

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

MINNESOTA FARMERS' DIARIES¹

This nation has been predominantly an agricultural nation for the greater part of its existence. Since most of its early inhabitants, at least, gained their living by tilling the soil, a history of the American people should have as its central core the history of American agriculture. This history remains to be written. And when it is written, it must be based on sources as yet little touched by the research student. An outstanding authority on American agricultural history writes:

The importance of preserving farmers' account books, diaries, letters, and reminiscences for the use of research workers is being realized increasingly. Of similar significance are country-store account books, mill records, old farm periodicals and rural newspapers, pamphlets, reports and programs of agricultural societies, and pictures of all phases of rural life. These commonplace documents of the past are the necessary sources of the information used by historians and economists in making analyses of our past agricultural and economic life.

These materials supply research workers with many facts not obtainable elsewhere. They furnish data indicating the course of farmers' standards of living; they show the influence of the competition of various agricultural sections, the changing conditions and wages of farm labor, the ups and downs of various systems of farm management, and the trend of crop acreages. They afford figures on the cost of fertilizers, machinery, twine, and other supplies and information on yields, disease epidemics, the dates of the introduction of new varieties and breeds, and new cultural practices.²

The Minnesota Historical Society is fortunate in having not only a relatively large number of farmers' diaries, but also a number of farmers' account books, letters, and mem-

¹ A paper read at a meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on April 12, 1937.

² Everett E. Edwards, "Farmers' Account Books, Diaries, Etc., Are Often Valuable Research Aids," in United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932, p. 197 (Washington, 1932).

oirs. The present article is based only on material found in the farmers' diaries and is limited to the period preceding 1885. Unfortunately diaries for the northern part of the state are not now available, so this study is limited to the southern part of the state. A number of articles on various phases of frontier life previously published in MINNESOTA HISTORY will be found useful in the study of farming conditions in the pioneer period.³

The weather, that stock topic of conversation, received constant notice in the diaries of Minnesota farmers. Nearly all the entries contain a record of the weather, and often the daily variations in temperature and the direction of the wind are given, even when there is little else. "I have made entries of each day," John R. Cummins wrote in 1855, "more though of the weather than of other things, because having determined, so to make entries, the weather, though possessing little interest compared with other things, yet still has some; and my own doings, on a farm, possessing still less, I was necessari[t]ated as it were, to confine myself to that topic."⁴

For most farmers this interest in the weather was not just curiosity or an effort to lay up a stock of conversational material; it was a demonstration of the great concern which every farmer had in that most important and incalculable factor of farm life. In the winter a sudden, heavy snow-storm might block the roads, prevent the mail from getting through, and keep the farmer from hauling wood, grain, or ice. On February 5, 1884, Allen W. Dawley recorded:

³ See, for example, Frank E. Balmer, "The Farmer and Minnesota History," *ante*, 7:199-217; Grace Lee Nute, "Wilderness Marthas," *ante*, 8:247-259; William A. Marin, "Sod Houses and Prairie Schooners," *ante*, 12:135-156; Ida Pickett Bell, "A Pioneer Family of the Middle Border," *ante*, 14:303-315; and Evadene A. Burris, "Keeping House on the Minnesota Frontier," "Frontier Food," "Building the Frontier Home," and "Furnishing the Frontier Home," *ante*, 14:262-282, 378-392; 15:43-55, 181-193.

⁴ Cummins Diary, December 31, 1855. Cummins lived at Eden Prairie, in Hennepin County.

