

Seneca County Farming During the Civil War Era, Based on the Diaries of Henry K. Dey

Henry K. Dey operated a farm on the eastern shore of Seneca Lake where present-day Sampson State Park is located. The detailed information in his diaries gives us great insight into what farming was like in Seneca County during the Civil War years.

On his 150-acres farm, Henry Dey, like most area farmers, raised wheat as his basic cash crop. He also grew oats, barley, corn and sometimes rye. Other agricultural products that he sold were potatoes, corn, apples (normally for cider or vinegar), hay, butter, poultry, salt beef, pork, hides, timothy and clover seed, lumber and fuel woods.

Wheat as the main cash crop

The wheat that was grown was both white (White Flint) and red (Old Red Chief) as well as some Mediterranean strains. All was winter wheat planted in September, with timothy or clover seed sown on the wheat field in April, and the crop harvested in late July.

Although Seneca County wheat farmers were having increasing difficulty competing with the prairie farms of the Great Plains, the Civil War created a great demand for whatever amount of wheat could be produced for market. The *Geneva Courier* carried this editorial:

Farmers—At this crisis in our country's history let not the farmer forget to make ample provisions for food for the thousands now rallying to hold up untarnished and cause forever to float that Star Spangled Banner—the pride of the world....The farmers should double the amount of ground heretofore used for the various seeds and permit not a foot of soil to become accountless....We entreat every farmer in the town(s) of Seneca and old Ontario to feel that they have an individual responsibility resting upon them.

The demand for wheat is reflected in the selling price of wheat. In 1862, Mr. Dey received about \$1.00 for his wheat. In 1863, he sold his white wheat for \$1.30 and his red wheat for \$1.18. In 1864 the selling price was \$2.00 a bushel, and it was \$2.50 in 1866. His total crop on his 32 acres planted that year was 564 bushels, for an average yield per acre just under 18 bushels. That average yield was somewhat over the New York State average.

Dey had two barns, so he could house quite a lot of livestock. He raised cattle, both for milk and beef, hogs, and poultry. Among the items which Dey sold during the Civil War years were a pair of black oxen (\$140), a beef hide (\$2.40), a pig (\$3.75 a cwt. or \$14.85), a horse (\$145), two bags of pigeon weed seed (40 cents a bag), a heifer (\$10), another yoke of oxen (\$127.50), and 2 barrels of walnuts (\$2 a barrel). Hay in 1863 sold for \$8 a ton and in 1864 for \$20. He sold about 150 dozen eggs in 1866 with prices fluctuating between 16 and 22 cents a dozen. He sold walnut logs at 23 cents a running foot, and walnut lumber for \$25 the thousand board feet.

Hired help

Dey had hired help all these years. A hired girl received at first \$1.00 per week and later \$1.25 per week, and went home every other Saturday for a half-day holiday. Her work was entirely within the house, except for the occasional emergency when she was asked to help with harvest, or more frequently to milk cows, for which she was paid extra.

Hired men came mostly from the farms in the area, and often were the children of men with whom Dey was exchanging labor. Their wages were usually quite low. In 1862, for example, his hired man worked from April 1 to December 1 for \$75. He was expected to do anything and everything on the farm: split wood, plow, harrow, help in harvest time, go to Geneva with goods to sell, pick stone, haul manure, and build fence. If he went fishing, to an

auction or something similar, he “lost the day,” and Dey kept a careful record of his work. In 1862, Dey in addition used one man for 4.75 days drawing in the wheat, 3 men to work on corn and oats, and a fifth man during haying time. One time when Dey was laid up with a hand problem, he paid one man \$1.25 a day to help with threshing, and another \$2.25 for cradling wheat, drawing oats and threshing them. He also paid for 4 days of labor husking corn at \$1 per day, and he hired another man for the month of August at \$18 for the month to do general farm work.

It was more usual, however, for Dey to hire just one man, with others to help during harvest. In 1863, his hired man worked for \$8 a month, and he did use another man for 33 days. This other man was paid 75 cents a day to haul manure, \$1.25 to hay, and \$1.50 in the wheat harvest. The somewhat more affluent Dey in 1866 hired a man for \$20 a month for 6 months, provided him a house, and cow pasturage. That man’s son was paid \$100 for 6 months.

Declining self-sufficiency

Another interesting phenomenon revealed by the Dey diaries is the vast amount of work which farmers exchanged. At harvest time, neighbors and their hired men came and aided in the work. In the following weeks, the crops of each cooperating farmer were successively harvested.

There were several types of “specialists” that provided Dey and other similar farmers valuable assistance with their farm work. One obvious such specialist was the blacksmith. Dey paid blacksmiths between \$30 and \$40 a year for their work, with a trip to the blacksmith an almost weekly occurrence. The blacksmith was paid 20 cents a shoe for horses, 25 cents for fixing a reaper knife, and 30 cents for mending a chain.

