

From a Hops Boom to a Dairy State

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Wisconsin is the dairy State. Right? Milk, Cheese, and all those great products that our farm people produce! But has it always been a dairy mecca? What did the pioneers raise?

This scribe is no agricultural expert, but we know how to depend on other sources, in this case Michael Goc and his fine historical survey of 1990, "Many a Fine Harvest". We will rely on that plus other contributors including Bob Biege, who piqued our curiosity with the attached picture.

To begin with, the principal crop of the early pioneers, like that of the Native Americans, was corn, food for humans and animals alike. We are reminded of a dinner many years ago, when a militantly Irish bride, when sweet corn was served in our home, turned up her nose and announced that in Ireland, corn was food for pigs only. She declined to eat the sweet corn, which gave me an extra ear or two.

As pioneer Baraboo Rapids developed its grinding mills using its water power, wheat became the crop of choice. However, without modern farm management practices the rich soil was exhausted within a decade or so. Fortunately, the declining income from farming soon received a boost.

As Goc reports, the crop called hops, essential in beer production, was formerly

centered in New York, but production there was devastated when the hops louse invasion peaked in about 1860. Goc reports that Sauk County farmers with New York roots had brought some hops production to Wisconsin, and rising prices now made it a major local crop in the 1860's. The popularity of beer among the newly arrived Germans settles helped swell the demand for hops.

Goc quotes John True as saying "Sauk County probably will never again be as overwhelmed by visions of general wealth as it was in the hops excitement of the eighteen sixties." The worn out wheat acres were replanted with hops, the price of which quadrupled, it is reported. Goc says "the 1867 crop was roughly two million pounds, earning more than a million dollars." A million dollars, went a long way in pioneer days, and prosperity reigned for most citizens.

Baraboo's share in this largess had been limited, however, as it lacked a railroad for shipping. With their rail connections Delton, Kilbourn and Spring Green grew rapidly, resulting in wild speculation. However, in some manner the hops louse problem in New York was resolved and hops production resumed there. Local prices fell like a rock

By 1868 the plunging prices hurt Reedsburg and the above named villages. As for Baraboo, in a couple years they had a major railroad, too late for the hops boom but critical to the growth and prosperity of the city for decades ahead.

As farmers turned to other production opportunities the dairy industry began to prosper, and today Sauk County and the state can claim national preeminence in cheese and milk and other dairy products. Farming techniques also continued to progress, and sharp-eyed Bob Biege recently

called our attention to a well preserved building from early dairy days.

Readily visible, one can drive very close to a stone building on Terrytown Road. Bob says it was built in the late 1860's by a Mr. Morely, who used it as a cheese factory, using milk from his and the neighbors' cows. Solidly built from stone on his acreage, it appears to be just as solid today, though no longer used for making cheese.

Morely is said to have shipped a ton of cheese to Chicago on one occasion, as reported in an 1873 newspaper. A Miss Fannie Morley was named the best butter-maker at the 1879 International Dairy Fair. A Mr. Morley, possibly a grandson of the original Mr. Morley, passed away a few years ago, reports Biege.

The stone work is worth a short drive on Terrytown Road, a relic of the past still proudly standing.

Sidebar: A fund has been established for the replacement of the gravestone of John Duckins, mentioned in previous articles. Duckins, a Kentucky slave, had escaped and established himself in this area. When he volunteered for Civil War service, he not only was refused because of his color, but had to pay a large fee for not serving! Send contributions to the Sauk County Historical Society, 531 Fourth Avenue, Baraboo.