"Snowed nearly Six inches last night making nearly 2 feet on the level. Day fine and clear, towards night indications of more Snow Took most of the day to dig out and then did not more than half do it." Two days later he wrote: "Snow getting so deep it is difficult to get around and consequently do not do much but chore and do not do that very Well." Sometimes a sudden thaw prevented the farmer from hauling farm produce by making the roads impassably muddy. If spring came late, plowing and seeding were retarded, and late frosts sometimes injured tender crops. Cold, wet summers blasted the grain crops, injured the hay, and slowed up the growth of corn; a drought could be a calamity, and, if accompanied by wind, might even result in a "dust blizzard." But it was during the grain harvest, and this was especially true before the use of the string binder, that the farmer worried most about the weather. Cutting grain with a cradle was a slow, laborious task, and even after the advent of the reaper there was still the job of binding the grain by hand. Under these conditions a hard, sudden rain might find the unbound grain lying on the ground and drive the heads into the soft soil, where it sometimes sprouted before it could be rescued. On September 1, 1875, Dawley wrote: "Rained hard the most of the night. Cleared off today and looks as if we might have some pleasant weather. Grain in bad condition Get [*sic*] some of it out to dry. Unless it stands up straight and well capped it is thoroughly soaked. Some of it has commenced to grow."⁵ Sometimes a rain wet a half-built stack of grain so that it was necessary to dry out the sheaves and rebuild the stack. Through the vagaries of the weather, as the diaries show, the pioneer farmers frequently were forced to face such misfortunes.

Ordinarily, the diaries are of small literary value. Written probably just before bedtime by the light of an oil lamp

⁵ Dawley Diary, September 1, 1875; February 5, 7, 1884. Dawley settled at Smithfield, in Wabasha County.

or a candle, recording the labors of a regular, uneventful existence, they are a running commentary on the day's work and the weather, careless in spelling and punctuation, but withal a surprisingly faithful record. Occasionally, however, a diarist shows some literary skill, as, for example, Mitchell Y. Jackson. The first of the following extracts from his diary was written in 1856 on his fortieth birthday:

The stream of time flows with accelerated velocity as we grow older. Forty Years! How long when looked at from the head of the stream and yet how short when viewed from the other end. How vividly and how indellibly is impressed upon the tablet of our memory all the windings and rippings and little eddies of the miniature stream of our childhood.

In the second, Jackson recalls, after his removal to Minnesota, the maple sugar camps of Indiana:

But we have no sugar making here. No making of sugar troughs — spiles — furnaces camps etc My boys will know nothing of the pleasant excitement of the hurry & bustle of the "sugar-making" Sugar camps are perhaps the strongest marked localities of my boyhood. . . . And now at this distance I can almost smell the smoke and see the blazing fire as it used to shine upon the huge forest trees through the thick black darkness of an Indiana sugar-making night. With equal distinctness can I see the pearly drops and hear the peculiar trickling of the sacharine fluid as it flows from the spiles upon a bright, frosty, sunshiny morning — such as this.⁶

Occasional bits, such as these, color and enliven the diaries, but they are all too few. Lack of color, however, does not detract from their historical value. What they lack in literary value they gain in objectivity. Through their medium farming operations can be traced day by day. In the winter months the farmer cut, hauled, and split firewood, rails, and posts, butchered a hog, cleaned out the stable, hauled manure to the fields, or filled the icehouse. Concerning the last task one farmer noted: "They manage to get out ice here in quick time cut it in long cakes and hitch horses to it, which can pull out pieces 2 ft wide & 10 to 14

⁶ Jackson Diary, April 13, August 10, 1856. Jackson's farm was in Lakeland Township near Lake St. Croix.

ft long.”⁷ Winter’s blanket of snow furnished easy traction and made possible the drawing of heavy loads of grain, wood, or ice on sleds. During severe cold spells, or when the snow was too deep for ordinary tasks, the farmer’s work was confined to the barn, where he threshed grain or beans left over from the fall months, or made wheelbarrows, ax handles, and ox yokes. Occasionally he tracked deer over freshly fallen snow or fished through the ice on the lakes.

