Farming

Pioneer Farms

"We have no apples, peaches and many other kinds of fruit which we miss very much, but then on the other hand there are many things I do like here. I like to raise wheat, corn and oats without manure which is actually the case on good land like the most of my farm...Turnips and [ruta]bages we sow broadcast on new broke ground and get abundant crops. I raised this year 110 bushels of wheat, 200 of corn, 100 of potatoes and of beans. I call that doing well for the first year don't you?"

( Timothy Temple, Dell Prairie, 1856)

In letters he sent to friends and family in Massachusetts in late 1856, Timothy Temple, the farmer who was “doing well for the first year,” penned one of the first accounts of farming in Adams County. Like most pioneer farmers, Temple had selected the best available land he could afford, 153 acres “laying in one body, 7/8 of it fit for the plough.” Given the choice, pioneers did not occupy wooded, rocky or hilly ground. Like Temple, whose land was in Section 8 of Dell Prairie, they selected prairie or lightly-wooded acreage that could be farmed right away. “I like to work with a breaking up team first,” Temple continued, “we use from 4 to 6 yoke of oxen...our ploughs cut from 16 to 24 inches, there being no stone, we keep the share sharp by filing and it cuts all before it.” People settling on new land, who had to build a house, tend a family and plant their first crop looked for land where a plow could stay sharp and readily cut “all before it” as soon as possible.

Much of Adams County was not wooded, especially the western Towns of Dell Prairie, Springville, Quincy and Strong Prairie. Big pines, oaks and maples may have grown along the creeks, but the ground in between was usually either a prairie, dry savanna or marsh broken by groves of jackpine and black oak. Land along the glacial moraine in New Haven, Jackson, New Chester and Lincoln was more wooded and some fields were stony enough to make rock picking an annual chore, but not enough to seriously halt or hurt settlement. Wetland and blowsand were greater obstacles, delaying settlement and farming in Monroe, Big Flats, Rome, Richfield, Colburn and Leola. By 1860, after a decade of settlement, about 47,000 of the 440,000 acres in the county were “improved” farmland.

For Temple and other pioneer farmers, spring wheat was the first crop. It grew well on new ground, “without manure.” It was readily market-
Neighbors raising the barn on the Lobby farm in New Chester about 1910, when barns with tall mows were needed for dairy farming.
Charlie Ward, left, of New Haven, preserved the pioneer skill of working with oxen into the 1960s. The ox was the draft animal of choice forsettlers on the frontier.

able, at a price that varied from $1.25 per bushel in the winter of 1855-56, to “only” 62.5 cents per bushel after harvest in the summer of 1856. The lower price meant that Temple and his family “have as many warm biscuits as we want,” illustrating another reason why wheat was popular on the frontier. If you couldn’t sell it, you could eat it. In 1860, the bumper year for wheat in Wisconsin, Adams County farmers raised over 81,000 bushels. By comparison, they harvested 50,000 bushels of corn, 41,000 of oats, 24,000 of rye and 27,000 of potatoes.

For livestock Temple had “one yoke of oxen, 2 cows, 11 sheep, 6 swine beside 5 that I fattened, 5 geese, 40 hens.” He did not list any horses, not unusual for a pioneer, for whom the ox was the animal of choice. It could work hard on a diet of wild forage that would kill a horse and was more edible if times got tough. In 1860, Adams County had over 1,200 working oxen and only about 600 horses. Indeed, one way to measure the progress of farming in an area is to keep track of the number of oxen. The pioneering era closed as farms developed enough to set aside land to raise the oats and timothy hay horses required. By 1895, for example, Adams County had over 4,100 horses, but not enough oxen for the census takers to count. Adams County also had dairy cattle whose milk was home-processed into butter and cheese. In 1860, the county’s 1,700 cows produced 142,000 pounds of butter and 6,600 pounds of cheese.

“General-purpose cows,” these animals were not bred solely for dairying, but to supply working oxen, some milk and beef. Most of the dairy herd improvement practices in common use by farmers in the 1900s were unheard of on the frontier in the 1850s.

While Temple had the means to purchase nearly 150 acres of cleared ground, he also owned about forty acres of woods on an island in the Wisconsin River and a wild hay meadow in the floodplain. He relied on the woods for building materials and fuel and the meadow for hay. Whether harvested from upland meadows or wet marshes, wild hay was an important crop for pioneers in the 1850s and remained an important crop for a century. Virtually every farmer in Adams County either owned, rented, or took free
use of land—usually marshes—where wild hay could be grown.

