

WENDELIN GRIMM AND ALFALFA¹

GRIMM ALFALFA is one of Minnesota's main contributions to American agriculture, and its history is an interesting and significant story of a hardy forage plant that was brought to America some eighty years ago by a German immigrant named Wendelin Grimm. Although millions of Europeans migrated to the United States in the course of the nineteenth century, Grimm stands out as an individual farmer who made an important specific contribution to American agriculture. He left his native Kulsheim, a little agricultural village between Tauberbischofsheim and Wertheim in the Tauber Valley of the duchy of Baden, Germany, in 1857. Since he was nearly forty years of age when he emigrated, he retained many of his old farming methods and interests. Like many other immigrants he brought with him some of his favorite possessions. Among them was a bag of alfalfa seed, weighing not more than twenty pounds, which was destined to become the basis of his important agricultural contribution. Grimm reached Chaska in Carver County about September 1, and there he bought 137 acres in the northwest quarter of section 4, range 24 west, Laketown Township.

In the spring of 1858, Grimm planted the seed he had brought with him in order that he might have a crop of alfalfa, as had been his custom in the old country. The soil was favorable, but the winters were more severe than those of his native village, and he did not have immediate success. Some of the alfalfa plants winterkilled, but he carefully saved the seed from those that survived and replanted the field. Thus he continued year after year, trying to grow

¹ This paper was presented at the afternoon session of the eighty-ninth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 10, 1938. In the absence of the authors, it was read by their friend, Mr. Rodney C. Loehr of St. Paul. *Ed.*

what he considered an essential crop. Some years his field winterkilled very little, but in others it died out almost entirely. Yet he always saved seed from the plants that survived and replanted the following spring. After years of persistence, the alfalfa became acclimatized and no longer winterkilled. The scientific importance of his work, Grimm probably never realized.

Detailed information about Grimm as a farmer is lacking, but reports gathered from the neighbors of his community have been repeatedly used. Charles Kenning of Bird Island, who was acquainted with Grimm, emphasized the fact that for many years he made little headway, and only by persistent care did he finally succeed in raising hardy alfalfa. A near neighbor, Henry Gerdson, is authority for the story of an incident that must have made Grimm feel that his efforts in growing alfalfa in America were worth while. In the summer of 1863, Grimm drove a number of fat cattle past Gerdson's home on the way to market. Gerdson, surprised to see such fat animals when feed was scarce and his own cattle were lean, asked Grimm where he had obtained his corn. Grimm, long conscious of the feed value of alfalfa, proudly answered: "Kein Körnchen, nur ewiger Klee," — "not one kernel, only everlasting clover."

George Du Toit, the proprietor of a store at Chaska, knew Grimm for many years. It was through him that Grimm did much of his trading, including the buying of garden and field seeds. Du Toit remembered him as a man with the rudimentary education of the average German-born citizen, good common sense, and a determination in his undertakings. The storekeeper also said that, in his memory, the only time that Grimm's alfalfa nearly died out entirely was in the winter of 1874-75. It is interesting to note that this was the severest winter since the forties. Joseph, Grimm's older son, who lived with his father until 1876, when he went south, recalled that six years after the alfalfa was planted the family dug a driveway for a bank

barn and found that the "roots of this clover had penetrated more than 10 feet deep through the clay soil."²

Wendelin Grimm's alfalfa or "everlasting clover," as it was commonly called, grew and thrived year after year, but it received little early notice commercially. Grimm himself did nothing to bring his contribution to the attention of the agricultural world. Only the farmers in his neighborhood planted it and relied on it as permanent source of fodder and of fertility for the soil. They obtained seed from Grimm and sowed fields for themselves. In this way alfalfa spread in Carver County, but it was raised largely within a radius of perhaps ten miles of the Grimm farm. It may also have been used a little in other localities. Grimm is reported to have bought a threshing machine in 1865 from an implement dealer who advised him to produce alfalfa seed for commercial purposes. Whether this suggestion was given as an aid to Grimm, or merely as a talking point to dispose of the thresher, is not known. According to Joseph Grimm, who operated the machine, 480 pounds of seed were produced on three acres in 1867 and sold in Minneapolis for fifty cents a pound. The failure of hardy alfalfa to spread in Minnesota during the early years of its development was probably due, as Joseph Grimm said, principally to the fact that livestock was grazed on vacant lands