In the month of March, which was often half winter and half spring, the farmer chopped firewood, made and mended tools, planted garden seeds in hotbeds, plowed perhaps, but more probably fretted about the late spring. Some farmers tapped maple trees for syrup, but this operation was not always successful, since the neighborhood boys had a way of boiling down the sap on the sly and eating the maple sugar. April and May were occupied with planting operations. The farmer sowed a variety of crops: wheat, oats, barley, rye, corn, broomcorn, sorghum cane, hay, and garden vegetables from beets to turnips, and he set out apple trees and strawberry plants. Corn plowing and vegetable cultivating occupied most of June and the early part of July and kept the farmer engaged in a constant battle with weeds, cutworms, and potato bugs. Apparently some of the most troublesome weeds were brought in by the settlers. “It is strange how fast weeds have spread in this country,” Cummins wrote in 1857; “only settled five years, and now, wild buckwheat and barn grass cover whole fields.” To the early settlers grasshoppers were a greater danger than weeds. “During this month without doubt they did the most mischief,” wrote Cummins in July, 1857. “Wheat fields that previously looked middling well though damaged considerably in a day or two, would over large pieces, in many places the $\frac{1}{2}$ or three fourths, would be actually leveled with the ground, and eaten all up. In the corn fields they would eat off stocks 8 or 10 feet high, and after it fell

⁷ Cummins Diary, February 4, 1858.

clean it all up.”⁸ Fortunately these pests did not remain all summer, but flew away about the middle of August.

The harvest season lasted from the middle of July until perhaps the first of September. It was a time of hot and strenuous work, with ripe hay and grain needing to be cut and shocked or stacked. This was the time when bad weather might ruin the farmers' hopes for successful crops — days with much to do and scarcely enough time to accomplish all. In September and October the farmer was hardly less busy. Grain needed threshing and the early threshing machines did not always work satisfactorily. One farmer noted in 1868: “Threshed out 240 bus. of wheat, a small days work indeed a good deal of time lost by breaking” of the threshing machine.⁹ Besides threshing grain, the farmer had to cut and shock or husk corn; dig or gather beans, hops, grapes, squash, pumpkins, and potatoes; and pick garden seeds. He hauled loads of grain and vegetables to town, and while there, he often attended an agricultural fair. The house was banked with dirt and straw in November and preparations were made for the winter. Supplies were hauled from town and plowing, threshing, and cornhusking were carried forward. The cold days of December brought butchering, wood chopping, and deer hunting. Thus, farming operations can be followed through the year.

The diaries tell something about agricultural tools and implements. The tools that the pioneers used in the forties were for the most part homemade. Except for the prairie plow and the ax, the farmer had to purchase few of his implements in the outside world. With his ax he fashioned sleds, harrows, rollers or drags, wagon boxes, whipstocks, oxbows, and yokes from white oak or ash. From the neighboring blacksmith he got shoes for his oxen, pitchforks, and perhaps scythe blades. His grain was cut with a cradle,

⁸ Cummins Diary, August 27, 1857; memoranda, 1857.

⁹ Cummins Diary, September 11, 1858.

threshed with a flail or by the hooves of oxen or horses, and winnowed by the wind. At a near-by mill the grain was ground into grist or flour. The farmers of the forties found markets for their products at Fort Snelling and on the steamboats that carried their supplies.

The settlers who came in the next decade brought a variety of tools with them. The appearance in the middle fifties of the threshing machine, motivated by horsepower, made the flail unnecessary, except for flax. Even in the late sixties the flail was used to thresh flaxseed. In 1869 Cummins wrote: "at work on the flax threshing with a flail but it does no[t] pay. We threshed only two bus. about 48 sheaves make a bus. or about twice as much as wheat." The next day, tired of the flail, Cummins reverted to an older practice. "At work treading out flax with the horses We got about 10 bus. today. much better than with a flail." A reaper mentioned as early as 1856 was surprisingly enough of the self-rake type, but reapers and mowing machines were not common until the Civil War years. Even as late as 1865 the owner of one machine traveled about reaping his neighbors' grain for a dollar an acre without horses or a dollar and a quarter an acre if he furnished both horses and reaper.¹⁰

Jackson contrasted methods used in 1860 with those followed in his boyhood.

