Northern Wisconsin
A NATURAL SHEEP COUNTRY
BY COL. L. D. BURCH*

The region visited lies about 350 miles north of Chicago, along and tributary to the Wisconsin Central railway, and embraces an area of about 3,500 square miles, covering the counties of Price and Ashland and contiguous portions of Bayfield and Iron counties. The great district forms as nearly an ideal sheep country as any the writer has seen in a quarter century of almost constant travel between the great lakes and the snowy range and from Manitoba southward to middle Texas. It is for the most part high and gracefully undulating and from 600 to 2,000 feet above sea level. It is interspersed with occasional cedar, tamarack, spruce and gravelly loams, reddish or chocolate hued loams, and red clays. All of these soils abound in lime phosphate, lime carbonate, silica, alumina and other properties of value. They are warm, quick, porous, responsive soils, most of them intermixed with a fair measure of clay, and nearly everywhere supplemented by siliceous clay subsoils. A better combination for sheep farming or mixed farming could scarcely be made up. They not only give the widest range of production known to husbandry, but are the most bountiful in yield, considering the widely varying products suited to their versatile nature. All of the grains, black ash swamps, but these have natural drainage, and their rich and inexhaustible vegetable soils have generally a basis in siliceous clays and marls, and for productive uses are as rich and enduring as the valley of the Nile. Ninety per cent of the country is dry land, always available to the tread of the golden hoof.

The soils of the uplands may be divided into three classes, viz., light grasses and vegetables of the middle latitudes grow here luxuriantly, as the present season's crop attests, even corn (though beyond the corn belt) making a surprising growth. I saw winter and spring wheat, oats, rye, peas, potatoes, turnips, mangels, cabbage and garden plants and vegetables as fine as can be found in any of the older farm sections, and corn fields good for 40 and 50 bushels per acre.

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For special sheep crops such as oats, rye, peas, cabbage, turnips, rape and fodder corn, no country in America can beat this region. All these crops, save rape, may be seen growing in luxuriance at almost any settled point in the district. I have tested rape and alfalfa in my own locality, and find them admirably suited to these soils. To say that this whole region is a peerless grass country is quite within the facts. Blue grass and white clover, twin “children of the sun,” and the finest grazing herbage of the middle latitudes, are indigenous, and grow in wild profusion from the water lines to the crown of the hills. For the larger clovers these lime-freighted soils are a veritable paradise. The traveler is rarely out of sight of them. They have been scattered over the burnt lands, along the lumber trails, the cow paths, railways, streets, roadways, and in the clearings by bird and beast, and may be seen in stools, fringes, patches and fields, growing in wild luxuriance. An old lumberman and farmer, long in the country, said to me in perfect candor: “I reckon, sir, a clover seed was never lost in this country.” Red clover here is as reliable as the tides. It never freezes out, never “heaves” out, but lives its allotted time, re-seeds the land, turns a volunteer crop, denser and stronger than its predecessor, and, like Tennyson’s brook, “goes on forever.” Two crops of red clover are grown in the season with unerring certainty. Indeed, clover is more tenacious here than timothy, and will run the latter out of a mixed clover and timothy meadow in two or three sea-

A Heavy Crop of Rye

sons, leaving the field a dense mass of its kind as if sown alone, a triumph of the law of the “survival of the fittest” in herbal life unknown, we believe, to any other country. Alsike does equally well, and is often seen growing in the burnt lands, by the wayside and in fields and woods where never a seed was sown.

The climate itself will prove one of the strongest aids to successful sheep husbandry in this favored and favoring region. The steady cold of winter gives appetite, tone and vigor to men and animals—more, indeed, to the sheep than any other farm animal. Sleet, slush and
mud in winter—the curse of the flock
in the middle states—are quite un-
known here. It is steadily cold from
early December to early April, with
an average of 70 to 80 days of snow.
The winter feeding season is not a
week longer than in northern Illinois
and the reliable grazing season not ten
days shorter. The summer, with its
bright, warm days and cool, restful
nights, is a benediction. The mercury
goes no higher in summer and no
lower in winter than in Chicago, Oma-
ha or Buffalo, a rather remarkable cli-
matic condition for this high latitude,
and largely due, it is affirmed, to the
influence of the neighboring Lake Su-
perior, the largest and deepest sea of
fresh water known. Of course, sheep
consume more food in a northern win-
ter than 500 or 800 miles further south,
for the good reason that the climate
gives greater tone, stimulus, vigor and
appetite. For the same reason the
food consumed gives decidedly better
returns to the feeder. Better still, the
food required for sheep in this region
is far more cheaply grown on these
rich, lime-laden, virgin soils, where
lands are but a notch or two above
government prices, than on high-priced
lands southward.

