History of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin

A brief history of the growth of the dairy industry in Wisconsin is very appropriate in this connection. When Wisconsin was first settled in 1830 to 1840 the farmers followed the program of raising corn, wheat, oats and barley and selling it to the mills and elevators and very little of it was fed to live stock on the farms. This system of grain farming was followed until 1885. During these 40 or 50 years of raising grain and hauling it to market the fields grew gradually less fertile and finally became so exhausted that profitable grain crops were almost impossible. Another condition which made farming very hazardous at this time was the presence of the chinch bug. For several years this little bug had been doing very heavy damage to the wheat and corn and other grain crops. These two factors combined brought about such a deplorable condition in agriculture that the farmers were getting in desperate straights and looking for a more dependable program.

The recognized pioneer advocate of the dairy cow was W. D. Hoard, who at that time was publisher of a newspaper and owner of a dairy farm near Ft. Atkinson, in Jefferson County. Mr. Hoard together with a number of other leaders in agriculture agreed that a continuation of raising grain for market was not only hazardous in point of crop failures but such a plan was undermining the soil and thus destroying the very foundation of a prosperous agricultural state. To meet the conditions which at that time were very serious, Mr. Hoard, urged the farmers of the state to turn from grain to grasses, clover, timothy and other legume crops which would not only resist the drouth and the chinch bug, but would produce good feed for dairy cows. He also urged the dairy cow and the cheese factory as a dependable method of marketing their crops and at the same time would bring about conditions that would rebuild the soil because of the crop rotation, the growth of legumes as well as the animal fertilizer.

All histories of Wisconsin point to the year of 1885 as the turning point in agricultural conditions in that state. This was the year when the movement for dairy cows, silos, crop rotation, cheese factories and other methods of farming were given their first big boost. It did not require many years to demonstrate the soundness of this program. As a result the agricultural leaders together with the newspapers, bankers and business men joined with the dairy farmer to help him solve his agricultural problems. The adoption of what is now known as the Wisconsin program of good roads, dairy cows, crop rotations and diversified agriculture was therefore formally made about the year 1885. The following of this program for 39 years has demonstrated to the people of that state its absolute dependability.

The position which Wisconsin agriculture holds today in the United States was not due to an accident or to any climatic, soil or other natural conditions, but rather to a long, hard campaign of education, demonstration, cooperation and application of the principles which had become fully demonstrated as the things most desirable for that state.

Be sure to read the article on page 39, “What Diversification Means.”