Commence the new harvest by cutting my Rye The old familiar clatter of the reaping machine sounds quite natural Though there is nothing about it that reminds me of harvest as conducted in the days of my boy hood. Then the old simple crooked sickle then the more formidable looking cradle were the only implements known. Now the machine drawn by 2 or 4 horses cuts its throng of four to six feet as fast as the team can walk. and from four to six men are busy binding and setting up the sheaves.¹¹

The reaper, however, did not entirely displace the cradle for

¹⁰ Cummins Diary, November 26, 27, 1869; Francis B. Larpenteur Journal, July 12, 1856; Dawley Diary, memoranda, 1865. Larpenteur's farm was near St. Paul.

¹¹ Jackson Diary, July 13, 1860.

a generation. In the eighties it was a common practice to cut several swaths around the edges of a grainfield with a cradle before entering with a reaper.

A study of the diaries shows that the reaper was beneficial to the farmer in two important respects—it made him less dependent on long stretches of good weather in harvest time, since the grain could be cut much more quickly; and it made possible an increase in the size of grainfields. Of course other factors enter into the causes for the increase in the size of fields and plantings—railroads and the growth of markets, for example—but much of the increase was made possible by the introduction and subsequent improvement of the reaper.

The diaries offer occasional bits of information about the prices of farm lands, both in the West and in the East. Although available data is scanty, it seems likely that land prices varied according to the time, place, kind of land, and number of purchasers, and that expensive land in the East and cheap land in West led to the migration of many persons from the middle Atlantic states, particularly Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. In 1857 some Minnesota land was selling for fifteen dollars an acre, while in Pennsylvania land "along the Delaware has been selling for rather high prices. Some of it having brought 500 dollars an acre."¹²

The prices of farm produce and farm supplies are frequently mentioned, and the fall in the prices of grain after the harvest and their gradual rise about the beginning of each new year to a culminating point usually in June can be traced. The effects of panics and the impact of a depression or a wartime inflation upon farm prices and income can be followed. The panic of 1857 was felt in Minnesota by October of that year, and by January, 1858, money was so scarce that farmers had to resort to barter. By September, 1858, however, it was said that: "Times are on the mend

¹² Jackson Diary, January 25, 1857; Cummins Diary, March 3, 1857.

when money is so plenty, that buyers will come up the [Minnesota] river for produce." A year later things were different. Wheat and oats which had sold for a dollar and a half a bushel in June, 1857, were selling in August, 1859, for fifty and fifteen cents respectively. "At such prices," one farmer complained, "it is about useless to try to farm." Later he remarked that "What with failure of banks, hard times and so on, things are about used up in this country at present; it is almost impossible [to] get any money."¹³ Thus the farmer described economic conditions, good or bad, and they were frequently bad.

Some of the reasons for the enmity of the farmer for the middlemen and the towns, which developed later into the Granger and Populist movements, can be found in the diaries. In 1857 a farmer noted: "The store keepers in the west are generally a little more giving to asking more than the value of an article than they would take; but it is the case more or less everywhere." And again: "The store keepers work a game here [*in Minneapolis*] not very profitable to the farmer. They will tell a farmer so and so sold potatoes at so much, and you must or we wont buy." In 1859 the following was recorded: "To give an idea how the lumberman cheat[s], for 1500 feet, I had only 1300." Here is another similar complaint: "Went to town with a load of flax. it lost a good deal in weight by some means." Such incidents as these deepened the distrust of the farmers for the townsmen and the moneyed interests. The farmer was only infrequently in a position to bargain, but on one memorable occasion a farmer reported: "Wheat is quite high; there being so much opposition between the Minneapolis buyers and Duffy of Shakopee, the price is ten to 20 cts higher than at Minneapolis some days running, it up to 170."¹⁴ Generally the farmer felt himself at the mercy

¹³ Cummins Diary, September 15, 1858; August 26, November 17, 1859.