Wild hay was so important that in one dry year in the 1870s, farmers from Dell Prairie cut hay on the Quincy marshes, hauled it to the river, then shipped it home on Wisconsin Dells tourist steamboats. So much wild hay moved down Cottonville Road from marshes in Preston and Colburn to farms in Strongs Prairie that it became known as “the Norwegian hay road.” From the 1850s on, county farmers harvested wild hay in good years and depended on it when the cultivated crop failed.

Like all pioneer farms, the Temple operation was all but self-sufficient. Family members had all the bread they could eat from home-grown wheat, meat from cattle, hogs and poultry, butter from their cows. They raised potatoes for market and
the table and garden vegetables as well. Clothing could be made from wool sheared from their own sheep. Heat in winter came from wood cut on the place. As the frontier era closed, farmers became less self-sufficient because they had the cash to purchase processed foods and manufactured goods. However, in part due to the absence of the railroad, but also because farming here was less profitable than in other parts of Wisconsin, Adams County farmers remained more self-sufficient longer than many of their neighbors.

Wisconsin's and Adams County's demise as a wheat-growing region occurred in the 1860s and '70s and farmers gradually moved to dairying. On the way, they indulged in the heady diversion known as the "hops-boom."

Encouraged by German immigrants and the Civil War, American consumption of lager beer increased in the 1850s and '60s and created a good market for the hops used to put the bitters in the brew. New York state became the leading producer until the hops-louse devoured the harvest in the early 1860s. New York immigrants in the Reedsburg area introduced hops farming to central Wisconsin just as the eastern crop started to fail and prices started to rise from a paltry nickel a bushel in 1864 to a high of 70 cents in 1868. Adams county farmers joined the boom. In 1868, the *Adams County Press* reported that "one man in this county, last year, raised from one thousand hills (there are 540 hill on an acre) over two thousand eight hundred pounds of hops. His crop sold for $1,607, bringing fifty-eight cents per pound ....The hops grew in the town of Preston on Adams County sand." In 1868, an income of $1,607 would have made a very prosperous farm.
The Press did not report if the Preston farmer got out of hops before the crash occurred in 1869, when the eastern crop recovered and the price fell back to a nickel. Even when the price recovered a bit, Wisconsin farmers were set further back by the appearance of the hops louse in their fields.

Hops grew on twenty-foot long vines that farmers trained to climb on thin poles cut for the purpose. Tamarack trees were favored for hops poles and many were cut from county marshes. At harvest time in late August, poles and vines were pulled from the ground and crews of workers—usually young women recruited from cities and towns—stripped the flowers off the vines. After picking, the flowers were dried in tightly-built hops houses, using air heated on wood stoves and passing through a special ventilating system. At the height of the boom in 1867, an estimated 30,000 pickers arrived by rail at Wisconsin Dells and then fanned out to area farms. If they put in the usual dawn to dusk work day, they could earn $1.50 per day, about the same as an unskilled mill worker and much more than a hired farm hand.

The presence of a large number of young females in the county, made the hops harvest an interesting season. Although they worked all day stripping hops vines, the young women still had energy to dance the “hop-step” at night, and hops house dances made the long hours of harvest more bearable. When the season was over and the women left, life on the farm was a little slower for the farm boys they left behind. The hops boom and bust took place in the late 1860s, but county farmers continued to raise hops on a diminishing basis for the rest of the century. As late as 1894, Lotta Burroughs, a young farm woman from Rome, “with a party of young people, went to a place called Arkadle [sic] to pick hops...We had a great deal of fun.”

Another diversion from the farm routine took place in 1871, when Adams County was the site of what has been called the last great nesting of the passenger pigeon. The birds nested in jack pines and fed on acorns, wild grass seeds or newly-planted grain, which did not endear them to farmers. The 1871 nesting covered 850 square miles including virtually all of Adams County, as well as parts of Sauk, Columbia and Juneau. The number of birds was estimated at 136 million.

The birds were soon followed by hundreds of hunters, trappers and egg gatherers. In April, 1871, the Wisconsin Dells newspaper carried this story: “The great pigeon roost this year is in Wisconsin. For three weeks, pigeons have been flying in flocks which no man could number. On Saturday, April 22, for about two hours before nightfall they flew in one continuous flock, darkening the sky and astounding people by the noise of their wings. Hotels at Kilbourn are full of trappers and hunters. Coopers are busy making barrels, and men and children are packing the birds and filling the barrels. They are shipping to Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York and Boston. 10,000 to 30,000 are forwarded daily.”

