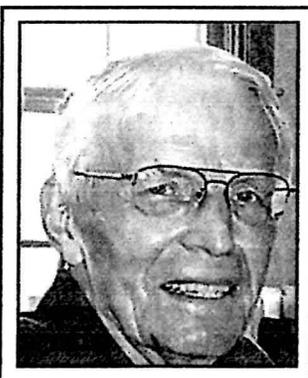


Washburn during the Great Depression: Farming the cutover P332 7

CJ 12/2/10

During the 1930s Wisconsin farmers continued to suffer from the agricultural depression that began after the Great War. The prices farmers received for their products and the value of their farms declined, while they had to pay more for the items they purchased. Given the marginal character of agriculture in the cutover, Bayfield County farmers were generally as bad, if not worse off, than Wisconsin farmers as a whole.



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

In 1933, about two-thirds of farm income in Bayfield County came from livestock and livestock products, and about one-third from crops, principally fruit. While blueberries growing on the barrens were harvested and shipped, strawberries were the most important fruit crop, with thousands of crates shipped each summer. In 1935, for example, 47,701 crates of strawberries were shipped by the Bayfield County Fruit Growers Association, followed by 8,236 crates of raspberries and 327 crates of other fruits. Shipments were made on refrigerated rail cars or trucks, which made it possible to market berries over a broad geographic region, as far south as Chicago. Indeed, in 1934 the Times reported that "New York City had a taste of Bayfield County's luscious red raspberries" when 850 crates arrived there 48 hours after leaving Bayfield, but there were apparently no further shipments there

even though they were "found . . . so good that a clamour went up for more."

Other crops included potatoes, peas, hay and grains, while livestock products included milk, and cattle, hogs, and sheep. Poultry and eggs were produced in two large hatcheries, Swanson Brothers, just north of the city, and Shindler's Restwood Farm, in the Town of Bayview. Nature was not always kind to the farmers, however, the lingering drought of the first few years of the decade, causing considerable hardship, while ruining most of the strawberry crop in 1936. In some years grasshoppers infested many farms, stripping the green foliage off plants, trees, and bushes to satisfy their voracious appetites. Land clearing continued with the encouragement of the county agricultural committee in an effort to increase the number of cultivated acres per farm, thereby providing

more economic security for farm families (in 1939 the average farm had 22 acres under cultivation). The county purchased two "land clearing tractors" that moved from farm to farm, pulling stumps and leveling fields. Farmers apparently continued to use explosives, however, with the usual disastrous results, two being killed while blasting stumps with dynamite.

However individual farmers may have been impacted by the depression, the agriculture community in Bayfield County was prosperous enough to participate in a broad range of programs and events. For the men, there was the annual Farm Field Days, usually held in the winter at the College of Agriculture experimental station at Ashland Junction, with speakers on a wide range of agricultural topics and problems. Farm Institutes were also occasionally held throughout the county, under the auspices of the College of Agriculture extension service. For the women, there were Homemakers' Clubs, supported by the extension workers from the Department of Home Economics of the College of Agriculture. In February 1933 there were 38 clubs, with 600 members in Bayfield County. Their principal focus appears to have been clothing, which as one speaker stated, was the most important need, after food, for a "man for his existence During

the times when money is scarce, to be well dressed and have a well dressed family is a serious problem for mothers." The clubs met frequently to exchange information and ideas about designing, sewing, altering, and mending clothes, and held an annual "achievement day" to display their handiwork. "Rural drama," another program supported by the College of Agriculture, encouraged the Homemakers' Clubs and other women's organizations to put on short dramatic performances, such as "In Doubt About Daisy," "The Butter and Egg Woman," "Mother's Old Home," "Company Cake," and "Man Proposes." The various groups presented their plays at a local preliminary contest, from which a few were selected by judges for an annual county drama festival, at which one play was chosen to be performed at the annual Farm and Home Week in Madison. For the young people, there were 4-H Clubs, of which there were 28 with 433 members in the county, in November 1939. Projects undertaken by club members included farm animal and poultry raising, sewing, handicrafts, thrift, baking and canning, and home beautification. Frequent "demonstration rallies" and achievement programs were held at which participants could display the results of their work on these and other projects.