¹⁴ Cummins Diary, April 4, August 29, 1857; September 20, 1859; October 9, 1867; December 8, 1869.

of the town buyer or seller who only too frequently took advantage of his superior position and knowledge.

The farmer's social life revolved to a large extent around the schoolhouse. With its adjoining lot, it functioned as polling place, caucus hall, public forum, clubhouse, church, funeral parlor, theater, and picnic ground. It was quite natural that the schoolhouse should be variously used by the community, since it was the sole public meetinghouse in the neighborhood—at least, until a church was built—and many of the farmer's amusements had an educational tinge. For instance, lyceums were held at the schoolhouse. The lyceum program usually consisted of a paper on some subject of general or educational interest, followed by a debate. On February 24, 1856, Jackson reported that he "attended Lyceum at Lakeland last evening. had quite an interesting meetings of Gents & Ladies Question Is the Liquor dealer the biggest scoundrel in the world. Affirmative carried."

Singing meetings, spelling bees, Sunday school festivals, temperance meetings, dramatic entertainments, panorama shows, and Christmas celebrations with community trees were all held in the schoolhouse. The last day of school, usually early in March, was a day of open house to parents. Dawley, who was a schoolteacher as well as a farmer, described one of these occasions: "School closed today & quite a crowd of visitors were in in the afternoon & quite a number of pieces were Spoken by the Scholars and we had a first-rate time Wound up by having a Spelling School in the Evening."¹⁵ On July 4 a picnic was usually held at the schoolhouse. A speech or a reading of the Declaration of Independence was followed by a dinner, and then part of the audience adjourned to the baseball field.

The farmer had other means of recreation besides those connected with the schoolhouse. Library associations were formed as early as 1856, and books, magazines, and newspapers were far from unknown on the farm itself. Some

¹⁵ Dawley Diary, March 4, 1870.

of the newspapers and magazines that the farmer read were the *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul, the *Weekly Herald* and the *Weekly Tribune*, both of New York, the *Fireside Companion*, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, and the *American Agriculturist*. In 1856 a club was formed at Lakeland to subscribe to the *Northwestern Farmer and Horticultural Journal*.¹⁶ Farmers' clubs are mentioned in 1856 and agricultural societies, in the late sixties, but the Grange is not mentioned until 1874. What went on in these clubs is not recorded. They may have been partly political; certainly the Grange was.

Not all the social life of the farmer was as serious and educational in its objects as the above may suggest. Among other amusements in which he indulged were euchre, "pea Nuckle," backgammon, parchesi, chequers, and croquet. There were dances in the homes, and recreation for all members of the family was offered at candy pulls, parties, sewing and quilting bees, housewarmings, ice-cream festivals, and sleigh rides, or in skating, berrypicking, hunting, fishing in summer and winter alike, and swimming. By 1856 fairs and "Young Ladies Grand Exhibitions" were held, and when the state fair came, there was horse racing. As early as 1857 a circus came to St. Paul. Ten years later at least one farmer attended a baseball game between teams from Minneapolis and St. Paul. St. Paul won, but the score was not recorded. Professional theatrical entertainments, with such plays as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the "Union Spy," were running in St. Paul in the decade following the Civil War. The social amusements of the farmer, however, for the most part depended upon his own efforts.

Two things in the attitude of the frontier prairie farmer toward religion can be noted in the diaries. One was the

¹⁶ Edward B. Drew Diary, April 13, 1858; Henry C. Fridley Diary, February 2, 1867; Dawley Diary, January 25, 1866; November 25, 1867; September 5, 1876; Jackson Diary, December 14, 1856. Drew resided in Winona County and Fridley, in Anoka County.