Pigeons were shot, trapped and netted. Sometimes a live pigeon was tied to a platform as a decoy (thus the term stool pigeon). There are accounts of hunters bagging over 1,000 pigeons in a single day. The adult birds provided excellent targets but it was the young pigeons—or squabs—which were most preferred. They were fatter, more tender and easier to capture. They were pushed out of their nests with long poles or men would burn sulphur under the trees to smoke them out of the nests. The trees were even burned or cut down to harvest the squabs. Squabs were so plentiful they were sold for as low as 2¢ each. School children were paid a penny per two dozen squabs delivered to the hunting camp.

In addition to market use, thousands of pigeons were captured alive and sold to provide live targets for shooting clubs. As the rail

Passenger pigeons by the millions roosted in Adams County in 1871. Forty years later the species was extinct.
depot closest to the nesting, Wisconsin Dells became the center of the hunt. Trainloads of netters and shot gunners came to make their grim harvest. As one account reads:

"Embarking on the 10:00 AM train, we headed for the great pigeon roost stretching from Kilbourn City on the Wisconsin River for scores of miles beyond. Having made all needed preparations the night previous we were called to arms and headed for the roost. The idea was to get into position before daylight. The indescribable cooling produced by uncounted millions of pigeons arousing from their slumber, was heard as the hunters made up their foraging parties. Creating an almost bewildering effect on the senses, as it was echoed and re-echoed back by the mighty rocks and ledges of the Wisconsin bank. As the first streaking of daylight began to break over the eastern horizon, small scouting parties of the monstrous army of birds then darted like night spirits past our heads. Soon the skirmish line, or perhaps more correctly pigeon bummers, swept past in small and irregular bodies. Our guide now told us to get into position as quick as possible as the large flocks would follow in rapid succession. We quickly ranged ourselves along the crest of a hill overlooking a cleared valley through which the birds would fly on their outward passage.

"And now arose a roar, compared with which all previous noises ever heard are but lullabies, and which caused more than one of the expectant and excited party to drop their guns, and seek shelter behind and beneath the nearest trees. The sound was condensed terror. Imagine a thousand threshing machines running under full headway, accompanied by as many steamboats groaning off steam, with an equal quota of R.R. trains passing through covered bridges—imagine these massed into a single flock, and you possibly have a faint conception of the terrific roar following the monstrous black cloud of pigeons as they passed in rapid flight in the gray light of morning, a few feet before our faces.

"So sudden and unexpected was the shock that nearly the entire flock passed before a shot was fired. The unearthly roar continued, and as flock after flock, in almost endless line, succeeded each other, nearly on a level with the muzzle of our guns, the contents of a score of double barrels was poured into the dense mist. Hundreds, yes thousands, dropped into the open fields below. Not infrequently a hunter would discharge his piece and load and fire the third and fourth time into the same flock. The slaughter was terrible beyond any description. Our guns became so hot by rapid discharges, we were afraid to load them. Then while waiting for them others threw clubs-seldom, if ever, failing to bring down some of the passing flock.

"Ere the sun was up, the flying host had ceased. It continued scarcely an hour in all. Below the scene was truly pitiable. Not less than 2,500 birds covered the ground. Many were only wounded, a wing broken or something of the kind, which disabled, without killing them. These were quickly caught and their necks broken."

When the pigeon harvest of 1871 was finished, a total of 1.6 million birds were shipped from the Dells. Smaller flocks came back in the 1880s, but the passenger pigeon was already on its way to becoming a symbol of waste and abuse of a natural resource. Wisconsin's last passenger pigeon was shot near Babcock in 1899 and the last passenger pigeon died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914.
From The Turn of the Century To World War II

By 1895, Adams County was, like the rest of Wisconsin, concentrating on dairy farming. The amount of land “improved” for farming had nearly doubled since 1860 to about 89,000 acres. There were over 9,000 cattle on hand, 1,500 in Strong’s Prairie alone, but only three cheese factories—Christensen’s in Big Flats, Foat’s in Jackson and John Swicky’s at Point Bluff. (Swicky’s son Henry later moved to Milwaukee and founded the Milwaukee Cheese Company, one of the largest in the state.)

The combined total production of Adams County’s three cheese factories in 1895 was valued at less than $2,000. Even though Adams County milk was also processed at Briggsville, Wisconsin Dells, Westfield and Hancock, there was still plenty of room to grow. By the mid-1900s, local farmers and business people had organized creameries for butter making at Leola, Arkdale, Easton, Friendship and Grand Marsh, with the Brooks Creamery coming along in 1915. In the late 1910s, Marie Elver was making Swiss cheese at her Point Bluff factory.

At a University of Wisconsin Farm Institute held in Friendship in late 1892, local farmers talked about their experiences with dairying. A speaker named Thomas Convey talked about his three year’s experience with what must have been one of the first silos in Adams County. “Ensilage,” he said, “makes the best general purpose feed on the farm.” The silo was a technological wonder in its day, one of many that would revolutionize farming in the late 19th and 20th centuries and one that over 300 county farmers constructed by the 1920s.

