

## SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND RECIPROcity

Farm families raised most of what they needed to get by except for such items as baking powder, coffee, sugar, and, rice. Wheat was milled for flour, corn for cornmeal. Vegetables were eaten fresh or canned for winter. Sheep, pigs, and, steer were slaughtered, the meat sometimes shared with a relative or neighbor who would then reciprocate. Even the poorest



families had chickens that yielded eggs and meat for frying and stewing. Cows were kept for milk and butter. Orchards produced fruit. Pumpkin, berry, and watermelon patches enlivened the seasons. Fruit was eaten in season and preserved in sugar for the winter. Potatoes, turnips, and apples were stored in root cellars. Syrup came from nearby maple groves, and molasses was sold by the gallon by farmers with sorghum mills.

Fuel for cooking and heating came from the timberlands and enough had to be cut to last the winter. The forest also provided lumber for building materials, handles for tools, pegs, latches, and fences. Hunting, fishing, and foraging provided entertainment as well as food, adding possum, raccoon, rabbit, quail, ducks, geese, fish, hickory nuts, walnuts, and pecans to the table. Many medicines came from the woods: ginseng, sassafras to “thin the blood,” and roots and leaves for poultices and infusions. Water from mineral springs such as those at Saratoga provided a tonic. Men often belonged to hunting circles, selling the pelts to the Chicago market for additional cash income.

A system of reciprocity existed among those who participated in co-operative activities with neighboring farms. Such activities as corn husking, barn raising, and hog butchering were



often hosted by one neighbor who also provided an expansive communal dinner. Only one other form of activity required more formalized systems of swap work and coordination of labor than hog butchering and that was wheat threshing. Threshing was often done in July, when a group of farmers would go in together to hire the thresher and cooperate in the labor.

SALUTATIONS TO THE LAND:  
TRANSITIONS FROM AGRI-CULTURE TO AGRI-BUSINESS

From the days of colonial America to the watershed year of 1933, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Agricultural Adjustment Act in an attempt to relieve the economic distress of owner-operated farms, there was a gradual change in approach and attitude toward our farmlands—the nation’s heartland. The agrarian philosophy of stewardship for the land shifted to a philosophy based on efficiency, commerce, and productivity.

The Agrarian Tradition corresponded to the Jeffersonian ideal of the “independent yeoman farmer.” It blended two traditions: farming-as-a-way-of-life, emphasizing the intrinsic goodness of dealing with the land, and farming as a contributor to the development of responsible citizens through the encouragement of social virtue, economic prosperity and democracy. Agriculture, the nation’s basic industry, reflected America in microcosm.

The Efficiency Tradition, also known as the entrepreneurial tradition, corresponded to the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps success of stories of Horatio Alger. Farming was an occupation that was instrumentally good. Land was a resource to be gainfully and efficiently employed to promote the best future for oneself and the nation.

These intertwining traditions each expressed something of the American experience and the nation. Gradually, the efficiency tradition dominated as new methods of industry and increased modernization resulted in a transformation of farming and rural life.

## A FARMER'S YEAR



A normal farming year was fairly predictable with specific crops coming at specific times. The Sadorus family still made maple syrup, so the maple trees would be tapped in February. Lambs and calves began to be born in early spring, and if a farmer raised sheep, he would shear them around February. Plowing would begin as soon as the ground could be worked in late

March, then disking and harrowing. Oats should be in the ground before April 15, and corn in by late April or early May.

Then came the first hay cutting and wheat threshing, followed in July by harvesting the oats and a second cutting of hay. If a farm specialized in dairy, some of the corn and hay would be turned into silage. Squeezed between the small grain harvest, farmers would till the corn, “busting the middles” of each row with a single shovel plow that threw the dirt around the emerging corn stalks. Meanwhile, the large house garden would have been planted, with small fruits and vegetables harvested and preserved as they came in.

Mid- to late-August the crop cycle paused. This was the period of county fairs, when farmers displayed their finest crops, livestock, needlework, and preserves. Corn harvest began in September and, in early October, winter wheat would be sown. Labor demands from early May through late September were intense, and all hands—men, women, and children—pitched in. During the winter month, farmers took care of the livestock, cut firewood, and did maintenance.

Dr. Jane Adams, Associate Professor of History, Southern Illinois University

## HARVESTING



The cradle used for harvesting wheat had a blade with 'fingers' longer than a man's arm. Hitting the wheat piled it up in the cradle. It was then bundled by gathering it under the arm and tying a wheat stem tight below the heads. The bundles were gathered together to make a shock by holding six bundles and pulling the heads together. Finally, a broken bundle was placed over the stack to make a waterproof cap. Each shock contained thirty to forty pounds of hay.

By the turn of the century, mechanical binders were widely used. Binders cut down on the labor required to cut and shock the wheat, but considerable horsepower was required. Commonly, four horses were needed to pull a binder. One person drove the team of horses (later a tractor was used). Another rode the binder to stack the bundles as they came out. Two or three men made the shocks. If there were not enough family members to perform the work hired labor was used.

## THRESHING

About three weeks after harvesting, threshing began. Often, neighboring farmers hired a thresher together and cooperated in the labor. The wheat was pitched off the shock and onto the wagon and hauled to the thresher. There it was put on the thresher's platform for the machine to separate the grain from the stalks. It took about twelve bundle wagons to keep the thresher busy, so it made sense to share the cost of hiring one thresher to serve several farmers.

The threshing machine required considerable skill to run and maintain, so the owner of a rig needed help hauling water for the boiler and tending the engine. Threshing could take

two weeks. Most farmers stored the wheat in a granary until spring to get the best price. Some left the straw in a pile, but others had it baled by someone who owned a baler.

### MAPLE SUGARING TIME

A grove of sugar maples on the Sadorus farm provided the family with the opportunity to produce maple syrup for their personal use. Maple syrup is most often made from the sap of sugar maple trees (*Acer saccharum*), also known as hard maples. Nights with below-freezing temperatures followed by a rapid-warming trend from early to mid-morning the next day will usually result in a good sap run. Maples were tapped by boring into the tree using a carpenter's brace and wood bit. Evenly spaced holes were bored around the tree trunk, with the number of



holes depending on the diameter of the tree. The tapholes were slanted slightly to allow the sap to run out. Tapered wood spiles or spouts were inserted into the tapholes to allow the sap to move from the tree into a pail hung under the spile. Once the sap was gathered it was boiled down in a kettle or large flat bottom pan over a wood fire to remove the excess water. About thirty-five to fifty gallons of sugar maple sap are needed to produce one gallon of syrup. In the early days, kettles for boiling sap were suspended over fires built in the open. Later, a crude shack or lean-to in the woods was used to protect the syrup from foreign objects and weather.