² For additional details on Grimm, see the following accounts by Charles J. Brand: *Grimm Alfalfa and Its Utilization in the Northwest*, 7-9, 17-21 (United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Plant Industry, *Bulletins*, no. 209—Washington, 1911); "The Acclimatization of an Alfalfa Variety in Minnesota," in *Science*, 28: 891 (December 18, 1908); and "Ancestral Home of Grimm Alfalfa," in *Fertilizer Review*, 9: 8-10, 13 (September-October, 1934). See also Charles F. Collisson, "Memorial Tablet Erected to Grimm Alfalfa Originator," in *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 15, 1924; M. C. Cutting, "Alfalfa from Xerxes to Grimm," in *Country Gentleman*, 89: 11, 29 (August 16, 1924); Charles Kenning, "Minnesota Alfalfa," in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 20: 112 (March 1, 1904); and J. H. Shepperd, "The Story of an Everlasting Clover," in *Breeder's Gazette*, 83: 845 (June 21, 1923). In Germany alfalfa is known as *ewiger Klee*, because of its continuous growth. It is also called *Luzerne*, and *Monatsklee*, or "monthly clover," since it can be cut each month.

and there was plenty of open range. After the passage of the Enclosure Act in 1871, fences were erected and more attention was given to feed crops, and especially to alfalfa, in Carver County. In 1889 this county produced nearly fifty per cent of the alfalfa grown in Minnesota.³ Ten years later it was still the leading alfalfa center of the state, producing a third of the total crop. Prior to 1900, it was generally believed that the farmers of Minnesota could not grow permanent stands of alfalfa, and those few who knew that it was being grown in Carver County attributed its success to local soil conditions.

The first person to take an active interest in bringing Grimm's hardy alfalfa to the attention of the outside world was Arthur B. Lyman of Excelsior. About 1880, on a visit to Tobias Ottinger at Victoria in Carver County, he learned of the superiority of alfalfa over red clover and induced his father to plant a field, which winterkilled because ordinary seed was used. Ten years later, when teaching school in Dahlgren Township, Carver County, he again came in contact with this forage plant which withstood the wintery weather. This time he took a handful of Grimm alfalfa hay home and showed it to his father, who bought seed in Minneapolis and tried again. As before the crop winterkilled. Lyman, still believing in alfalfa, obtained seed from the Grimm neighborhood and persuaded his father to try again. The result following the first winter was not encouraging, but the second winter more plants survived and from then on the alfalfa continued to flourish.

Lyman was very enthusiastic over his father's success with Grimm alfalfa and was anxious to disclose the facts to someone who would bring it to the attention of Minnesota

³ Several writers have followed the statement in Brand, *Grimm Alfalfa*, 20, that "in 1899, with the exception of certain counties in New York, Carver was the only county east of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers that reported as much as 1,000 acres of alfalfa under cultivation." Carver County is west of the Mississippi and only 658 acres of alfalfa were reported within its borders in the agricultural census of 1900.

farmers. In 1900, at a picnic excursion on Lake Minnetonka, he met Professor Willet M. Hays, head of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, and to him he told the story of his discovery. Hays decided to make a personal investigation in Carver County. Accompanied by an assistant, Andrew Boss, he drove the thirty miles to Excelsior and made an extensive tour of inspection with Lyman as guide. After three days, he decided to start trials with the plant at the experiment station, and made arrangements with Lyman to procure all the Grimm seed possible. Lyman obtained as much as he could by increasing his own alfalfa fields to "over one hundred acres." Cold, rainy seasons prevented the harvesting of large supplies for two years, but at the end of that time he again agreed to furnish seed because there were constant demands for it from other experiment stations.⁴