leveling effect that the frontier had upon sectarianism. Jackson wrote in 1855: "It also seems pleasant to witness the studied concealment of sectarian names." The other was the tenacious hold that the farmer maintained upon certain common religious symbols, such as refraining from work on Sunday and assembling for common worship. Pastors were scarce in the early days, but their absence did not prevent services from being held. Cummins wrote in 1868: "Went to church but there was no preaching the other services were not very interesting." Although the pastor's cash income was pitifully small—one minister is reported in 1856 to have received but seventy-three dollars a year—it was undoubtedly supplemented by gifts in kind. In return the pastor was expected to preach an acceptable sermon. The farmer was not slow to criticize the sermon or the services. One or both might be too long. If he had words of praise for the "eloquent" Bishop Whipple, he could also dismiss another sermon as "nothing extra," or even make a more caustic comment, such as this: "Went to church, preaching by Bible agent minister but not much good in him by appearance, false pair teeth and eye brows."¹⁷

The subject of politics is generally dismissed with a comment such as this, made in 1876: "Put in a good honest vote for Hayes & Wheeler." Sometimes the comments take a sharper form. Jackson wrote in 1857 that the new state constitution "allows all whitemen that have been here 10 days to vote. And the way the '*dear Irish*' are marched up to vote the *Dimmicratic* ticket is a sin against heaven & earth. . . . I think there were from 50 to 100 votes polled here by persons having no interest in the affairs of Minnesota." Another diarist remarked in 1862: "Staid in town and went to the republican convention; there is a good deal of rascality going on in a Political meeting." Local politics get a little more attention than national affairs, but the com-

¹⁷ Jackson Diary, June 24, 1855; Cummins Diary, July 20, 1856; September 6, October 4, 1868.

ments are usually sparing of information. A delightful exception is the following: "Good news from Election Wabasha ahead on the Co Seat by 2000 votes Wab cast 4158 votes Pretty well done considering it contains only about 1500 inhabitants."¹⁸

The diaries tell little of the life of the farm wife and the conditions under which she labored. Although she was usually kept out of the fields, in times of great necessity she might do a man's work. One farmer recorded: "Olive plowed and I worked on my pasture fence." And on another occasion: "Commenced to Stack Olive helped me."¹⁹ The farm wife's usual work was carried on in the house and the barnyard. She made hard and soft soap, put up preserves and pickles, made strawberry shortcake, and on Thanksgiving Day prepared a turkey or a feast of oysters, sausages, mince and pumpkin pies, cake, and sauce. The piano was not unknown on the farm in 1856, and the sewing machine was a possibility fifteen years later. Screen doors were available by 1881 and papered walls and washing machines were on the farm by 1885. On the whole, however, the entries covering the activities of the farm wife are surprisingly few.

The diaries are useful for a study of prices, both of farm products and farm supplies. By recording the goods which the farmer bought, they furnish clues to his standard of living and show a gradual rise in the level of comfort of farm life. Varieties of crops and their yields, new crops and their usefulness, and the weights of livestock are sometimes recorded. A mass of incidental information, also, such as the cost of railway transportation and the names of steamboats, can be found in the diaries.

There are obvious limitations upon the value of farmers' diaries to the historian. The entries are usually short

¹⁸ Jackson Diary, October 13, 1857; Cummins Diary, September 20, 1862; Dawley Diary, November 13, 1867; November 7, 1876.

¹⁹ Dawley Diary, May 15, August 13, 1885.

and are confined to comments on the day's labors, and the farmer's milieu is described casually, if at all. The entries give comparatively little information about the breeds of livestock and the varieties of grains that the farmer raised, his shifts from one breed or crop to another, and his reasons for making them. The diaries ignore the things that the farmer took for granted—his clothes, the interior of his house, his tools, his wife. All in all, however, there is a surprising amount of valuable historical material in farmers' diaries, not only for the history of farm life alone, but also for other phases of American history. The diaries convey to the reader something that is difficult to transfer to any account of them: the atmosphere of farm life, an appreciation of its struggles, hopes, and defeats. Those who are interested in the history of a great agricultural state are deeply grateful to those faithful, recording Minnesota farmers who kept diaries.

RODNEY C. LOEHR

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
MINNEAPOLIS



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).