Robert Zentner, Springville, reported on his new dairy operation at the 1892 Farmers Institute.
He had kept track of eleven cows for nine months and said “they average me about 4,822 pounds of milk, about $34 worth” a month or $305 for the whole year. Since nearly all his expenses came “off the farm” he netted a profit of $274.35 on the cows. Zentner was not getting rich but, if his other farming ventures proved as successful as dairying, he was making a better living than if he had been a hired farm hand or a factory worker, most of whom were paid less than $400 a year.

Zentner gave voice to the optimistic spirit at the Farmer’s Institute: “A man is of no use in any kind of business unless he has an ambition to get on. What Adams County wants is farmers whose ambition leads up and not down.”

One farmer whose ambition led up was Walter Helm, who liked to call himself “Wisconsin’s last homesteader.” Helm did find a patch of unclaimed federal land adjacent to the county poor farm in Jackson in 1915 and filed Homestead Act papers for it, but there was still plenty of federal land in Wisconsin eligible for Homestead Act filings for many years after. Helm’s farm probably was the last parcel of Homestead Act land in Adams County. No matter, he “proved up” on it and established a thriving farm. As he recalled many years later, “We raised some hogs and chickens and Muscovy geese and had twenty-four Guernsey cows we milked by hand. Milking didn’t take so long. I milked some, my sons did some, so did my daughters.”

Like Robert Zentner and Walter Helm, nearly every farmer in the county in this period was a dairy farmer. A county directory published in 1919 contains hundreds of listings, most of which read as follows: Atcherson, O.S., Farmer and Breeder of Full Blooded Holstein Cattle, Dell Prairie; Dawes, F. E. Farmer and Breeder of Thoroughbred Holstein Cattle, Monroe; Olson, Bert C., Farmer and Breeder of Holstein Frisian Cattle, Strong’s Prairie; Jones, J. K., Farmer and Breeder of Hereford Cattle, Lincoln; Klein, Mike, Farmer and Breeder of Thoroughbred Guernsey Cattle, Quincy; Osborn, Walter, Farmer and Breeder of Red Polled Cattle, Lincoln; Garrett, Lizzie E., Farmer and Breeder of Durham Cattle, Preston; Sparby Bros., Farmers and Breeders of Thoroughbred Durham Cattle, Strong’s Prairie; Starks, Jerome, Farmer and Breeder of Thoroughbred Shorthorn Durham Cattle; and so on for many more names that illustrate how Adams County was making its mark in the “dairy state.”

Holsteins were on their way to becoming the most popular dairy animal, but other breeds were obviously present. All those varieties of Durhams were popular because they were supposed to be “dual-purpose” animals that could deliver what was considered to be a good supply of milk and produce good beef. In the years since, the “dual-purpose” cow has lost its place on the farm, one reason why Durham raisers are less numerous.

The county also had numerous “Farmers and Breeders” of Poland China, Chester White and
Duroc Jersey hogs; Shropshire sheep; White Leghorn, Plymouth Rock, Wyandotte and Rhode Island Red chickens and Toulouse geese. Although the auto age was well underway by 1919, tractors were still scarce on farms anywhere, so Adams County also had “Farmers and Breeders” of Clydesdale, Percheron and French Draft Horses. On call to care for all this livestock was T.J. Jensen, “Farmer,” and “Veterinarian” of Strong’s Prairie.

The first two decades of this century are considered to be the “golden age” of American farming, a time when both production and prices were good. It was the “golden age” in the better farming areas of Adams County: Strong’s Prairie, New Haven, Springville, Jackson, Easton and QuinCY. Here farmers developed the county’s most prosperous, modern farms.

They also adapted to the demands of farming on sand soil. By the 1880s, Adams, Marquette and Waushara counties were already known as the “rye belt” of Wisconsin. In the 1890s, acreage of rye in the county doubled to exceed 22,000 acres and, while Waushara usually led the state in rye production, Adams was usually second in the production of this cereal crop so suited to sandy soil. The county also became a leader in the production of buckwheat, another light soil crop and was the state’s number one producer in the 1910s. Adams was also in the top dozen or so potato raising counties, harvesting more than 177,000 bushels of spuds worth $61,000 in 1895. Potatoes were important enough for railroad booster John Purves to point out that the “600 carloads of potatoes” that Strong’s Prairie farmers shipped out of Necedah every year in the 1900s was trade lost to the county and one reason why the North Western built a siding at Dellwood in 1911.