From this time on more interest was taken in the possibilities of developing and introducing hardy alfalfa as a forage crop for the Northwest. Lyman was invited by Professor Hays to read a paper on the subject at a session of the annual meeting of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society, held at the Masonic Temple in Minneapolis on January 12, 1904. A general discussion of alfalfa, and especially of the hardy variety grown in Carver County, followed the reading. Most noteworthy of the remarks and questions was the comment by William J. Spillman, a member of the federal department of agriculture:⁵

I cannot help but be impressed with this paper read by Mr. Lyman . . . as of vital importance to the future of agriculture in the State of Minnesota and in the Dakotas. We have been searching the world

⁴A. B. Lyman, "Alfalfa Seed," in Minnesota State Agricultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1903, p. 38-44, and "History of Alfalfa," in Minnesota Farmers' Institute, *Annual*, 1922, p. 34. See also the paragraphs entitled "How I Discovered the Grimm Alfalfa" in the sixteen-page sales pamphlet issued by Lyman in at least three versions under the title *Lyman's Grimm Alfalfa* (n. p., n. d.).

⁵Minnesota State Agricultural Society, *Annual Report*, 1903, p. 42.

for a variety of alfalfa that would do just what this variety does. We sent a man to Turkestan this summer at great expense to get something of that kind, but here we know we have what we sought.

Professor Hays continued to give considerable attention to Grimm alfalfa, and in March, 1904, he issued a *Press Bulletin* in which, officially at least, this hardy alfalfa was referred to as Grimm alfalfa for the first time.

From 1901 to 1920 experiments to compare Grimm alfalfa with other alfalfas and other species of forage plants were conducted at various experiment stations in the Northwest. The first were started at the Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Minnesota. Careful statistical records were kept, using genuine Grimm seed, commercial seed, Turkestan seed, Iowa seed, and some unidentified varieties. In 1902 similar experiments were begun at the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station at Fargo and also at the substation at Dickinson. Comparative studies in Montana and Kansas showed that Minnesota Grimm yielded three times as much hay as other alfalfas. Hardy strains were developed also in South Dakota; one of the best was known as Grimm S. D. 162. After Dr. Spillman heard about Grimm alfalfa at the meeting of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society in 1904, the United States department of agriculture became actively interested, and Professor Hays continued to give encouragement from Washington after his appointment as assistant secretary of agriculture. Charles J. Brand and Lawrence R. Waldron made exhaustive comparative tests at Dickinson. Their study brought them to the conclusion that Grimm alfalfa was a natural cross between the common purple blossom alfalfa, *Medicago sativa*, long familiar to agriculturists, and a wild yellow flowering kindred species, *Medicago falcata*, which in some devious way had strayed from its original home in Asia to western Europe.⁶ Brand

⁶C. J. Brand and L. R. Waldron, *Cold Resistance of Alfalfa and Some Factors Influencing It*, 50 (United States Department of Agricul-

had obtained alfalfa seed from the region of Grimm's old home in Germany for comparison with that developed by Grimm in Minnesota. With reference to its ability to resist cold winter weather, the conclusion of Brand and Waldron is as follows:

In comparative experiments with Grimm alfalfa and the old German Franconian alfalfa the latter has proved to be much less hardy under our northern conditions than the Grimm, which points to the probability that the German lucern that Mr. Grimm brought with him has been greatly modified during its fifty years' sojourn in Minnesota. . . . Under identical conditions and with identical treatment, adjoining rows of these strains killed out very differently. In the old German strain 64 out of 85 plants winterkilled, while in a sample of Grimm grown in North Dakota only 2 out of 70 plants were killed. . . . The Grimm killed out less than 3 per cent, while the old German lost more than 75 per cent.⁷

