

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #33

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the newsletter, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

FARMING IN THE TOWNSHIP FROM EARLY SETTLEMENT UNTIL TODAY

Farming has always been and continues to be one of the most important activities conducted on our planet. After all, the billions of people living on the Earth have to eat every day. However, the ways that farmers have conducted their activities have changed over the many decades. We will soon read that farming in the Town of Madison during past years was far different from the way it is practiced today.

When we travel our local highways today, we notice decaying barns and outbuildings. In their place we often see a huge farm complex that may deal with dairy or perhaps just with crops. The economics of farming has changed. The dependence of the nation on the small farms is not as it was in the past.

In this article, I would like to take a look at farming when our first settlers arrived in the Madison-Bouckville area in the 1790's and follow the pattern of farming as it has evolved into the practices and ways of using the land today.

Our first township settlers came from the New England states. News of rich farmland that had been relayed to the population of the coastal colonies during the American Revolution sparked an exodus from the coast in the years following the war.

The head of the family usually arrived first. He would look land; meaning that he would select what he thought was a favorable place to bring his family the following year. This was often on a hillside because the lower valley areas were wet. This resulted in more mosquitos and Genesee Fever, commonly known as malaria. After concluding a purchase contract for his chosen lot, he returned to New England to make plans for the following spring.

Arriving at the lot he had purchased the previous year, he and his family would try to get there in early spring and immediately set out to clear some trees and to make a crude cabin. Among the items that the family brought were seeds to plant. These often consisted of wheat, barley, and flax. Corn seed was obtained from the Native Americans. The seeds were planted around the tree stumps. In addition, fishing and hunting brought in much-needed food.

All of the family food needs had to be produced by the family themselves. Work days were long; cabin building to be done, crops to maintain, and wild animals to be kept at bay. This was true subsistence farming. This was the beginning of farming in the Town of Madison.

During the next few years the farmer concentrated on clearing more land and planting more crops. Supplemental income could be secured by making charcoal and potash, in addition to tapping maple trees in the spring to make and sell maple sugar. The farm often had a pair of oxen and a horse. The oxen supplied the power to move heavy logs and rocks. The horse also helped with the farm work , such as plowing the fields or hauling hay and when hitched to a carriage or wagon, conveyed the family to church on Sunday. Church services were a very important part of farm life.

As communities began to come into existence, there was a market for butter and cheese made on the farm. Butter could be sold to area communities, while cheese could be shipped to more distant markets. Milk from the farms was sold at the cheese plants and the farmers now had some cash to use at the local general store or trading post. Trees could be harvested from the woodlot and sold to the newly established sawmills and by the mid-1800's, sheep farming grew into a dominant industry. The first sheep were introduced in Madison County in 1810 and soon the Town of Madison was a leader in the county in the raising of sheep.

While sheep were important during the early part of the 1800's, we cannot forget the hop industry. Introduced by James D. Coolidge in 1808, hop farming became a dominant money-making venture for many of our area farms. Hops were sold on the New York City market and fortunes could be made if the price did not fluctuate significantly. The hop industry died by the 1920's due to the blue mold disease that stunted the plants.

Every well-ordered farm had a substantial orchard. With the arrival of Samuel R. Mott in 1868, farmers in the area had a market for their excess apples and often planted more apple trees. This market ended when the Mott's Company in Bouckville sustained a terrible fire in 1931 and focused on their facilities in other parts of the state.

As we have read, milk production increased when the cheese factories were operating, but with the arrival of the railroads and later refrigerated boxcars, fluid milk could be shipped longer distances. Dairy farming took over as the major farming pursuit. This was from the 1880's to the present time, although now in a greatly reduced form. At one time if we traveled from the main intersection of the Village of Madison west to Ray Brothers Bar-b-que, we would have passed a dozen dairy farms. Now there is only one in operation.

In the 1910 time period, peas and beans were grown in large quantities on many of our farms. They were sold to regional markets. This lasted until the 1950's when labor costs and competition from other areas of the nation cut into the profit.

Some of our farmers over the decades tried other avenues of farming. These included farms raising chickens for the egg and meat markets and the growing of teasels for the textile mills. Teasels had barbs which could be used to fluff up the wool or cotton for easier spinning and weaving.

Today, farming in the Town of Madison has changed once again. We now see more crop farming, the raising of beef cattle, and some new vegetable farms. Farming has been an ever-changing venture in the Town of Madison.