CHAPTER II.

HOPS.

The first break in the monotonous round of wheat culture in Wisconsin came with the brief but exciting period of hop growing. For nearly thirty years the farmer had gone over the dismal routine of plowing, sowing, and harvesting; the crop often poor in quality, usually low in price; he saw his land steadily becoming less productive, yet with persistence more heroic than intelligent, he had consistently refused to be led from his beaten path by the most reasonable and stable temptations. But even this dogged conservatism was not entirely secure from contaminating influences, and it finally broke down under a complication of internal and external attacks.

The hop craze, although exceedingly brief in its main outlines, had its roots grounded well back in Wisconsin history. There is hardly a doubt, although the data for proof are not at hand, that the introduction of this crop is to be credited to the people who were familiar with its culture in the state of New York. At all events, the names of the men who first are mentioned in this connection are without exception the names common in New York settlements. As early as 1850 a few attempts had been made in the direction of hop culture, and the results were flattering indeed.

The success of hop growing was so well proved that by 1853

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29 "I have been in the hop culture . . . three years in Wisconsin. . . . Good corn soil the most suitable for hop-raising . . . five acres last year gave me one ton of hops per acre, which I consider as an ordinary yield with good care. The cost of cultivation is about six cents per pound. . . . I sold the yield of my five acres for $1,400.00. I consider the hop crop as sure as any I have ever raised. It can be kept up ten or twenty years with good management."—Wisconsin State Journal, Jan. 18, 1854.
it would seem that the time for a boom in it had arrived; but not so. It will be remembered that this was just on the eve of the impetus given the wheat industry by a period of high prices; thus the hop fever lay dormant for a long interval. Other visions occupied the farmer's mind, with wheat always in the foreground. With the dull times of the late '50's advocates of hops tried to assert themselves; but not till the hopes of fortunes in wheat had been abandoned in the chinch-bug period, did hops receive the serious attention which seemed destined to be paid them for a season. Still it was not the failure of wheat alone. The rise in the price of hops was a factor of equal importance. The following quotation seems to be so admirably to the point as to be worth giving in full:

The "introduction and extraordinary run [of hop culture] in this state are mainly due to three circumstances—the failure of the crop, or rather repeated and utter failures of it, owing to ravages of its insect foes, in New York and other portions of the East, whence western supplies, even, had been largely drawn; to the fact that some of the largest establishments [breweries] of the country—and a good many of them—were located in our own Metropolitan city; and to the further reason that the climate and soils of Wisconsin seemed to be admirably adapted to its healthy growth.

"The crop of 1860 was so trifling as hardly to deserve mention. But in the year 1864 it amounted to 385,583 pounds, as shown by the incomplete returns to the secretary of state, with a value of $135,127; and in 1865 to 829,377 pounds with a total value of $347,587. But even this was only the beginning. In 1866 the business of planting and poling began in earnest and before the season was over, the fever raged like an epidemic. Gathering renewed force with every new acre planted in the county of Sauk, where it may be said to have originated, and where the crop in 1865 was over half a million pounds; it spread from neighborhood to neighborhood and from county to county until by 1867 it had hopped the whole state over; so completely revolutionizing the agriculture that one in passing through found some difficulty in convincing himself that he was not really in old Kent of England. Even many of our old fashioned wheat farmers caught the infection and for once have disturbed the
routine of their operations. In 1867 the crop in Sauk county alone, which has still the honor of being foremost among the forty or more counties that have enthusiastically followed, is believed to have been over four million pounds, with a cost value of little, if anything, short of $2,500,000.00.

"Cases are numerous in which the first crop had paid for the land and all the improvements, leaving subsequent crops a clear profit, minus the cost of cultivating and harvesting. The crop of the present year throughout the state will be so great that we dare not venture an estimate. The yield in various parts of the state equals one ton to the acre, and the Wisconsin hop commands the highest price in the eastern market.

"Already the hop-louse has discovered our magnificent crop and sent out his skirmishers to prepare the way doubtless for a general attack. Moreover, the price seems sure to decline before any newly planted yard or field can possibly yield its first marketable crop. Fifty-five cents, the price of last year's crop, paid magnificently; but twenty-five cents would hardly warrant the sacrifice of every other interest to go into this particular business."40

As would be expected, the profits of hop growing were greatly exaggerated. The Baraboo Republic estimated the cost of starting a hop yard as five hundred dollars per acre. This seems high, but it must be remembered that a hop shed was a building which involved no small expense and was indispensable to success in the business. The roots for planting an acre, though a small item in the expense, cost sometimes twenty dollars; poles were another matter of considerable consequence, and the work involved was greatest of all. Twenty-five cents per pound was estimated as the lowest price at which crops could be grown with profit.41

When the time for picking arrived, which began about the last week in August, there was a general rush of girls and boys, mostly the former, from distances of a hundred miles to the hop field. "Every passenger car is pressed into service, and freight, and platform cars are fixed up as well as possible for the transportation of the pickers. Every train has the appearance of an excur-

41 Article quoted in Wisconsin State Journal, May 11, 1867.
sion train on some great gala day, loaded down as they are with myriads of young girls. The most of them have their places of labor engaged in advance.\textsuperscript{42}"

The price paid for picking was forty or fifty cents a box. This great expense induced a Sauk county man to attempt the invention of a hop-picking machine, which was to save the county a million dollars for help in one season.\textsuperscript{43}

