

A Walk thru History

County Farming: After The Lumber Was Gone

Hard Work and Determination Change a Forest into Farmland

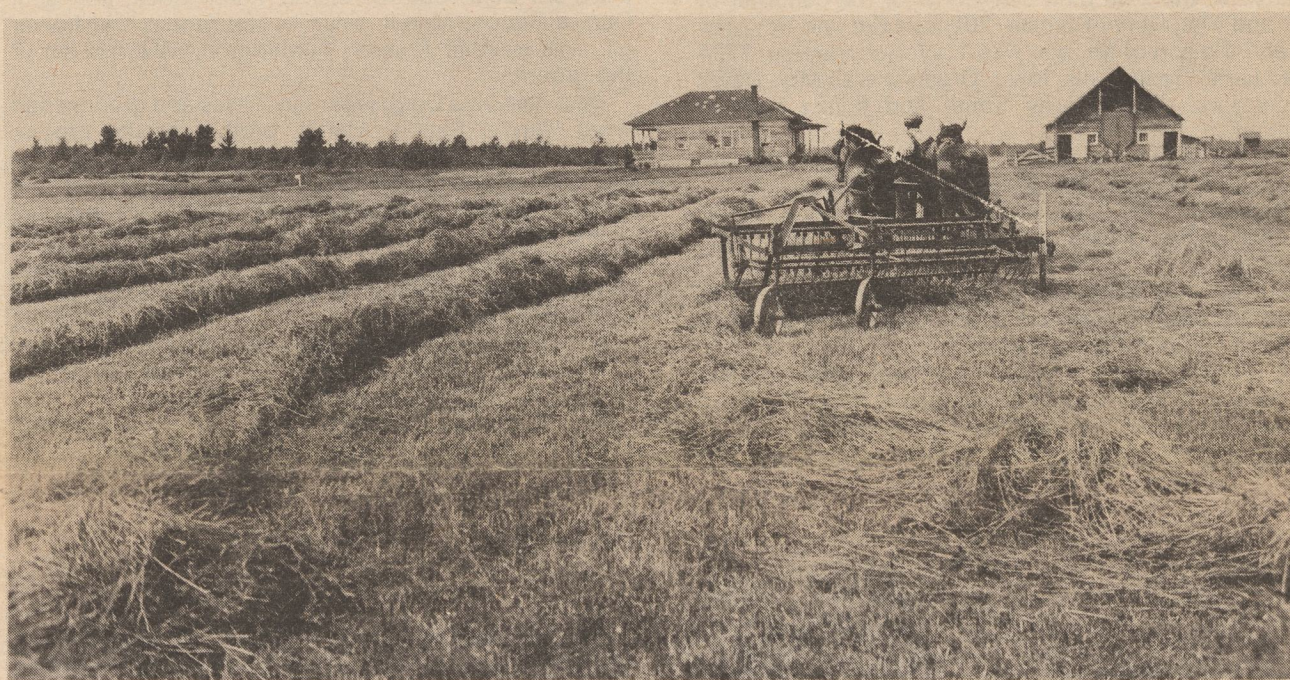
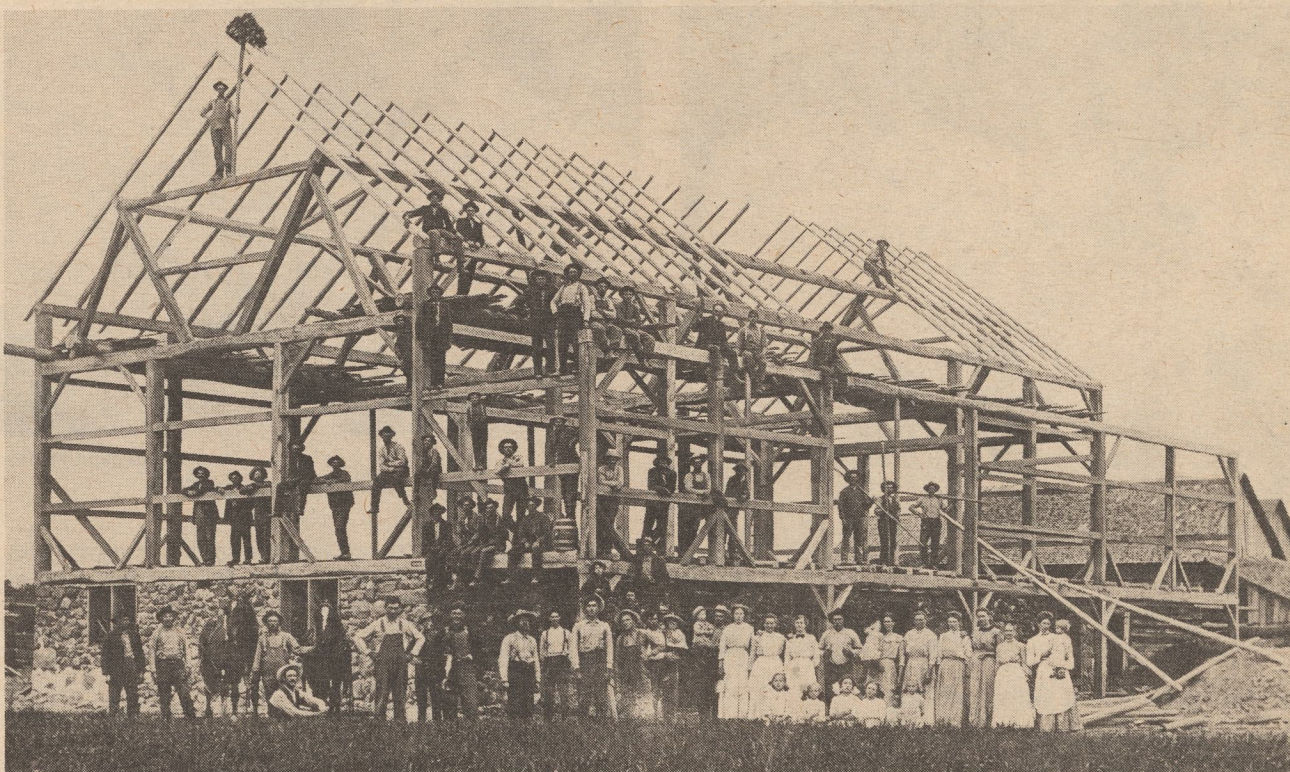
Nobody ever said that farming in Lincoln County was going to be easy. Wisconsin's geography was formed by the glaciers that covered most of the state millions of years ago, and the refuse deposited here by those massive sheets of ice is not the best for farming. The terminal moraine deposited by the glaciers is comprised mostly of sand, clay, gravel and boulders, and covers much of the county.