Despite having made real progress, the county had acquired a reputation as a sand desert, at least in the pages of the Milwaukee Sentinel in 1900. A negative article referring to “log huts” and “dilapi-
dated shacks" prompted the county to respond. School Superintendent George Reynolds asked the county board for $200 to fund an exhibit of Adams County farming to enter in competition at the 1901 State Fair. Reynolds assembled an exhibit that was "large and occupied more space than any other county... except Price and Waukesha, which occupied the same as did Adams County."

He continued, "the articles on exhibition were unsurpassed by any other county and many of them excelled the products shown by other counties. This was especially true of corn, clover and potatoes... It was a surprise to many visitors at the fair, who knew Adams County only by reputation... In fact, no other exhibit attracted so much attention... because I suppose we had such a bad reputation."

Reynolds concluded his report by saying the county had won $70 in premiums which should be used to fund an exhibit in 1902. The advice was not taken and the county missed the chance to build on the favorable impression Reynolds had made.

While the Reynolds exhibit was an accurate display of the quality of farming in the county, it did not tell the entire story. While some farmers were keeping up with the rest of the state, others were falling behind. Robert and Gertrude Reid settled in Big Flats in 1895, amidst a group of immigrants from Illinois. Their son Floyd, born in 1900, recalled that "When they [the Illinoisiens] saw that black soil, they thought it was just like home [but] that's just about the poorest land on earth." After putting in a few hard, disappointing years, most of these farmers moved on, like the Reid's themselves, who relocated to better ground in Leola.

With the best farmland in the state already settled, newcomers seeking relatively inexpensive land came to the dry sands and wet peats of Adams County. Settlers born in the United States and immigrants from Bohemia, Germany, Poland and other parts of Europe took up farms here. Towns that saw the greatest increases in the 1890s were Rome, Leola, Richfield, Preston and Big Flats. So many new settlers had moved to Leola and Richfield that a new town, Colburn, had to be created in 1891. Rome, which had no more than 232 people in 1890, grew to 654 in 1900. The population of the entire county grew to 9,141 in 1900, an increase of nearly one-third since 1890.

Growth in Leola was encouraged by plans to drain the marsh that covers most of the township. Organized in 1901, the Leola Drainage District encompassed 15,000 acres in Leola and the adjacent Waushara County Town of Plainfield. Farmers who benefitted from the drainage, which was intended to turn wetland to cropland, were taxed to fund construction of the ditches to carry the water to the Big Roche-A-Cri and 14 Mile
Creeks. By 1907, the main ditch of the district was completed. In 1909, one of the biggest fires on record roared through Leola and ignited the peat of the ditchbanks. It was the kind of fire that Floyd Reid later remembered watching on a smoky summer’s evening when an orange sun set over pale green crops in a black marshland field ringed by ditchbank peat glowing red.

Fires were common on the marshes and the Leola marsh had “been largely burned over” prior to drainage in 1889. The difference was that, unlike natural marshes that flooded in the spring, a drained marsh stayed dry and was much more vulnerable to fire. Once ignited, peat could burn for months and only a heavy covering of snow could smother the flames and make winter the single season of the year when the marshes did not smell of burning earth.

Unlike many other drainage districts in central Wisconsin, Leola remained solvent enough to pay the cost of its construction, but not enough to keep farmers on the land. Leola, along with Rome, Monroe and Big Flats, which did not have drainage districts, lost population between 1900 and 1910, with both Big Flats and Rome losing nearly one-third of the people living there in 1900.

The optimistic spirit of the 1890s deflated even more in the 1920s, when the national agricultural depression hit hard at places like Adams County. About one of every six county farms went out of business in the ’20s. Then the 1930s came and the county faced both an economic and environmental disaster. “I had five kids,” Walter Helm recalled, “and I sold hogs for 2.5 cents a pound, eggs for 9 cents a dozen and potatoes for 20 cents a bushel. I don’t like to talk about the Depression.” Those 20-cent potatoes were especially hard to take, since Helm had made as much as $7.00 a hundred for potatoes during World War I.

After enduring the lowest agricultural prices on record in 1932, county farmers encountered one of the worst droughts on record in 1933. Rainfall recorded at the Hancock Research Station was nearly 10 inches below normal between January 1933 and June 1934. In May, one of the first and largest of the transcontinental duststorms rolled out of the northern Great Plains states and into central Wisconsin. The droughted sands of Adams and neighboring counties blew out of fields and into drifts like snow. “The corn was just coming out of the ground,” said Walter Helm, “when the dust just buried it.”