It is doubtful if Wisconsin farmers ever made money so fast or so easily at any other time or in any other business, as in hops for the two or three years preceding 1868. There are still to be seen in the main hop districts, barns which were once hop houses; and residences, which if not particularly elegant at present, show a magnificence entirely out of keeping with the later '60's. There are also stories, more or less reliable, of fine carriages, new harness, and high-stepping horses, pianos, and trips abroad, all based on the fabulous wealth made, or more often to be made, from hops.\textsuperscript{44} This phenomenal prosperity dropped with hardly a premonition upon the shoulders of men little wonted to the handling of money in considerable sums, and the wonder would be in stories of a different nature, rather than in the doleful tales as they are. Feeling that they had a secure and lasting hold on a veritable bonanza, they had no hesitancy in contracting debts of any size or paying any price, however high, if only fancy prompted their untrained judgments to make the venture.\textsuperscript{45} By 1868 the fairy tale was about told; hops were again growing in New York, and the price was on the down grade while, worst of all, the rust and the hop-louse were running riot in the Wisconsin yards.\textsuperscript{46} As an example of the temptation to risk every thing in this one precarious industry, one farmer is reported to have raised in 1867 three thousand one hundred pounds of hops on a single acre and sold them at \$5.87\frac{1}{2} per pound.\textsuperscript{47} It must be admitted that something more than ordinary judgment was needed to keep men from embarking in an adventure with such inducements.

\textsuperscript{42}Madison Democrat, September 1, 1868.
\textsuperscript{43}Madison Democrat, June 1, 1868.
\textsuperscript{44}This statement is based upon conversations with A. A. Mickelson of Black Earth, Mr. John Lorch of Madison, and many others who knew the circumstances.
\textsuperscript{45}Trans. State Apr'1 Soc., VII, 420.
\textsuperscript{46}Madison Democrat, September 16, 1868.
\textsuperscript{47}Wisconsin State Journal, December 6, 1867.
One writer remarks that ninety out of a hundred would engage in such a reckless pursuit, even though their judgment told them that, in a series of years, they would be worse off—"slowly accumulated wealth will not do for our people."

The prices of provisions responded readily to the new impulse; for example, butter which had before been a drug at fifteen cents, now sold for forty cents in hop-picking time. The store keepers took advantage of the occasion to collect back debts and take an added toll from the goods then on hand, but most of them paid dearly for it in the end by giving credit anew and eventually failing to collect the bills. Interest overleaped all bounds and came up to a point about equal to that reached in the preceding years. "There is money in the country, but it demands extremely high rates of interest; as high as ten per cent. per month has been paid for the use of money." 48 Horses and other live stock advanced somewhat, as near as may be learned, but it does not appear that the price of land was at all affected. It may seem a little strange that land producing a hundred dollars and upward per acre should continue at the same price, and as a matter of fact, farms with flourishing hop yards did sell occasionally, i.e., within a few years, for less than the mortgage placed against them during the hop craze, but this was due to a false estimate of the improvements as there was at all times a great deal of land to be had suitable for hops which was not so used.

The hop episode ended as suddenly as it had begun. The crop of 1867 sold readily at fifty or sixty cents a pound; the crop of 1868 was the largest raised, but the quality was far below that of the preceding year, and rather than take half price a great many held the hops over to the following year, by which time the bottom had dropped completely from the hop market and the old crops were sold in Milwaukee as low as two and a half cents a pound. 49

It will be noticed that the state instead of the county has been treated in this chapter; this is because Dane county was sufficiently involved in the hop industry to require recognition in some way, but was not a typical hop-growing county of the state. 50

48 Madison Democrat, September 19, 1868.
50 The data on Dane county hops are hard to find. In 1850 the yield is reported as 120 lbs.; 1860, 10,800 lbs.; 1875, 274 acres; 1880, 116 acres.
was in Sauk county that the business first began in earnest, and throughout, Sauk was far in the lead, even raising nearly half of those grown in the state. In 1868 Sauk county raised six thousand acres of hops, Dane county six hundred fifty acres. The location of the hop district is told in the Madison Democrat for June 29th, 1868: “We believe it is well settled that Kilbourn City is the greatest primary hop depot in the United States, perhaps in the world. The region that markets and ships its hops here raised last year about one-fourth of all raised in the United States, and over two-thirds of all raised in this state. . . . Last fall over twenty-two thousand bales raised in this vicinity were shipped from this depot for which over two million dollars were received.”

It seems strange that such a large number of intelligent men should be led astray financially, when the facts could be definitely known which pointed to disaster. Voices of warning were not wanting. 51 Again and again attention was called to the danger from the hop-louse and the equal danger from a fall in prices which in the nature of things had to come, for New York was once more growing hops. But the possibilities were so great that the probabilities failed to gain the attention, each man hoping that his own fortune would be safely made before the crash should come. And although many modest fortunes were made, the annals fail to record a single instance of a hop grower who came out of the affair richer than he went in. What the actual loss was can never be known; it was not alone in store bills and mortgages left on the farmer’s hands, but equally important was the change in the system of farming. When the hop industry began, there was already a tendency toward stock raising and dairying, and these beginnings were now to be made anew, while the farmer was not in as good condition to make them as before. 52 In all too many cases he was a speculator who had staked his last dollar and lost.

52 Trans. State Agr'l Soc., VII, 420. I have also gathered many of these facts from the men who passed through the experience.