

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

AGRICULTURAL PERIODICALS

Agricultural periodicals contain a vast treasure trove of data which historians have failed to exploit to full advantage. Considering the fact that the United States has been primarily a nation of farmers until recently and that each of its sections and states has passed through—or is still in—a predominantly agricultural stage of development, it would seem logical for historians to give more attention to the contents of this group of periodicals which were consciously designed to serve as the main clearinghouse of information pertaining to agriculture and its related interests. Furthermore, the number of agricultural journals published in the United States since the inauguration of the *Agricultural Museum* at Georgetown, D. C., on July 4, 1810, is legion, and a list of those issued in Minnesota alone runs to well over a hundred titles.¹

An idea of the variety of subjects covered in agricultural periodicals may be obtained by noting those in the first volume of the *Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*. This farm journal, the pioneer in Minnesota, was edited and published as a monthly by L. M. Ford at St. Paul from November,

¹ Although John Stuart Skinner's *American Farmer*, first issued at Baltimore on April 2, 1819, is commonly referred to as the pioneer agricultural periodical of the United States, it is clear that the *Agricultural Museum* is "entitled to the distinction of being the first agricultural journal published in this country." See Claribel R. Barnett, "The Agricultural Museum; An Early American Agricultural Periodical," in *Agricultural History*, 2: 99-102 (April, 1928). The present writer has supplied the Minnesota Historical Society with a manuscript list of the agricultural periodicals issued in Minnesota. It is based on an unpublished "List of American Agricultural Journals" prepared by Stephen Conrad Stuntz and owned by the United States Department of Agriculture Library.

1860, through April, 1862.² As secretary of the state agricultural society, the editor was in a strategic position to gather material for his paper. His general objectives were summarized thus: "In addition to facts about our crops and agricultural resources, we shall, from time to time, give brief accounts of our schools, colleges and religious denominations, together with descriptions of our beautiful lakes, waterfalls and natural scenery, as well as articles on the Botany, Geology, Climatology and Mineralogy of Minnesota." That the editor devoted his primary attention to the objectives thus delineated is indicated by the fact that the volume here described includes only one article which deals with the crucial contemporary national events of the early sixties. Under the caption, "'What of the Night,'" he rather belatedly reminded his readers that "A fearful storm is gathering, and dark clouds are now obscuring the sky of our country." The article is devoted to "our humble opinion in regard to the prospects for our agricultural interests," and the early Minnesota farmers were advised "to raise all they can."³

Probably the most valuable historical data in this pioneer farm journal are the descriptions of agricultural conditions in the sections of Minnesota which were already fairly well settled. McLeod, Carver, Stearns, Scott, Wright, Rice, Ramsey, Steele, Houston, Freeborn, Olmsted, Sibley, and Meeker counties and the communities of Bloomington, Cottage Grove, and Le Sueur prairie are the subjects of short but enlightening articles. Similar information appears in

² No numbers were issued for March and April, 1861, and the four numbers of volume 2 bear the title, *Minnesota Farmer and Gardener and Educational Journal*. Although the name of Colonel John H. Stevens of Glencoe was carried as one of the editors, there is no internal evidence that he was active in this capacity. The "Explanatory" in the first number states that he had "kindly promised to act as assistant or corresponding editor."

³ *Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*, 1: 56, 173 (December, 1860, June, 1861). The second number of this periodical, that for December, 1860, was "issued upon the first printing paper manufactured in Minnesota, or the Great North-west."

the "Threshers' Reports" and in the "Editorial Correspondence," the column wherein the editor recorded his observations while on tours à la Arthur Young through his particular domain.

Contemporary estimates of Minnesota's agricultural possibilities appear under such headings as "Farming Lands on the Superior Road," "Fertility of Minnesota Soil," and "Advantages of Minnesota for Stock. &c." Although the articles entitled "The New York Tribune on Our Wheat Crop" and "Gov. Ramsey on the Wheat Crop" are significant as foreshadowings of the future, much more space was given to the current experiments in raising apples, winter wheat, broomcorn, strawberries, sorghum, sweet potatoes, cranberries, peaches, chicory, okra, Hungarian grass, madder, sugar beets, hemp, flax, and timothy. Articles on such special topics as "The Present State Agricultural Society," "Our Agricultural College at Glencoe," "The Oldest Farmer," "Not the Oldest Farmer," "A Little Land Well Tilled," "The Best Cultivated Acre," "The Pioneer Grapery," "Wine Making at St. Anthony," "The Biggest Hog," "Fattest Horses," "Another Greenhouse" in St. Paul, and "The First Snow" of 1861 also are contributions to the early agricultural history of Minnesota.