Other observations were made by Brand and John W. Westgate, who started in 1906 to make a critical, botanical, agronomic, and historical study of alfalfa, officially directed by the United States department of agriculture. After three years of study, Westgate concluded that a certain per cent of *Medicago falcata*, the hardy drought-resisting wild alfalfa of Eurasia, was indicated in the Grimm strain, and that it was this ancestry rather than acclimatization since its introduction in Minnesota that made it so hardy a plant. Brand, in his summary, called attention to the hardiness and consequent great potential value of Grimm alfalfa. This had been amply substantiated by the results of his investigations and also by the experiences of many northern farmers, who time and again had planted seed of ordinary strains of domestic and foreign origin only to have their fields gradually deteriorate to a point where they were no longer

ture, Bureau of Plant Industry, *Bulletins*, no. 185 — Washington, 1910); Brand, *Grimm Alfalfa*, 9-11, 13-17; R. A. Oakley and H. L. Westover, *Commercial Varieties of Alfalfa*, 10 (United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers' Bulletins*, no. 757 — Washington, 1916); P. K. Blinn, "Developing a Hardy Type of Alfalfa," in *Breeder's Gazette*, 63:947 (April 16, 1913).

⁷ Brand, *Grimm Alfalfa*, 14.

profitable. Such fields had to be plowed up and resowed with Grimm to obtain enduring stands.⁸

Ten years of tests comparing Grimm with other varieties of alfalfa confirmed all beliefs in its hardiness and superiority over other forage plants as a general feed crop for the Northwest. Grimm was recommended at all times, but little headway was made in establishing it as a leading forage crop because the farmers did not know how it should be raised and treated under differing soil conditions. Methods were found, however, that eventually aided certain localities in its cultivation. In Carver County the soil had always been favorable to a good stand, but where the land contained quantities of acid, alfalfa did not grow successfully. The farmers had to learn that, to counteract such conditions, they must apply lime to their fields. Inspection of the roots in alfalfa fields also revealed that poor stands were often caused by lack of alfalfa bacteria, whose presence is essential if the plants are to thrive and to fertilize the soil. The methods of inoculating new seedings had to be explained and demonstrated.⁹

Although the large-scale production of Grimm alfalfa was slow in developing, its seed was much in demand and at all times scarce. In 1914, forty thousand pounds of seed were distributed among farmers widely scattered through-

⁸ Brand, *Grimm Alfalfa*, 58; J. M. Westgate, "Another Explanation of the Hardiness of Grimm Alfalfa," in *Science*, 30: 184-186 (August 6, 1909).

⁹ A. C. Army, "Alfalfa as a Farm Crop in Minnesota," and C. G. Selvig, "Pastures and Meadows for Northwestern Minnesota," in Minnesota Farmers' Institute, *Annual*, 1912, p. 167-170, 1918, p. 61-66; C. P. Bull, "Alfalfa in Minnesota," and "Nubs of News," in *Breeder's Gazette*, 53: 671, 57: 618 (March 18, 1908, March 9, 1910); A. D. Wilson, "Why Alfalfa on Every Farm," H. M. Hamlin, "They 'Tried Alfalfa' — and They Failed," and A. D. Wilson, "Getting Started This Year with Alfalfa," in *National Alfalfa Journal*, February, 1919, p. 3, March 1920, p. 5, April, 1920, p. 5, 9-12; C. R. Hutcheson, "Notes from the Alfalfa Clubs," in *Northwest Farmstead*, 25: 465 (August 1, 1924); Minnesota State Board of Immigration, *Central Minnesota*, 45 (St. Paul, 1915); "Failures in Alfalfa Growing," in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 20: 377 (September 1, 1904).

out the northwestern counties of Minnesota. Many seed companies handled what Grimm alfalfa seed they could get, and probably much that was purported to be of this variety, but it was Lyman who concentrated his attention on producing and distributing the seed on a large commercial scale. His early experience in furnishing seed for the farm school and the encouragement and influence of Hays afforded him an unusual opportunity. He leased land in Montana, Idaho, and the Dakotas, where the dry climate seemed to be most favorable to seed production. Grimm alfalfa failed to seed well in wet years or in humid surroundings. Lyman directed the farmers whose fields he had leased in the production of pure Grimm alfalfa seed. The growers were required to deliver all seed to him for inspection, and a pedigree was kept for each field planted. Advertisements in farm journals and pamphlets telling of the value of Grimm alfalfa and including a short history of its discovery gave publicity to "Lyman's Grimm Alfalfa Seed." It is not known to what extent Lyman's business grew, but in 1915, twenty-five thousand dollars worth of seed was sold, and at no time was his production great enough to meet the demand. The seed was always high in price, selling for as much as a dollar a pound.¹⁰