The May 1934 storm blew dust all the way to Washington D.C. where a weather bureau scientist concluded that “a continuation of a dust blanket of this magnitude would shortly result in ice-age conditions.” In Adams County the storm was followed by hot weather and near-record temperatures until rain finally fell in June. By then, hay and oats were burned out with corn and potatoes severely set back.
Right: Planting trees with the mechanized equipment that came along in the 1940s. Below: Farmers organized the Adams-Marquette Electric Cooperative to bring electrical service to rural areas in 1939. (l-r) Manager James Joyce, Alfred Murray, Art Austland, Ted Allen in front of the co-op’s first office at Second and Main in Friendship.

In response, the state established the Central Wisconsin Shelterbelt Project to plant trees to protect the soil from erosion. In 1934, Adams County farmers planted 2,500 trees in “shelterbelts,” 6,250 in ’35 and 83,700 in ’36. When drought conditions returned with a vengeance in the summer of ’36, many of these trees died and had to be replanted. The numbers continued to grow every year, peaking with 470,500 trees planted in 1940. By the time World War II began the once-open fields of Adams County were lined with over one million young trees, all of them planted by hand, since the tractor-pulled tree-planter had yet to be invented. The Central
Wisconsin Shelterbelt Project was the first large scale wind erosion control program in the United States and Adams County farmers were full-fledged participants.

The Shelterbelt Project was one of many Depression-era farm programs at work in the county. Farmers also received aid in the form of price supports for milk and grain, federal purchase of “surplus” corn and livestock, distribution of pesticides to control grasshoppers, the excavation of lime-rich marl from local marshes, numerous work relief programs and, in the hardest-hit northern towns, offers to purchase farms and fund resettlement elsewhere. One of the University of Wisconsin personnel working in the county was Professor Aldo Leopold, who knew Adams County as a good place to hunt grouse. He reported on the lack of interest in resettlement shown by local farmers and his own reaction to it:

“Yet in the 1930s, when the alphabetical uplifts galloped like forty horsesmen across the Big Flats, exhorting the sand farmers to resettle elsewhere, these benighted folks did not want to go...I began to wonder why, and finally, to settle the question, I bought myself a sand farm.”

Leopold’s “sand farm,” the place where he wrote his book, A Sand County Almanac, was in Sauk County, but its purchase was inspired by the “the Big Flats” and other parts of Adams County.

Another depression-era relief program brought electric power to rural areas in Adams County. In 1931, the county’s entire electrical generating capacity was about 220 kilowatts churned out by the hydrostations built at Friendship and Cottonville by George Polivka in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Power lines ran through the county from Wisconsin Dells to Adams-Friendship and from there to Cottonville and the Dellwood Pavilion in Quincy, as well as from the Dells to Briggsville. Farmers along the lines could connect, but Wisconsin Power and Light was not really interested in serving them and fewer than one in ten county farmers had electricity. Conventional wisdom in the utility industry held that farmers would not use enough power to pay for service at a reasonable cost.

“I lived only three miles from electric lines but the local power company refused to build lines to my farm,” recalled Town of Jackson farmer Andrew Mc Clyman in 1985. He and other local farmers came together to take advantage of low-cost loans available through the federal government’s new Rural Electrification Administration. Established in May 1935, the REA was created to raise rural living standards by supplying affordable electrical power to the countryside.

Rural people—nearly all farmers in the 1930s—organized cooperatives to purchase electrical power and distribute it over their own lines. The work began in Adams and Marquette counties in 1938 led by Adams county agent Ira Goodell. The farmers who served on the first board of what they called the Adams-Marquette Electric Co-operative were Francis Russell, Phillip O’Connell, John Johnson, Ellery Cummings, Judd Dunn, Arthur Hofman, Mrs. Robert McNutt and Nettie Huber. McNutt and Huber were the first women in Wisconsin to serve on a co-op board. They hired Briggsville electrician James Joyce as the first co-op “coordinator.” Joyce ran the operation out of his home at first, but the office was moved to Friendship early in 1939 so, as the Adams Times reported, the co-op could be near its legal counsel, Fulton Collipp.

To organize the cooperative, farmers agreed to install electrical service and pay the monthly bill. The first lines were strung early in 1939 and by the end of the year, AMEC was supplying power to its first members. The farms of Walter Wilson and Maurice Roller, Easton, were the first in Adams county to have their meters connected. Joyce was quoted in the Westfield Central Union newspaper as saying “all the members who have their home wired will be able to enjoy lights by Christmas.”

From these humble beginnings the Adams-Marquette Electric Co-operative grew. Through mergers with co-operatives in Waushara, Columbia and Sauk county, through the growth of the non-farming rural population and through the development of irrigated agriculture throughout its region, what is now known as the Adams-Columbia Electric Co-operative is the largest distribution co-operative in Wisconsin.

