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L. E. Falk.

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BROWN COUNTY AGRICULTURE

While Brown County has always been and still is an agricultural region the crops produced and the methods pursued in farming have undergone many changes. When the homesteaders arrived the virgin sod was broken or plowed and in some cases grain crops were sowed on the newly broken sod. Some of the homesteaders, however, after allowing the sod to rot for one season would re-plow or "back-set" before a crop was produced. After the second plowing the more careful of the farmers would employ a springtooth harrow which would tear and pulverize the sod to better advantage than any other implement then available. Ordinary harrows were then used in some cases.

The earliest seeding was done with the so-called broad cast seeders none of which are now in existence. The implement consisted of a long box in the bottom of which were a series of short rollers with large shallow corrugations that fed the grain slowly to spreaders which spread it over the ground. It was then covered over by a series of shovels not unlike the shovels of a corn plow only smaller.

That kind of a seeder was found to be unsatisfactory since some of the grain was covered too deeply and other parts of which would lie on top. The improvement of this seeder was the so-called drill which deposits the seed at a uniform depth.

During the first ten years of the county history small grain was virtually the only crop produced. It was thought that corn would not mature and little or no hogs or cattle were produced, except for home consumption. Neither was poultry and eggs considered a source of income.

So far as the first decade was concerned prairie grass was the only

source of roughage for live stock except perhaps on a few farms where small patches of flint or "squaw" corn were raised for fodder. But before the invention of a corn binder the harvesting of corn was extremely laborious. Threshing was done by steam power practically from the start, though a few horse power machines may have been used in the Aberdeen section.

As the number of dairy cows increased it was found that prairie hay, admirably suited for horses, was not so well suited for cows. As a result attempts were made to sow clover and timothy. The ordinary red clover, extensively used in eastern Minnesota and Wisconsin invariably winter killed, and timothy hay was no better suited for milk cows than the prairie hay. Various kinds of millet were therefore extensively used during the early period as fodder for dairy cows. Extremely low prices for wheat, drought, and crop failures together set farmers to casting about for a source of subsidiary income which would be more certain than grain farming.

Shortly after the dawn of the century the invention and introduction of the hand cream separator stimulated the dairying industry in the county. Creameries were started in the various parts of the county previous to the introduction of the hand separator, but it was found impracticable to haul the milk for such long distances as were necessary. As a result the creameries did not prosper and eventually closed. Thus, gradually, dairy cows came to provide perhaps a minor, but highly important part of the farm income.

Experimentation with corn proved that the cereal could be grown with success. This fact, in addition to the supply of skim milk available from hand cream separators encouraged hog production which was to become the source of a large part of the farm income of the county. About this same time the introduction of sweet clover and a little later alfalfa largely solved the problem of proper roughage for dairy cows. The more succulent and palatable legumes were grown with success, and this fact encouraged their use as live

stock feed.

The growing success in the cultivation of corn encouraged the production of hogs, a branch of farm products which was to become a major importance in the second decade of the new century.

At this period it became evident that after cropping the soil with grains for a succession of years it would not yield as plentifully as it once had. This fact probably gave dairying, hog raising and cattle production a decided impetus.

The decade beginning with 1910 may perhaps be said to have ushered in the greatest prosperity, for the agricultural interest of the county thus far in its history. It is true that many farmers were prosperous before this date but this decade saw not only the climax of agricultural prosperity but the beginning of the decline.

The relatively high prices for poultry during this period encouraged the production of an increasing amount of birds, both of the general utility type and egg-laying strains. Established markets for poultry grew up during this period and the demand for well finished birds was apparently good throughout the year. Turkeys and other fowls shared in this general prosperity of the poultry business.

The markets for cream also developed during this decade although considerable cream had been marketed in the previous ten years. When the cooperative type of creameries became defunct, big centralized creameries established stations in the various towns where cream might be marketed. A large part of it was shipped by rail to large plants, mostly in various parts of Minnesota.

As previously mentioned the hog industry was going to the front in the previous decade, but the rising prices which climaxed during the war period and immediately after saw the greatest development.

During this time the production of small grains continued but the perfection of the gasoline motor for power brought about a decided difference in threshing operations. Up to this time threshing had been done by large steam outfits requiring from 8 to 10 teams to haul bundles to the machine. Since practically all of the threshing was done out of the "Shock" it was natural that some farmers were forced to wait sometimes long periods for the machine to come. The development of the gasoline tractor brought out the small thresher which was sold at a price the average farmer felt he could afford.

By 1920 the big type of steam thresher had almost disappeared from the picture, being replaced by small threshers owned by one or two farmers together.

During the period of the World War^I the production of wheat was naturally stressed by the encouragement of the government to produce as much as possible. Low lands along the James River were drained and in some places protected by dykes in order to provide increased acreage for grain fields. During this period most of the remaining sod was broken up and turned into plowed fields so that in the greater part of the county, especially the eastern half, practically no native sod remains. This period shows the peak of grain production in the county and was characterized by a succession of excellent crops, rainfall being usually plentiful during those years.

THE BLACK RUST SCOURGE

The year 1904 marked the end of an epoch in wheat farming of the entire wheat belt of which Aberdeen is the center. Up to that time hard wheats had been produced with success. The scourges of the wheat crop had been drought and hail with occasional losses due to cut worms. Durum wheats had been introduced and found well suited to the soil and climatic conditions, but the market price for that variety of wheat had been so far under the #1 hard that no general cultivation of that variety had begun.