Contributions to general economic history are found in accounts of Winona as a grain market, wheat in store at Hastings, the shipment of flour to New Orleans and Superior, pork raising in Minnesota, and the pork trade of St. Peter. The social history of the state is similarly recorded in articles on the Winona State Normal School, the Central University at Hastings, "Singing in Public Schools," "The Religious Denominations of Minnesota," "Improvements about Minneapolis," "The St. Anthony Chalybeate Springs," "Whitney's Picture Gallery in St. Paul," and "Beautiful Residences."

The *Minnesota Monthly* is another early agricultural periodical which constitutes a similarly interesting as well

as important historical source.⁴ Issued in thirteen numbers during 1869 and 1870, this "North-Western Magazine Devoted to Agriculture, Horticulture, Domestic Economy, Social Improvement, and General Information" carried as its motto, "Faith, Hope, Charity, Fidelity." The editor, Colonel Daniel A. Robertson, took a leading part in establishing at St. Paul in September, 1868, the North Star Grange, the first permanent Grange in Minnesota. He also helped to recast the propaganda circulars of the Grange to emphasize the order as a weapon against monopolies and a medium for co-operative buying and selling. Thus he did much to make the Grange the basis of a political movement rather than a social organization, as Oliver H. Kelley, its founder, had conceived it. The *Minnesota Monthly* was developed as "The Official Organ and Advocate of the Patrons of Husbandry, a Rural Order which is rapidly increasing in numbers and usefulness."

Outstanding among the many agricultural periodicals that have served Minnesota and the Northwest are the *Farmer and Farm*, *Stock and Home*. The former was founded as a monthly by Edward A. Webb at Fargo, North Dakota, in 1882. At first it was called the *Northwestern Farmer* (1882-85); later it was known as the *Northwestern Farmer and Breeder* (1886-93), the *Northwestern Farmer* (1894-98), and since 1898, as the *Farmer*. The paper has been published variously as a monthly (1882-93), a semi-monthly (1893-1909), and a weekly (from 1910). In 1890, Webb removed his publication to St. Paul, where it has since been issued. In 1905, Dan A. Wallace joined the staff, and two years later he became editor in chief, serving in that capacity until February, 1935. The *Farmer* is Minnesota's oldest agricultural periodical, and its files afford the longest continuous record of rural conditions in Minnesota as presented in farm journals.

⁴ Mr. Horace H. Russell has gathered the factual data for this and the next two paragraphs.

Farm, Stock and Home was founded as a semimonthly in 1884 by Horatio R. Owen at Minneapolis. A year later, his brother, Sidney M. Owen, joined the editorial staff, and soon thereafter he began to be recognized as an outstanding agricultural leader in Minnesota.⁵ He gave particular attention to the cause of agricultural education, and he is credited with being one of the men who was largely responsible for the early establishment and development of the college of agriculture of the University of Minnesota. *Farm, Stock and Home* did notable pioneer service in advocating that Minnesota specialize in dairying, and its self-assumed designation as "The Paper that Founded the Farmers' Creameries" is not without justification. For many years, Theophilus L. Haecker, often called the father of dairying in Minnesota, conducted the page devoted to his special field. The periodical is also noteworthy for its treatment of economic conditions and political movements in the eighties and nineties. *Farm, Stock and Home* was absorbed by its eminent contemporary of many years on June 1, 1929.⁶

There is naturally notable variation in the contents of the farm journals issued for a particular region during the course of half a century or more, and there are, therefore, considerable differences in their relative value as a historical source.⁷ Each editor had his own particular ideas of the mission of his paper; each decade brought forth new problems and interests; and each generation of readers had to

⁵ See obituary sketches in *Farm, Stock and Home*, 16:211, 26:135 (May, 1900, February 15, 1910).

⁶ "The Consolidated Publications," in *Farmer and Farm, Stock and Home*, 47:920 (June 1, 1929).