Rural electrification was the first of many changes to influence farming in the years after World War II. With the Depression over and war time restrictions ended, more Adams County farmers mechanized, replacing horses with
tractors, hand milking with milking machines, milk cans with bulk tanks. They planted alfalfa, soybeans and hybrid corn, applied pesticides, chemical fertilizers and other soil amendments in addition to manure. Most significantly, they shifted from dairying to corn and irrigated vegetable farming. Among the first in the county to install irrigators were the Reids in Leola and the Nichols in New Haven. Others followed and, from about 900 acres in 1960, the number of irrigated acres in the county increased to over 44,000 in 1987 and growing. As a result, the county that was once known as the “hole” in the dairy belt, where the best crops were rye and buckwheat, became one of the leading snap bean and potato-raising areas in Wisconsin.

As in other parts of Wisconsin, the number of farms fell dramatically, dipping to 382 in 1987. Like Timothy Temple in 1856, they do not raise apples and peaches, but cranberry acreage is growing. They don’t raise a lot of wheat or oats, but they do raise more corn, beans and potatoes than ever—and just like Temple—those who have successfully adapted to new agricultural conditions are “doing well.”
Irrigated Farming
Clay Nichols

One has to go back to the early ’30s. By continuous growing of wheat and potatoes as a cash crop, the fertility and humus for our fragile top soil had been depleted. The Depression and the drought had put a double whammy on the county farmers. Eggs were selling for ten cents per dozen, butter was 29 cents a pound, hogs $4 per hundred. A neighbor shipped a Guernsey veal calf to Milwaukee from Wisconsin Dells. He got a bill from the railroad; the calf didn’t bring enough to pay the freight.

Then World War II came along. Prices were frozen. Hogs at $5.50. Fat cattle at $11. Through this period, each small farm was raising a family, milking 10 or 12 cows, a few hogs, chickens, and a huge garden.

Irrigation entered the picture. It started slowly in the north end of the county where the water table was nearer the surface. It started with a pipe called “hand move” laid on the ground with risers that held the sprinklers. After that piece of ground was watered, the pump was shut down, the pipe drained, moved, set and started again.

The help soon rebelled to this much work; so entered the "wheel move". With this machine, the axe on those 50-inch wheels strung across the field was the main pipe with sprinklers on it. You would water for a while, stop the pump, drain the pipe, start an engine in the middle of the line, move it ahead to the next set, and start over.

These early machines did their job at that time; but, one was limited to crops about two feet in height.

In the fifties came the great well drilling machine technique called reverse rotary drilling where the driller could put down a high capacity well in 24 hours or less that would produce 1,000 gallons per minute.

Then came the "battle of the water drives." These continuous old beasts could cover all crops on a quarter section less the corners. If you could keep them running. But they did their job at the time and now we have electric drives that do a fine job and one can reverse them or move them without water pumping.

In looking back at over 70 years of farming at the Nichols farm spread, I can recall the worst and the best.

With the drought and burnout of the early thirties, the next came in 1955. The hot searing winds in early August literally cooked the standing corn in the field. Our corn that year yielded 15-20 bushels per acre.

In the late ’50s and early ’60s, a good friend and neighbor Howard Elliott and I might be found on a Sunday PM about 4 miles north of our farms watching the corporate farms (Pine Bluff) watering their veggies while our crops were drying up. We came to a decision, if they could do it for veggies, why couldn’t we do it for corn and soybeans. We each put down our first wells in 1964.

And now for the best, 1998. Our son Ken, has long since taken over the Nichols farm. In ’98 the Nichols farm broke the golden barrier by producing over 200 bushel of corn per acre. That common old joke that I heard most of my life, “That a crow had to carry his lunch when he flew across Adams County,” has now gone like the Essex.

This transformation in our county did not happen by itself. We had good people here. Our county agents were the best. In the ’30s, Ira Goodell fought hard to get the REA electric in for us in 1939. Les Schmidt followed by Alex Richter worked hard for the good of Adams County at this time. Also there was Ivan Morrow leading our 4-H youth and don’t let us ever forget that great man in the ASC office, Don Massen. A few years back, Don politely informed the Madison office that Dane County was not tops in corn yield per acre...Adams County was.
The Adams County Fair

