

Reconstructing the Lives of Your Farming Ancestors

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INTRODUCTION

The 1870 U.S. census was the first to show farmers as less than half of the population, at 47.7 percent. Before that—back to the earliest days of Colonial America—the majority of employed persons in America farmed for a living. The result is that lots of us have farmers in our family trees. But it’s one thing to say, “My family were farmers,” and quite another to understand what that means in terms of their daily lives.

FARMING IN THE 1600S

Movement to and migration within America changed the typical European farm living situation. European farmers tended to live in a village and travel back and forth to their fields to work. It did not take long, however, for the readily available land of the New World to cause farmers to leave the village and live on their farms. “Although [17th century] farms differed in detail from colony to colony, all shared four characteristics: they were cut off from daily contact with the larger world; they were, up to a point, self-sustaining; they were family-run; and, by modern standards they were small.”¹ Clearing the ground for cultivation was the most pressing task of the American farmer in the 1600s. Fencing was another imperative to keep both wild and domesticated creatures from devouring crops. The size of a family determined how much work could be accomplished in a year, and only simple tools were available. Corn was the primary crop. Almost everything a family needed had to be produced by the family itself, though bartering for some goods was possible.

FARMING IN THE 1700S

Westward movement increased in the 18th century and in some places farmers began to grow more than they needed just for their families, particularly in the Middle Colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware, and New Jersey). Markets opened to sell this excess produce. Mills were built to process wheat into flour, and manufacturing of iron products, such as plows and other tools, began to change the life of the farm family. Farms became larger during this century and the hiring of farm laborers to assist the farm family became more common. Crops became more diverse. For instance, in colonial New Jersey, farmers grew wheat, barley, flax, oats, and rice, in addition to corn and hemp. In the south, plantations evolved to grow crops like tobacco and cotton on a large scale using slave labor, but the family farm also continued to exist there. The growth of cash crop farming allowed farm families to purchase more goods than they had been able to previously. The cotton gin was invented in 1793, and the first cast-iron plow was patented in 1797, hinting at the boom in improved implements and machinery that would occur in the next century.

FARMING IN THE 1800S

The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century affected farmers in many ways. Many farm tasks became mechanized, so a farm family could manage many more acres than in the past. This spurred many

¹ David Freeman Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 32.

prosperous farmers to purchase more and more land. Overproduction of farm produce began to affected. Many farmers went into debt to acquire the latest machinery to allow them to produce even more crops in order to make up for the lower prices they got for their crops. Many lost their farms as a result of excessive debt. On the bright side, mail order catalogs came into being, allowing families on isolated farms to purchase consumer goods that hadn't been available to them before. Though public land had been available for settlement for several decades, the Homestead Act of 1862 made it possible to acquire land simply by working your 160-acre parcel, rather than requiring cash for a purchase. The first gasoline tractor was built in 1892.

FARMING IN THE 1900S

Farm production continued to grow in the 20th century thanks to improvements in machinery, fertilization, and scientific crop management. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s called attention to poor agricultural practices and spurred improvements. In 1940 it's estimated that one farmer supplied food for 10.7 people; by 1970, the number was 47.7. In 1954, the number of tractors on farms exceeds the number of horses and mules for the first time. The family farm declined in the 20th century and industrial farming became the norm in many parts of the country.

HOW TO RECOVER THEIR STORIES

For those of us who want to understand the stories of our farming ancestors, social history can be a great help. Social history is the history of ordinary people and how they lived their daily lives. It can be found in any number of books and websites devoted to everyday life. Diaries, memoirs, and oral histories, whether they mention our ancestors or not, can be excellent sources of information about what it was like to be part of a farm family during whatever era you're interested in learning about. A Google search for



16783—Plowing Rich Prairie Soil with Tractor, S. Dak.

“farming America 1800s,” for instance, will take you to any number of websites with useful information. A search on WorldCat or your local library’s catalog for similar search terms can open up a world of resources. Searching on e-book sites like Google Books, Hathi Trust, and Internet Archive brings you a wealth of digitized books to read on your computer. Historic newspapers are gold mines of information about everyday life. U.S. census Agricultural Schedules in which your ancestors appear will tell you in great detail what kind of crops and livestock were being raised on their farms. County directories can provide a surprising amount of information about our farming ancestors.

Below are a number of resources in which to begin your search for your ancestors’ stories.

1 "Plowing Rich Prairie Soil with Tractor, S. Dak," c. 1916. Library of Congress

RESOURCES

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