

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

"Farmer's Accounts Give Glimpse of 19th Century Life"

Carroll County Times article for 22 April 2012

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Spring for the farmers of nineteenth-century Carroll County meant work from dawn until dusk – hours behind a horse-drawn plow, other preparations for planting, followed by sowing of seed. John Diehl Bowman (1812-1900) was a Middleburg farmer whose account books, letters, diary, and other ephemera are part of the Historical Society's collection of manuscripts. The material offers fascinating, detailed glimpses of farm life.

Bowman, it seems, was a compulsive list-keeper. His compulsion certainly helps researchers today, but you wonder what his family felt about someone who recorded exactly how much lumber came out of one maple tree – documenting limb by limb as it was sawn! He also left a record of what had been served for breakfast, dinner and supper to those working for him. The menu usually featured what was in season like “punkin, turnips, & sweet ‘tatoes,” or “cabbage & ‘tatoes,” or “old sausage, turnips & ‘tatoes.” Most of it doesn't sound very appetizing, but to hungry workers, it may have been quite satisfactory.

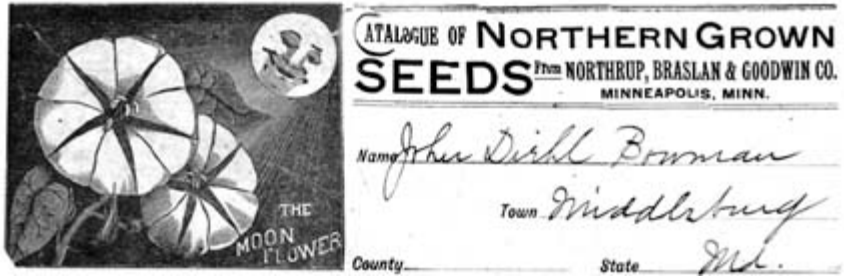
Among his myriad lists, Bowman recorded all the fields where he planted corn each year from 1829 until 1867. He also kept a “Memorandum of Fruit Trees” from 1866 through 1881, naming every variety he purchased for his extensive orchard along with the name of the nursery and the local agent who handled the order. In 1878, for example, he bought peach, apple, apricot, and nectarine trees. One of the apple varieties was “Rome Beauty” which is still widely grown today. One of the peach varieties was called “Stump the World.”

From various accounts, we know what he was paying for work done on his farm. In 1850, he gave \$3.00 to someone for six days of loading dung and \$1.50 for three additional days of spreading it. During March and May 1856, Joseph Baker was helping pitch and stack straw, clean wheat, split wood, thresh oats and plant corn. An account with Benjamin Ecker for the same year shows \$1.00 paid to hire four horses for a day and another \$0.625 to hire a driver. One day's use of a windmill cost 50 cents.

In 1858, Bowman charged his neighbor John W. Angel 50 cents to feed Angel's hired boy five meals while the boy was plowing his corn field. The charge for a day's use of a wagon was 75 cents. In 1832, two and a half days of mowing cost \$1.25 and a day of shucking corn netted someone only 50 cents.

Bowman recorded all this information in very small script on every scrap of paper which came his way, leaving you with the impression that he was not only compulsive, but extremely frugal! Nevertheless, his notes reveal so much about the operation of his farm – what it cost for hiring help, horses, and wagons plus what he actually received when he sold his produce. In 1831, his butter brought \$0.15 a pound and eggs brought 8 cents a dozen.

Among other things, Bowman's diary for June-July 1863 notes the arrival of the Army of the Potomac in his Middleburg neighborhood and the subsequent battle at Gettysburg.



A scrap of paper from an undated seed catalog belonging to John Diehl Bowman of Middleburg. There is much to be learned about 19th century farming from the records of Bowman and his father, Samuel (1783-1838). Collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.
Return to "Carroll Yesteryears" 2012 Index*