

Farming the Cutover—Part 2

In the favorable agricultural economy of the first two decades of the twentieth century, agricultural settlement in the northern Bayfield County prospered. The University College of Agriculture, through its extension division, county agents, farmer's institutes and other educational and advisory services, provided valuable assistance to those struggling to make a success of farming in the poor soils and short growing season of the north country. The college's contribution was further expanded with the establishment in 1911 of an experimental farm at Ashland Junction, a rail junction a short distance west of Ashland. Washburn newspapers published enthusiastic reports about the progress of agricultural settlement, proclaiming that the territory around Washburn would become "the garden spot of Bayfield County" and the "paradise of northern Wisconsin." A few farms were prosperous enough to mechanize, the Washburn Times noting there were now two threshing machines in Bayfield County, one owned by a farmer near Washburn. Some farmers had hay baling machines, binders, and other farm machinery. There were also good roads, a mail route, and telephone service in the farming areas, which along with the prosperous farms, the Times predicted, will "convince the prospective buyer that this will within a few years be one of the greatest farming districts of the

state."

In 1909 the dean of the College of Agriculture declared that the land adjacent to Lake Superior was one of the most promising regions in the



nation for fruit growing. The horticulturists of Bayfield County apparently heeded his prediction, for fruit growing expanded and prospered. People, visiting the horticultural exhibit at the state fair in 1911, "fairly went wild" over the exhibit of Bayfield County fruit, according to the Times, while, in 1913, the county's fruit display won first prize at the state fair. During the 1913 season carloads of strawberries were being shipped almost daily, the largest shipment consisting of 1,000 crates, with the total for the season being over 6,000 crates. Farmers were receiving good prices for their berries, the total income from the crop shipped through Washburn in 1913 amounting to \$10,000. While strawberries were the main fruit crop, other fruits including apples, raspberries, blueberries, gooseberries, and cherries were also grown. Apples were particularly important in

the Bayfield area, where commercial apple cultivating was established under the leadership of William Knight, an early settler in Bayfield.

Fruit growing proved so successful that in 1912 the growers organized the Bayfield County Farmers and Fruit Growers Association, for the purpose of "buying, selling and manufacturing" of dairy products and farm produce; the "buying and selling of goods, ware and merchandise, the maintaining of warehouses and the buying, selling and handling of live stock." A large warehouse was constructed on the southwest corner of First Avenue West and Omaha Street, adjacent to the railroad track, "at a cost exceeding \$4100" (still exists). The building was dedicated in a long ceremony on Saturday, "January 4 1913 with several speakers, one of whom suggested that the association adopt the slogan "Watch Washburn Win." Shipping began on January 13th and business was so good that a year later, the association was able to declare a stock dividend.

In addition to fruit, potatoes and various grains were also grown. Dairy farms were established, the soil of the cutover being particularly suited for growing grass and clover. Banks in Washburn and Ashland provided special loans to farmers to buy cows, to be paid off from the proceeds of the sale of dairy products. In fact, dairying was becoming an important

sector in Wisconsin's booming agricultural economy. Beef cattle, goats, and sheep were also raised, the two of these being particularly useful for clearing the land of unwanted vegetation. A sheep raising industry was promoted as a way to stabilize the farming business and improve the land, but was never developed by the farmers.

The Great War years, 1915 to 1919, were the high point of agricultural settlement in the cutover region. Increased foreign and domestic demand for foodstuffs raised agricultural prices and the value of land, making it profitable to farm the marginal cutover lands. The state continued its support of cutover agriculture, conducting a farmers' school in the new buildings at the Ashland junction experimental station and sponsoring meetings and picnics for farmers of the region. But the post-war years brought a severe agricultural depression that exposed the fragile and marginal character of farming on the cutover lands. Farms that had been prosperous for many years were reduced to subsistence operations, while those which had never advanced beyond that level suffered abject poverty. The consequences of the betrayal of the expectation that the cutover could be transmuted by farmer alchemists from a wasteland into an agriculture paradise were to be felt throughout the region for many years.