By 1920 Grimm alfalfa was being grown in widening circles. It had spread to many states of the Northwest where the winters brought sub-zero weather and to the Canadian West, and it had been tried in the states to the southward. In the warm, humid regions, however, the results proved very unsatisfactory, so its growth in such places was not advised. The alfalfa acreage in Minnesota increased from 658 acres in 1900, to 2,288 in 1910, 45,419 in 1920, and 702,578 in 1930. The focal point up to 1924

¹⁰ [J. Y. Beaty], "Alfalfa Seed with a Real Pedigree," in *National Alfalfa Journal*, March, 1916, p. 5; "Lyman Tells of Saving Alfalfa Seed," in *Northwest Farmstead*, 25:399, 404 (June 15, 1924); advertisement in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 25:207 (March 15, 1909); *Lyman's Grimm Alfalfa*.

was always Carver County, but so great was the expansion that by 1930 no less than eighteen counties had a larger acreage. During the ten years from 1910 to 1920, Grimm alfalfa was becoming a standard hay crop in Minnesota, endorsed by many growers. The best results appeared in the western part of the state and portions of the eastern half. The leading counties in seed production were Grant, Kittson, eastern Roseau, central Marshall, eastern Polk, Norman, Otter Tail, Wilkin, Becker, Crow Wing, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Todd, and Stevens. In southwestern Minnesota and the Red River Valley, excellent hay crops were obtained, but the fields produced seed only in dry seasons.¹¹

Farmers in North Dakota became interested in Grimm alfalfa after seeing the results at the North Dakota demonstration farms. Some began extensive production of seed and, as a result, the North Dakota Grimm Alfalfa Seed Producers' Association was incorporated in 1916. The objects were to register Grimm alfalfa fields to keep the variety pure, to assure purchasers that all the seed they bought was genuine North Dakota-grown Grimm, and to furnish this seed to buyers at prices consistent with the product. The bylaws provided for inspection and verification of fields to insure against fraud or possible error. The Grimm fields in North Dakota were registered by application, and growers stated under oath that genuine seed was the source from which their crops were grown. In 1917, its first year, the association handled seventeen thousand pounds of seed.¹²

A similar organization in Minnesota, the Minnesota Grimm Alfalfa Growers Association, was formed at Morris in August, 1924. The businessmen of the town agreed to donate and build a warehouse to be used for storing the pooled seed of all members of the organization. Articles

¹¹ R. S. Dunham, "40 Years of Agronomy," in *Red River Aggie*, 12-15 (Crookston, 1936).

¹² W. R. Porter, "N. D. Grimm Alfalfa Association," in *Farmer*, 36: 852 (May 11, 1918).

and bylaws were drawn up providing for the use of genuine seed and fair terms of production. In order to equalize freight costs, it was agreed to average the cartage, thus giving a farmer who lived two hundred miles from Morris the same advantage as one who shipped only ten miles. The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association also became actively interested in Grimm alfalfa, and required that seed for certification be traced back, under affidavit, to Carver County.¹³

Although increasing attention was being given to the production of Grimm seed, the acreage was slow in reaching a commanding figure. The *Northwest Farmstead* took a leading interest in expanding the acreage of alfalfa, recommending Grimm as the variety to be grown in Minnesota. After emphasizing alfalfa for a number of years, it started a most arduous campaign on August 1, 1923, and during the following year published some two hundred articles endorsing Grimm and revealing the value of alfalfa as a protein feed and a soil builder. The campaign slogan was "An Acre of Alfalfa for Every Cow in Minnesota." To teach the farmers how to grow alfalfa successfully, Charles R. Hutcheson, a specialist on the subject, was engaged to go to all parts of Minnesota to test the soil and explain to the farmers and businessmen "what to do and how to do it" in order to succeed with alfalfa. He came to be known as "Alfalfa Hutch," and as a result of his work many alfalfa clubs were formed to further its growth. An example of the interest taken is shown in a letter from Lynn Sheldon, county agent of Redwood County, to the *Northwest Farmstead*:¹⁴

