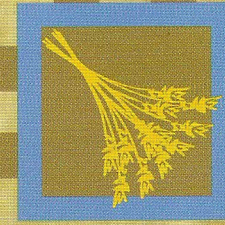
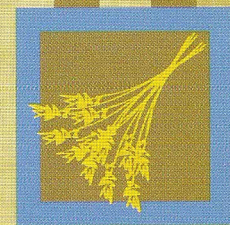
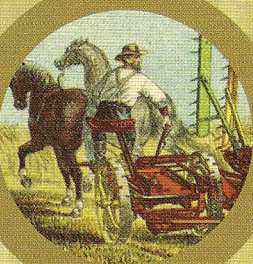
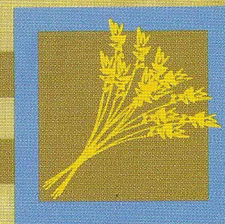
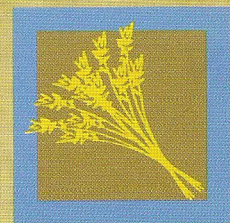


Dethroning King Wheat

by Jerry Apps



Following statehood in 1848, thousands of people poured into Wisconsin. Many of them were farmers who came from New England, especially upstate New York, where the soil had become depleted and crop production had diminished. Thousands of immigrants—Germans, Norwegians, Poles, Belgians, English, Irish, and Swedes, to mention a few, were represented. The majority of these European newcomers were German, and most wanted land and the opportunity for a new life in this new state.

The Yankees (those from upstate New York and New England) preceded the immigrant groups and set the pace for the kind of agriculture that would take place. Many of them arrived before statehood, in the 1830s and early 1840s. Their choice—wheat growing. Wheat requires relatively fertile soils, and the newly cleared land was nutrient rich. Much of southern and northwestern Wisconsin was either wooded or a combination of prairie land and woodlands. The ring of the ax could be heard day after day as these settlers cleared the land. With their teams of oxen, settlers toted the trees—those not needed for cabins and other modest farmstead buildings—into huge piles and set them ablaze. The smell of burning wood drifted across the countryside.



With the trees removed, teams of oxen pulled massive breaking plows across the land, turning the rich soil, burying the sometimes hip high and higher blue-stem grasses, cutting through brush and tree roots, and leaving behind brown ribbons of sweet-smelling virgin soil.

With ample rains and freshly plowed land, southern, central and northeast Wisconsin wheat farming flourished. As wheat production acres expanded and yields increased, the price for wheat advanced as well. The 1860 Census of agriculture, based on the 1859 wheat harvest, ranked Wisconsin third among all wheat-growing states. After the 1860 harvest, Wisconsin advanced to second place ahead of Indiana but still behind Illinois. In 1869, Wisconsin produced twenty-five million bushels of wheat, the largest amount ever.

But then havoc struck the wheat growers. Production per acre steadily declined from twenty-five and more bushels an acre to as little as five or six. Farmers knew little of fertilization, crop rotation, and other techniques for maintaining soil fertility. A rust disease attacked the crop and reduced yields. Finally, and in some ways most devastating of all, a cinch bug attacked the plant, sucking out its juices and further reducing yields and killing the plants.

Even though thousands of wheat farmers didn't believe or accept what was happening to them, the dethroning of King Wheat was near. Many of the New York farmers who moved to Wisconsin had known about dairy cows and dairy farmers in their home state. In the late 1800s, New York was the leading dairy state in the nation. John J. Smith had moved to Sheboygan Falls from New York in the summer of 1844. His brother Hiram Smith arrived in 1847. They, of course, grew wheat. But they apparently had an inkling as to what might happen to King Wheat. By 1858, they were milking cows and making cheese from the milk of their cows as well as from their neighbors' cows. In those days, most farmers had but a cow or two or three that huddled under a primitive lean-to in winter providing milk during a few months in summer.