But 1904 known subsequently as the "rust year" saw the hard wheat crop annihilated by a plague hitherto unknown - Black Rust. The wheat plants developed an excellent stand in the greater part of the wheat belt, but shortly before the plants were ready to set the berry rust spores settled on the stems and a week or so of hot muggy weather so favored the growth of the fungi that practically no wheat was harvested. On the other hand fields of durum wheat were little affected by the rust and produced a fair crop.

Once infected the wheat fields seemed unable to escape the rust and cultivation of hard wheats was abandoned. No entirely satisfactory explanation of the propagation of the Black Rust has been made, although it was proven that the barberry bush was one of the hosts of the rust. Many practical farmers believed that barberry bushes were not numerous enough to account for so general an infestation as seemed to come with the suddenness of a thunder clap.

The market price of the durum wheats later advanced and wheat of that variety has since been a source of much of the income of the farms in Brown and adjacent counties.

The black rust scourge was of far-reaching importance. In the first place it revolutionized the wheat culture in the county and cut off the sources of local supply of milling wheats for the numerous small flour mills operating at the time; since they were not equipped to mill durum and had no markets for the flour.

THE GREAT LAND BOOM 1900 - 1910

The turn of the century saw much land in the county in the hands of Eastern insurance and investment companies, although perhaps a majority of the cultivated acreage had passed into the hands of farmer owners. A popular method of sale up to that time was the so-called "wheat-contract" plan. The buyer cultivated the land, furnishing seed and bearing all harvesting expense and delivering generally a half of the crop as payment of interest and principal. Much land changed hands on that basis.

But shortly after the new century came in, it was somehow discovered that land in this part of South Dakota was much too low in price as compared with land of equal productivity in states further east. A majority of the land buyers probably came from Illinois and Iowa, where land values and cash rentals had risen to fantastic figures. It was evident when the first farms changed hands in the county at something like \$25 per acre that people whose idea of the value of farm land was from \$200 per acre upwards would be strongly attracted to this part of South Dakota and the Jim river valley especially.

Real estate men were not long in formulating a systematic exploitation of farm lands here and the result was a sharp rise in values, the jump from \$25 per acre to \$75 being accomplished almost over night. It was before the automobile era and livery barns did a thriving business in providing transportation for the strangers who came to buy land. Hotels and restaurants were taxed to their capacity.

Some of the buyers naturally were speculators who bought in order to resell at a profit, but there were also many actual farmers who made their homes on the land they bought and became permanent residents.

Many fortunes were made in real estate during those years, a circumstance which served to convince the pioneer settlers their holdings were valuable.

Many of them had held on through the hard times of the nineties for reasons perhaps not clear in their own minds. But now they were convinced they had used good judgement in their fight against the distressing odds that infested the nineties. A good farm in the Jim river valley was no longer a joke. The man who owned one was considered a person of affluence and commanded the respect of everyone. It was true the land probably produced no more wealth when it sold for \$75 per acre than it did when it could be bought for \$10, but the attitude of the owner toward his acres had undergone a complete change. A farm was now something to be guarded carefully as a basis of prestige as well as economic independence.

Though land prices held at approximately \$75 per acre for fifteen years following the inception of the great boom, it was a period of much progress as indicated earlier in this essay. Expanding credits prompted the building of the majority of the substantial farm buildings still to be seen on the farms of the valley.

1910 - 1920 THE WAR PERIOD

The opening of the second decade of the new century was perhaps significant. An excellent stand of grain was literally burned to the roots by hot winds in July and the county did not produce its seed grain that year. There was little real distress as a result, however, since farming had become widely diversified and income from livestock and poultry enabled most farmers at worst to live comfortably despite the loss of the small grain crop.

Despite the bad start the decade was one of continued development and saw the boom prosperity of the World War years. With the beginning of hostilities in Europe, increased demand and rising prices for farm products brought great prosperity to farms and towns of the valley alike. Land prices took another leap, fantastic in its scope, farm land without improvements selling

for more than \$100 per acre, while improved farms changed hands frequently at \$200 per acre. Everyone made more money than they had ever made before. The money was as a matter of course not always wisely invested. Many people speculated wildly, entering into contracts which brought inevitable ruin when deflation set in following the war hysteria.

With the increasing prosperity the automobile, which at the outset of the decade had been considered more or less a rich man's toy, came into general use and with its adoption by the farmers came the demand for good roads and the necessity for hard-surfaced highways where the heaviest of the traffic moved. The decade had brought the telephone and mail delivery to the farm areas and there was a decided upswing in the buying of household appliances which did much to lighten the drudgery for housekeepers especially on the farms. Where electric light plants were not installed, a small gasoline motor took up many tasks that formerly required monotonous if not back-breaking toil on the farms.

Much labor saving machinery came into general use during this decade. There was not only the corn binder, but so simple an implement as the drag cart which allowed the man guiding the horses ahead of a drag to ride instead of plodding behind in the soft ground, came into general acceptance. In many places, the man who did not walk all day long behind his farm machinery was considered lazy or at least something akin to it, if, indeed, it was not generally known that he was physically handicapped.

It was the golden age of the farm thus far in Jim river valley history. Aberdeen, being the capital of a great farm region, shared in the prosperity and the greatest developments in the city in nearly all lines of endeavor date from that time.