

CHAPTER I.

THE TRANSITION FROM SIMPLE TO COMPLEX AGRICULTURE.

The change from simple to complex agricultural conditions did not happen in a day. It came so gradually that those who made the changes, and were themselves at the same time undergoing a modification no less pronounced, hardly realized that anything of far-reaching consequence was happening. These results were brought about primarily by economic causes already noted, together with some important social influences, while later, political movements were of equal significance.

Among social influences a few stand out with unmistakable clearness. The Ohio people, in the southern, the northeastern, and the northwestern, parts of Dane county, all engaged to greater or less extent in sheep raising. They had all learned something about the business before coming and were able to bring a few sheep along with them. The Vermonters were also disposed to own sheep, and occasionally an Englishman or a Scotchman ventured to invest in a small flock. There were many drawbacks to the business, yet it persisted in a tentative way from its introduction in the early '50's until a time when opportunities came to give it more attention. To the Ohio people is also due the credit of introducing tobacco culture. The explanation of this is analogous to that of the introduction of sheep—they had learned the business at home and brought it with them. Cattle were of course indispensable, but it was the cheapness of this kind of stock in the older states of the Northwest which accounted for the fact that cattle raising came in as fast as it did. Hogs were kept as exten-

sively as the market would stand, until the high-price period of the '60's, and why they were not then raised in large numbers instead of by the half-dozen or so, is a hard question to answer. It is usually said that the price of breeding-stock was so great that few could afford the investment. This is about equal to arguing that seed corn is too valuable to plant, and therefore must be made at once into meal. A few men did have enough foresight and enterprise to go into the business in earnest and these were soon able to pay off the incumbrances on their farms and to buy more land as well. Fat hogs sold as high as fourteen dollars per hundred for a time, but to a farmer with fewer hogs than it takes for a wagon load, as was the usual condition, this was a matter of small concern. As for cattle, the difficulty of getting a start was serious enough to be accepted as a good argument, against raising them; but in letting the years from 1861 to 1868 slip without branching out into the swine industry, the Wisconsin farmer missed an opportunity such as comes to few generations of farmers.

The war was the cause of many experiments and modifications in agriculture throughout the North. One of the most noticeable of these was the attempt to produce sugar at home. In Wisconsin there was considerable excitement over the possibilities of growing sorghum on a commercial scale. Meetings were held, and papers were read and published, in which it was predicted that we could easily get along without Louisiana sugar; that the inconvenience of the high tariff on foreign sugar would be forgotten when sugar was made in sufficient quantities at home, and that molasses and sugar might possibly be exported. Even the seed was to prove an item of consequence by affording feed for stock.³⁴ A state convention was held at Madison for the purpose of diffusing sentiment and gathering information.³⁵

Under the same stimulus the production of honey increased several hundred per cent., but even then the total amount was not a matter of consequence.

Another crop which attracted considerable attention for a brief

³⁴ *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 8, 1863.

³⁵ *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 21, 1864; *Trans. State Agr'l Soc.*, VII, 35, 100; an account of this convention appears in the same volume.

time was flax. The first of any importance raised in the county was in 1851, and had the flattering results of the experiment proved to be the rule, the distinctively wheat period would, no doubt, have terminated soon after that date.³⁶ Coming as it did, at a time when wheat had been for several years a failure, it is no wonder an innovation of this kind should be taken seriously. At this time the main plan was to manufacture linseed oil and thus effect a big saving in freight.³⁷ There were several reasons why flax could not gain permanently in favor. In the first place, it would not flourish on impoverished or foul land, yet this was the only place there was to put it except on newly broken soil, which usually did well in wheat. Again, the average yield of flax was small, and finally it was believed to be peculiarly exhausting to the soil. On the other hand, the yield and price of wheat were just on the eve of an advance, and the flax project was soon forgotten, until in the '60's when the high price of cotton cloth brought it forward again as a possible solution to the question of cheaper clothing; the amount produced however was insignificant.

Hemp was another exotic which came in with war-time prices and in 1865 something over eight thousand pounds of fibre were produced in Dane county.

More important than any of the foregoing changes was the impetus given to wool production. Before 1860 the number of sheep kept had suffered a decline; now within four years there was a fourfold increase. In view of the good prices of wool and mutton, the pastures and meadows required for feeding the sheep, and the utility of this animal in ridding a farm of weeds and adding to the fertility of the soil, the increase in sheep raising may be counted as one of the first permanently helpful incidents of the wheat period.

It should also be noticed that the better prices for barley and oats, the need of corn for feeding the increasing numbers of farm animals, and the room given to the new crops above enumerated, though of small significance taken separately, had in the aggregate made a perceptible reduction in the acreage sown to wheat, and thus perforce introduced a system, though an imperfect one, of rotation.

³⁶ *Wisconsin Express*, March 4, 1852.

³⁷ *Wisconsin Express*, March 18, 1852.

Altogether the system of agriculture in 1870 was radically different from that of a decade before. The change had not come by observation; it had crept in little by little, and had the ninth census been more complete, the returns would have occasioned even a greater surprise than they did.