the last years of ranging became, in the restrained expression of John A. Hopkins, the historian of the beef cattle industry in Iowa, "very unpleasant". The herds ate or trampled the wild hay that the settlers planned to stack for winter forage, the farmers in turn tried to stampede the herds. There were mass meetings, resolutions, violent verbal battles, and threats of shootings which fortunately did not come off. The contest was too unequal for prolonged conflict. When confronted by an extending phalanx of farmsteads protected by barbed-wire, the stock rangers had to seek the unsettled open spaces of the last frontier. The heart of the prairies was too valuable for such a primitive utilization. Transition to a diversified

economy awaited only adequate markets and marketing facilities.

Early markets were restricted to drives on the hoof to regional centers. The extension of railroads and the development of terminal stockyards went far to commercialize the whole meat industry. The refrigeration shipping devices, invented in the seventies, made possible cross-country and trans-ocean shipping of meats and laid the foundation for large-scale packing plants with the great localized center at Chicago.

The packing business in Iowa was started in a small way by merchants in the Mississippi River towns who were forced to combine elemental processing with their mercantile activities. "Pork houses" were established in the forties for processing hogs. The industry gradually moved nearer to centers of supply in Sioux City and such strategically located interior points as Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Ottumwa, Des Moines, and Mason City. In recent times Iowa packers have processed more than half the hogs, sheep, and calves and about a third of the cattle marketed from Iowa. The growth and extension of trucking has greatly facilitated and economized livestock marketing of all kinds.

With its unexampled advantages in production and marketing and its alert settlers, Iowa was des-

tined to become the great livestock State of the nation, the most typical representative of the Corn Belt economy. The Hawkeyes were able to profit by the experiences of the Buckeyes, Hoosiers, and Suckers; and cropping was never carried to as great extremes as on the earlier frontiers.

The trend toward diversification of crops and the combination of crops and livestock appeared early in the life of the State and was encouraged and aided at every step by agricultural journals, agricultural societies, the State Agricultural College, and the Federal Department of Agriculture.

The introduction of machinery for cultivation and harvesting led to the displacement of the "trailing-footed ox" by the horse and mule. New markets for horses were found in the cities and in the overland hauling business, while military commissary departments became important customers. Iowa became famous for its production of the standard draft breeds for which a large domestic and foreign demand was found before the turn of the century. The peak was reached in the early years of the first World War. After that time the tractor occasioned a rapid and general mechanization of farm power. There remains, however, a supplemental farm use and a possibly expandable market for special riding and driving types of horses.

After an abortive effort to finish Texas steers on Iowa grass, it became evident that Iowa was best adapted to the rearing of the standard beef breeds, of which the State became a leading importer, and to the finishing of "feeder" stock secured from the range. In cattle production Iowa took rank next to Texas.

Something of the same trend may be seen in sheep production: from wool to mutton, to lamb feeding, in which the prairie Commonwealth along with the plains States of Colorado and Nebraska are the big three. But the State's most dominant and spectacular achievement in the production of the nation's meat supply has been in the selection, adaptation, and mass production of that "most thorough domestic animal . . . the hog." The corn-hog ratio is the key to the distinctive economy of the Corn Belt and Iowa raises upward of a fifth of the nation's pork supply, more than twice as many hogs as the nearest competing State.

Dairying and poultry raising, starting in a supplementary way, have in certain areas become so fully specialized with highly bred animals and fowls and with the application of advanced methods and techniques as to contribute very materially to the food output and total income of Iowa.

It is an interesting and significant fact that all of the outstanding applications of "technology on



the farm" as applied in Iowa, in breeding, nutrition, prevention and eradication of diseases, new and improved crops and cultivation systems, mechanization, marketing, modernized housing, and the service of transportation and communication utilities, have not led to the creating of new systems of agriculture but rather to the strengthening and perpetuating of the existing corn-livestock economy on the family-sized farm.

The Prairie Plains have been termed, without straining a figure of speech, the bread-basket and meat-platter of the nation. Today there is the demand from Europe that the baskets and platters be passed across the ocean. The inter-dependence of agriculture and industry which extreme specialization created two generations ago has been renewed in intensified form by the ravages and disorganization of total warfare.

For many years there has been a growing recognition of the need for diverting a greater proportion of cultivated crops from feed to food and for the more economical fattening, processing, and distributing of our meat-supplying livestock. Theories and possibilities have now become conditions and realities; the future has arrived and the supreme test is upon us. The Corn Belt is faced with the greatest challenge of modern agriculture.

EARLE D. ROSS