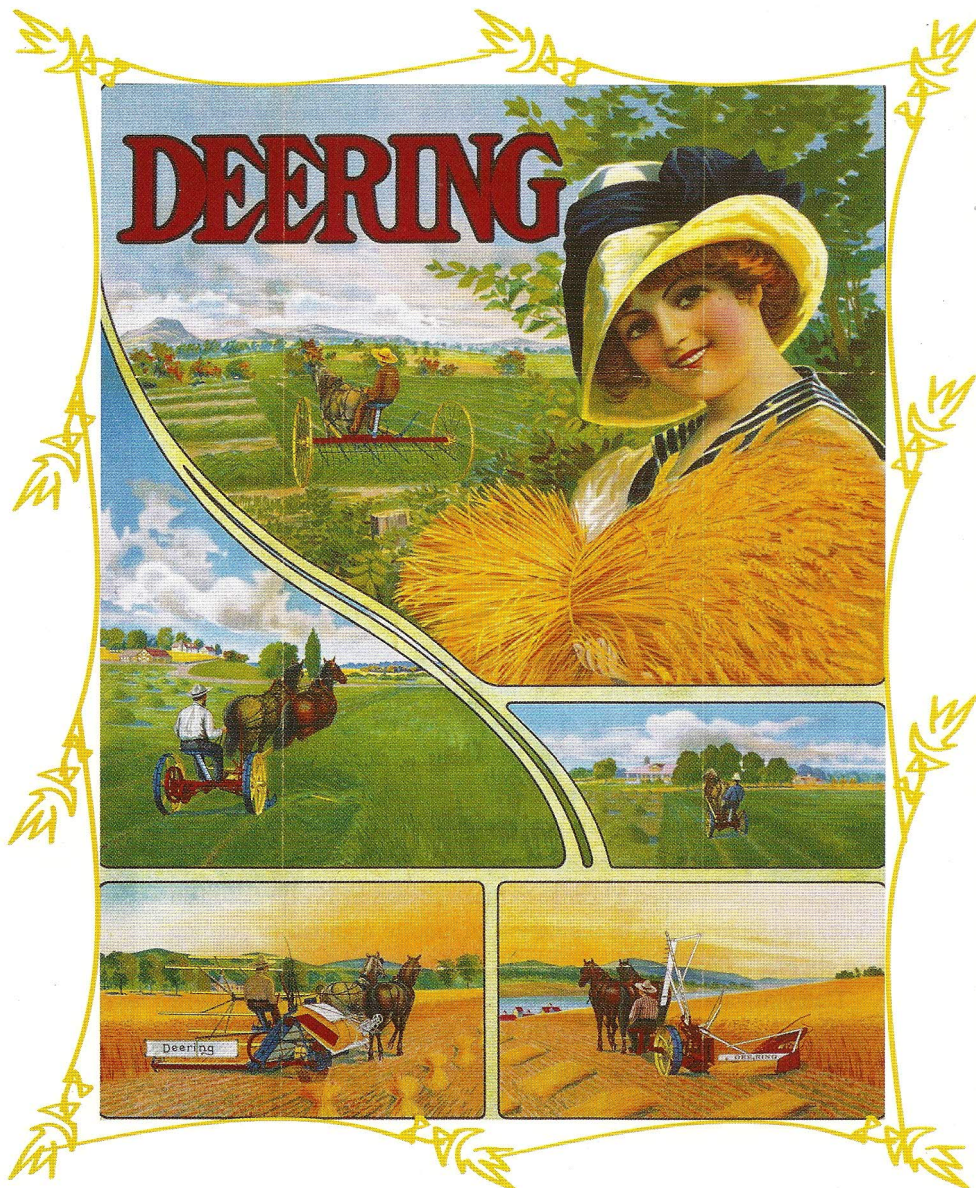
Chester Hazen, another former New Yorker, started a large cheese factory near Ladoga in Fond du Lac County. By 1870, the Hazen cheese factory was producing nearly 200,000 pounds of cheese, from the milk of some one thousand area farmers. These and other former New York dairymen served as community models for those farmers whose future in wheat growing grew increasingly bleak.

Many wheat growers had difficulty switching to

dairy farming. They couldn't wrap their minds around it. In the mid-to late 1800s, taking care of cows, including milking them, churning butter, and making cheese, was women's work. No upstanding, macho man would be caught dead milking one of those smelly cows that survived back of the horse barn with meager care.

Former New Yorker William Dempster Hoard can be given major credit for convincing wheat farmers to milk cows. As founder of *Hoard's Dairyman* magazine, he wrote extensively about dairy cattle management. He advocated improved feeding, advanced breeding strategies, building adequate barns, and later, promoting silos and the feeding of silage.

Slowly the shift from wheat growing to dairy farming and cheese making occurred. In 1870, Wisconsin had ninety cheese factories. In 1905, the number had increased to 1,518 and in 1922, the number reached 2,807.



Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-4432



Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-1806

The shift from wheat growing to dairy farming and cheese making occurred slowly. Many wheat growers were reluctant to switch to dairy farming because in the mid- to late 1800s, taking care of cows, including milking, churning butter, and making cheese, was women's work. Former New Yorker William Dempster, the editor of *Hoard's Dairyman*, played a big role in convincing wheat farmers to become dairy farmers. Today dairy farming and cheese making are still notable agricultural pursuits in the state. And as Hoard said, "Queen Cow dethroned King Wheat."

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-23279

The University of Wisconsin-Madison opened a twelve-week Dairy School for cheese and butter makers in 1890, and by 1891, seventy students were enrolled. In 1897, the university erected a model dairy, to serve as a teaching facility for students of agriculture and a research center for studies in dairy cattle nutrition and animal health.

In the early 1900s, southern and eastern Wisconsin counties boasted the highest dairy cattle numbers and most cheese factories. For instance, by 1905, Sheboygan County had 120 cheese factories and produced 11.6 million pounds of cheese. Other counties in the region with more than fifty cheese factories included Green, Dodge, Outagamie, Fond du Lac, Kewaunee, Shawano, Marathon, Calumet, and Clark. In 1910, Wisconsin pushed New York aside as the leading cheese-producing state in the nation. That honor has remained with Wisconsin ever since.

Producing quality cheese became a concern. Early on, Wisconsin nearly lost its foreign markets when some unscrupulous cheese makers shipped bad cheese to Europe. Starting in 1916, Wisconsin cheese makers needed a license to make cheese. In 1921, Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to require mandatory grading of cheese.

Dairying and cheese making continue as Wisconsin's most notable agricultural pursuits. In 2008, Wisconsin produced about 2.25 billion pounds of cheese, with more than three hundred types of cheese represented. Mozzarella is the most popular variety with cheddar cheese second.

As Hoard often said, "Queen Cow dethroned King Wheat." How true it was, but it wasn't easy and didn't happen quickly.