⁷ The United States Department of Agriculture Library has the largest collection of American and foreign agricultural periodicals in the United States. The McCormick Historical Association in Chicago also has a valuable collection. The libraries of the University of Western Ontario at London and the Canadian department of agriculture at Ottawa have comprehensive collections relating to Canada. See Fred Landon, "The Agricultural Journals of Upper Canada," in *Agricultural History*, 9:167-175 (October, 1935).

be approached in different ways. A few statements concerning the contents of agricultural periodicals generally will, however, further emphasize their importance to historians.

The farm journals which catered to the needs of the pioneer generations afford contemporary descriptions of the various geographical subregions as they were being opened to settlement and, to a less extent, of the settlers who poured into them. Editorials and news notes also gave attention to immigrant groups, especially if they were considered distinctive and in the process of contributing something of value to American agriculture. The foreign-language agricultural journals offer what their editors considered the special problems of the respective immigrant communities during their adjustment to American ways of farming.

News items in farm periodicals give supplementary information on the various steps by which virgin land was transferred from the public domain to the individual farmers who undertook the creation of homes and productive fields thereon. The reactions to the policies of the federal and state governments with reference to the disposition of land appear in editorials and in confirmatory and protest letters from readers, and the activities of land companies are reflected in news items and advertisements.

The rise and general progress, whether ultimate decline or relative permanence, of the various crops and livestock are recorded in farm periodicals. The steps by which the agricultural map has come to assume its present form are indicated. The changing ways of farm management and the introduction of new and improved varieties of crops and breeds of livestock are reported in detail. Machinery of all kinds is described in articles and pictured in the advertisements, and attention is given to farm buildings, fences, seeds, feeds, and the sources of draft power.

The problems incident to all phases of the marketing of

agricultural products are discussed at length. The rise and development of producer co-operatives and the disposition of their products are similarly treated. Some of the journals, depending largely on the editor and the ownership, afford much data on the farmer-protest movements. Practically all the editors, as spokesmen for the farmers, gave space to material on political issues such as internal improvements, temperance, suffrage, tariffs, banks, the money standard, and education.

Information on the media by which the scientific knowledge contributory to the evolution of agriculture from a self-sufficing economy to the present-day commercial economy — namely, agricultural fairs, the federal and state departments of agriculture, agricultural schools, colleges, and experiment stations, farmers' institutes, extension service and demonstration farms, county agents, 4-H clubs, and the like — appears in ample detail in farm periodicals. They are also replete with information on what may be called agricultural leaders — the writers, inventors, scientists, and outstanding farmers who contributed to the progress of American agriculture and rural life.

The superstitions, cures, crazes, manias, fevers, and humbugs which hurtled through the countrysides also stand revealed in this source. Although there is no way of knowing the extent to which the endless variety of suggestions not only on better farming methods but on cooking, dressmaking, baby-raising, health, "the hired girl," etiquette, amusements, smoking, and the like were put into actual practice by the farming population, yet their general tenor, plus the occasional pro and con comments thereon, clearly reflect rural mores. The journals likewise include an interesting deposit of the intellectual diet of the farming population in the form of jokes, poetry, short stories, and cartoons.

The multitudinous subjects dealt with in agricultural periodicals constitute an integral part not only of agricultural,

but of general economic, social, and, to a less extent, political history.⁸ It would be a great boon to historians if copies or microfilm enlargements of the farm journals relating to a specific geographical region, such as a state, could be cut up, even figuratively speaking, into articles, editorials, news items, advertisements, etc., and the resulting material arranged chronologically according to subjects in a classified file. The result would be a detailed history of the evolution of agriculture in that region, together with countless sidelights on its general economic and social history. Even a comprehensive and carefully cross-referenced index to a complete collection of these journals would go a long way toward serving the same end. Historians will do well to mine and utilize to the full the wide variety of data available in agricultural periodicals.

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⁸ The utility of kindred historical sources are discussed in Everett E. Edwards, "The Need of Historical Materials for Agricultural Research," in *Agricultural History*, 9: 3-11 (January, 1935). Additional references of a similar nature are listed in the same author's "Annotated Bibliography on the Materials, the Scope, and the Significance of American Agricultural History," in *Agricultural History*, 6: 38-43 (January, 1932), later revised and issued in mimeographed form as *References on Agricultural History as a Field of Research and Study* (Washington, D. C., 1934).



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