¹³ "Certifying Alfalfa Seed," and "Morris Donates Grimm Warehouse," in *Northwest Farmstead*, 25: 359, 506 (May 15, August 15, 1924).

¹⁴ "Northwest Farmstead's Alfalfa Campaign in Minnesota," "Review of Alfalfa Club Activities," and "With Alfalfa Clubs in Minnesota," in *Northwest Farmstead*, 25: 294, 352, 403 (April 15, May 15, June 15, 1924); C. R. Hutcheson, "Grimm or Cossack — Why?" in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 41: 174 (March 15, 1925).

Redwood County farmers have sown over 15,000 pounds of Grimm alfalfa this spring [1924] according to reports from various seed handling agencies. About one half of that amount was ordered through the county agent and orders were placed with the various seed distributing agencies handling good seed at right prices.

The production of a forage plant so hardy as Grimm alfalfa, with its permanence, enormous yields, high protein content, economy as a crop, and value as a soil builder and weed throttler, is almost without parallel in plant history. It is impossible to compute in dollars and cents what it has meant to the nation. Minnesota, therefore, owes a great deal to the diligent German pioneer who knew that he must have good feed for his livestock and, through perseverance and hard work, developed what is the outstanding forage crop in the Northwest today. Who should be honored for bringing Grimm alfalfa to the attention of the agricultural world and fostering its development is a question that cannot be answered easily. Much credit, however, should be given to Lyman, Hays, Boss, Brand, Waldron, Westgate, Hutcheson, and others for their interest in alfalfa work. The various alfalfa associations and the campaign of the *Northwest Farmstead* should not be overlooked.¹⁵

To pay homage and tribute to the German pioneer who developed Grimm alfalfa, a monument was unveiled and dedicated on June 10, 1924, on his old farm. Over four hundred people gathered for the occasion, including many of Grimm's descendants. His granddaughter, Miss Clara Adelman of Minneapolis, drew back the American flag that covered the monument—a bronze tablet attached to a native boulder. The inscription reads: "Commemorating Wendelin Grimm, resident of Minnesota 1857-1891, who originated Grimm Alfalfa on this farm. Erected June 1924 by Grimm Alfalfa Growers Associations."

Speakers at the dedication services included Dean W. C. Coffey, of the college of agriculture of the University of

¹⁵ "Alfalfa on Every Minnesota Farm," in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 41: 174 (March 15, 1925).

Minnesota, who declared that he felt that Grimm's contribution to the livestock industry was as great as that of the breeders. George W. Kelley, editor of the *Northwest Farmstead*, gave his reaction to the occasion in the following editorial, and its text may well serve as a conclusion for the present discussion:

The world knows not its greatest benefactors. Frequently it raises to eminence the demagogue and the time server. Fame it often gives to those responsible for its most disastrous calamities.

Sometimes, though, it is given to a few to recognize and pay tribute to a patient man or woman who in obscurity and perhaps in poverty has worked out great benefits to humanity.

Such an occasion was that . . . when eminent men from several states joined with hundreds of his former neighbors in dedicating a monument to the late Wendelin Grimm. . . .

Civilization advances. Such monuments indicate it. Perhaps some day our historians will tell more of the work of such men and glorify less the authors of death and devastation.¹⁶

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¹⁶ "Honor to Wendelin Grimm," in *Farmer*, 42: 800, 857, 864 (June 7, 21, 1924); Collisson, in *Tribune*, June 15, 1924; *Northwest Farmstead*, 25: 375, 419, 423 (June 1, July 1, 1924).



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