Crop failures are unknown
in northern central Wisconsin. The
average yearly rainfall is well above,
and rarely goes below, 40 inches, and
is well spread over the growing season,
its certainty and equable distribution,
it is said, being mainly due to lake in-
fluence. With the mercury up to 90
degrees in a dozen states south of
here, the crops cut short, and pastures
burnt brown by drouth, it was refresh-
ing to see the fields and woods of this
favored region as green and fresh as
the hills of Ireland.

The water supply
could hardly be improved. From the
little town of Phillips, the capital of
Price county, 80 miles north, to the
larger city of Ashland, the whole coun-

A Sheep Farm Near Fifield
try is meandered with clear, rapid rivers, creeks and trout brooks, all born of clear, cold springs and silver lakes and lakelets. No sheep farm or ranch need be beyond these sources of water supply. Every cedar swamp has its attendant and appropriate chalybeate spring, of which the cedar (arb-or-vitae) itself is born. Indeed, this is the “land of bright waters.” Sheepmen will hail with pleasure another local condition to successful sheepkeeping on these fresh northern fields. They are free from current sheep diseases.

No large flocks have yet penetrated these wilds to scatter scab or nodular disease. The deadly stomach worm has not yet found a lodgment here, nor will he while the range abounds in richest browse and tonic weeds.

Sheep will feed in this country better than in others, for it impels appetite, growth, fat, finish and deep, perfectly grown wool as few other countries can. The mutton finished, a trunk line speeds it to market quickly and with trifling shrinkage. Yes, it is a great country for the sheep and lamb feeders, as results will show within the next decade. By the same sign it is a

Second Crop Clover, September, 1904

strategic point for sheep breeding.

The stud flock may be founded and carried up to highest levels, because secure in good health and vigor from the outset. To mate and breed good sheep is well, but to keep them healthy, strong and vigorous, with the reproductive functions unimpaired and in normal perfection, is better. No question of doing that here, where all the springs of life yield to the magic and magnetic touch of pure air, pure water, the sweetest of herbage, and a radiant climate that brings into action the best energies of animal life. Here are the
natural breeding grounds, and westward lies the market field for thoroughbred sheep. And will they be bred here? Yes; why not? Has not the good Prof. Craig already founded a breeding flock of Shropshires only two counties to the southwest? This critical sheepman, who has looked far and wide for a desirable location—and is it not something better than rumor that says the foremost sheep breeder in south Wisconsin—has his weather eye on the very district of which I am writing. Yes, gentlemen, I look for a steady stream of sheeplemen to this region, because I believe in it as grand a natural sheep country, which needs only an introduction to the American sheep-keeping public to make it a point for rapid settlement. And I am

NOT ALONE IN MY LIKING

for the country. Before me came Prof. W. A. Henry, the first American authority on grasses and the dean of the Wisconsin Agricultural College. Prof. Thos. Shaw, of the Minnesota Agricultural College and Experiment Station (now Editor of The Farmer), and one of the ablest champions of the sheep industry, came later. Prof. John A. Craig, one of the most capable and critical sheeplemen in the country, came early, saw clearly and has gone on record with unstinted praise of this region as a sheep country. Prof. Henry indorses the country to sheeplemen in positive terms. Prof. Shaw goes on record with his warm approval.

A dozen miles north of Phillips, at Fifield, the north and south forks of the Flambeau river (both broad, clear, rapid streams) drain a large and particularly fine district for handling sheep, most of it high, rolling, burnt land, well covered with grass and easily cleared. Like the Squaw creek country east of Phillips, this district is admirably suited

FOR LARGE FLOCKS.

The country, of which I have given at best but superficial glimpses, is THE LARGEST BODY OF GOOD TERRITORY, without serious blemish that I have yet seen in this north country, but to the great mass of sheeplemen is as veritable terra-incognita as the shores of the Polar ocean. The men of the flocks have drifted westward with the popular tide of travel and empire till the plains and mountains are covered with their great herds and the grazing fields are taxed to their full capacity. To ambitious young shepherds there is little left of room or opportunity on the treeless plains or in the mountains. I call their attention to this region because the soil is virgin, the fields fresh and untrodden, and possibilities of sheep husbandry great enough to satisfy a great ambition. That

A BRIGHT FUTURE

is in store for breeders, feeders and flocks in this country of peerless clovers and grasses admits of no question. Competence, comfort and even wealth are here for level-headed men who seek them.