The Adams County Fair is the oldest community event in the county and the Adams County Agricultural Society, "the Fair Board," is the oldest community organization here. Although a fair of some kind may have been held in Plainville in the early 1850s, the first documented county fair was held at the current fairgrounds in Friendship in 1859. In addition to agricultural exhibits, horse-racing was the featured event until the 1920s when 4-H club and school exhibits became, as now, part of the fair. Carnival shows, baseball tournaments, musical performances, commercial displays, political events, airplane flights, stock car races, tractor pulls and demolition derbies have taken place over the years.
Previous Page: (far left) Newspaper ad for the fair of 1893; (top) the race track and infield, 1909; "Monster" wedding cake on display, 1924.
Above: Some of the 4-H Club members who exhibited 42 calves in 1928 Left: No fools in the Happy Workers Club of 1938.
Below: Revving up for the tractor pull, 1979.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert Banville</td>
<td>Richfield</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>1970</td>
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<td>Archie Crothers</td>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>1845</td>
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<td>Rexford Crothers</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>1956</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Warren Elliott</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<td>Harold Feldman</td>
<td>Quincy</td>
<td>1897</td>
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<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1870</td>
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<td>1883</td>
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<td>Sharon Gasiencis</td>
<td>Preston</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>Geraldine Hesler</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>1979</td>
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<td>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Stanley Huber</td>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>1953</td>
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<td>Gary W. Huber (Pictured Above)</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>1896</td>
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<td>Wayne &amp; Betty Jefferson</td>
<td>Adams</td>
<td>1880</td>
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<td>Ralph L. &amp; Norah Jones</td>
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<td>1956</td>
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<td>Edward Percy Lawson</td>
<td>Monroe</td>
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<td>Helmer Lecy</td>
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<td>Edward &amp; June Lloyd</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>1876</td>
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<td>1877</td>
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<td>Lewis Mikkelson</td>
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<td>Irvin L. Rosgard</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<td>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Gordon Seefeld</td>
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<td>Mary Rosella Stelter</td>
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<td>James L. &amp; Alma Warp Thurber</td>
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<td>1860</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<td>Arleigh &amp; Alta VanWie</td>
<td>Springville</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BE A FARMER!

Buy Farms and Lands of Barnes, Barnes & Barnes. Realtors, P.O. Friendship Wisconsin.

BUY A HOME NOW AND BE INDEPENDENT WHEN WAGES GO DOWN.
PAY ONLY 6 PER CENT INSTEAD OF 20 TO 40 PER CENT AS RENTERS

THIS COUNTY AND VICINITY OFFER GREAT OPPORTUNITIES!

"The earth was made to be farmed and man was made and sent to farm it. Whenever he has stayed close to his farm he has prospered."

"There is not a State in the Union which is more nearly self-sustaining than is Wisconsin," says Dean Russell, "and yet Wisconsin is not beginning to measure up to its opportunities."

Light and medium soils are the surest and easiest to farm and our great State University is educating farmers how to successfully handle them.

"Wisconsin is the only state in the Mississippi Valley to increase its farm ownership during the last ten years, which shows that Wisconsin is still in the lead in its agricultural activities, and is outstripping its competitor in the elimination of the tenant farmer, as it has in the rank of dairy cows, the erection of silos, the production of seed grain," and we may say its excellent quality of potatoes, fruit and garden products.

Adams County, the keystone of Central Wisconsin, only 60 miles from Madison, 90 miles from Milwaukee, and 150 miles from Chicago, is 48 miles long North and South, and is bordered on the East by the Soo R.R., on the North by the C & N.W. R.R. on the South by the C.M.&St.P.R.R., on the West by the Wisconsin River; the world admired Dells, and the magnificent water power dam at Kilbourn, and is crossed by the C.&N.W. R.R. from Milwaukee to Seattle, one of the best equipped railroads in the United States.

With a variety of soils, beautiful groves, large tracts of fine timber, dozens of streams of clear water, with fields of the best quality of corn, clover and potatoes, garden products and fruits; with autos, trucks, tractors and better roads, which make farming and marketing easy, with telephones, churches and excellent rural schools, with a beautiful County-seat, containing an up-to-date Court House and High School, but no jail for a county of 10,000 population, and no bonded indebtedness on the county, hence low taxes; and with an enthusiastic County Agent to advise and encourage the farmers to better methods of farmings--ADAMS COUNTY offers the Homeseeker by far the Best Opportunity for the Least Money and Effort, that is offered anywhere today in the U.S.

We invite CORRESPONDENCE and INSPECTION. We will meet you at Adams Station, on the C&N.W. Rwy., and give free auto trip to inspect any of these properties, and free entertainment while here.

Come and see US. If we have misrepresented, we pay for your time and expense.
Give US your BUSINESS, and will give you prompt service.

BARNES, BARNES & BARNES

This ad, along with a full page of farms listed for sale, appeared in the Friendship Reporter in 1916. It is testimony to the optimism of the times and the promotional enthusiasm of "Barnes, Barnes & Barnes" who came to the county to build a railroad from Big Flats to Chicago, then stayed to sell real estate.