During these years, Dey hired other specialists. He hired a man to build a sleigh at a cost of \$7.50 for the wood work, and \$16.50 for the iron work. He hired a carpenter at \$2 a day to work on a shingling job. Digging and stoning the well cost \$30. Ditching for field tiles cost Dey 18 cents a rod, or \$24.48 for 136 rods.

Dey was dependent upon his neighbors. He borrowed their machinery, traded or purchased cattle, and personally lived not alone but as a part of a larger community. Dey, like his neighbors, was becoming increasingly less self-sufficient in another way. As his income increased, he was increasingly making more trips to Geneva to purchase what were becoming “necessities of life”—rice, indigo, a tea steeper, whiskey, lemons, dry goods, coconuts, etc.

Daily and monthly work

It is important to understand that Dey, like most farmers in these years, had daily chores such as milking, cleaning the stables, feeding the livestock, gathering the eggs, carrying wood for the fires, turning the cattle into the pasture in the appropriate season and bringing them back to the barn. When Dey was ill, his diary entries often read, “Don nothing but the chores today.”

In addition to these daily chores, Dey’s monthly work could be summarized as follows. In January, he perhaps had the greatest amount of slack time and spent the month mending items and making plans for the year. He spent time threshing oats with a flail to feed his animals, slaughtering beef, pork and chickens. He was also cutting lumber that could be used for next winter’s fuel, rails for new fences, or sold in Geneva.

His February work was similar to that of January. His diary entries indicate that in three of the four years, the men moved buildings in February. Apparently the icy smooth road made this work easier. The women seemed to make quilts in February.

In March, there was the splitting of wood, shelling corn, cleaning timothy seed to have it ready for the spring sowing, and generally to be preparing for the summer’s work.

In April, the year's farm work began in earnest. The fields were plowed, rolled and harrowed. Then came the sowing of seeds. Grass seed was planted on the wheat and oats. Corn and vegetables were planted later. In between times, the farmer carried stones, repaired fences, pulled stumps, and burned refuse in the fields. He might plant some trees or trim those in his orchard. By the end of the month, the cattle were usually moved from the barn to the pasture.

In May, the tempo of worked increased. The rest of the planting took place. Plaster was put on the fields. Fallow land began to receive its almost constant plowing. Fences were mended on off days, and there were always stones to be picked up in the fields. In late May and early June came the breeding of the cattle for calves the next March.

In June came the annual hauling of manure. Dey records that 110 loads of manure were hauled in June 1862. Other June work included the continuing plowing of the fallow fields, cultivating fields, shingling the barn, and digging ditches for the tile.

July and August were the harvest months. Haying would start right after the Fourth of July. Then came the harvesting of wheat and oats. The grain was mowed, shocked and hauled to the barn. As time permitted, there was more hauling of the previous winter's cut from the wood lot, and the continued plowing and harrowing of the fallow land.

September was devoted to planting the next year's crop and threshing the one in the barn. There was also the digging of potatoes, fixing fence, hauling what lumber remained in the woods, picking the corn, and doing fall plowing on the corn and oats ground.

In October, the rest of the crops were brought in. Oats were threshed, corn husked and put in the corn crib. Late in the month, apples were picked and cider made. Some of the cider was boiled down for vinegar. Corn stalks and wheat and oat straw were put down for cattle bedding. The wheat crop was sold during this month and hauled to the purchaser.

As the cold began to intensify, November and December were marked by a diminished amount of work. If the snow held off, some manure might be spread on the fields. Wood for the winter had to be split and stacked. In November, hogs were slaughtered, sausage made, and the smoke house prepared for ham and bacon. In December, poultry were slaughtered for sale in New York City for the Christmas holiday. Corn had to be shelled. By mid-December, the cutting of trees for lumber was begun. Fuel wood would be hauled to Geneva.

Summary

It is easy to see from the general description of a year's toil that such a life even in the best of times was arduous and difficult. It is also possible to say that it was banal in its monotony. Little occurred of importance. Occasionally the Dey family went to Geneva, or to church, but from the testimony of the diaries the general content of their life was work. It was important work, it is true, because the farmer by his work enabled others to do other things, things which today perhaps seem more important than the work of H. K. Dey....

[Note: The information for the above article is taken directly from David C. Smith's article "Middle Range Farming in the Civil War Era: Life on a Farm in Seneca County, 1862-1866," which appeared in the October 1967 journal *New York History*. The "summary" portion above is a direct quotation from the source. Much of the other wording of this article is that of David Smith.]