The pine forests that drew the lumber industry to Merrill are another factor that make this area less desirable than others for farming. The Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey, Bulletin No. 1, says that the real estate left behind after the forests were cleared is "the type of land least desirable for farming." When you consider the work involved in clearing the land of the stumps left by the loggers, and the relatively short (125 to 135 day) growing season, you have to wonder how farming ever got a foothold in the area.

An article in the August 6, 1921, issue of the Merrill Daily Herald quotes the remembrances of Fred Smith, who, with his twin brother, was the first white boy born in Lincoln County. "Early farms included the one owned by A.C. Norway near where I. Malsin operated an excelsior plant, on the bank of the Wisconsin River," Smith reminisced. "William Averill, Sr., had a farm on the bank of the Wisconsin which is now part of the Parrott farm. Thomas Mathews had a farm near Lake Pesobic, and George Strowbridge where Anson, Gilkey & Hurd's sash and door plant now is. West of the trading post conducted by Frank White and along the banks of the Wisconsin a man named Stevens had made a clearing and had farmed. Later the mill company used the clearing for a horse pasture. It was the Indians' favorite camping ground when they passed through Merrill to get their government allotment at Wausau."

For many immigrant farmers, it was their best opportunity. Perhaps they never expected it to be easy. They went ahead, a day at a time, and cleared the land, planted crops, and brought in the dairy cattle. The 1900 census shows 924 farms with 98,933 acres under tillage, and by 1920 there were 1586 farms totaling 162,677 acres. The total value of dairy products produced in Lincoln County in 1920 was \$925,074, with the average annual production of the area's cows at 426 gallons of milk.

The 1980 Wisconsin Blue Book shows 650 farms in Lincoln County in 1979, with a total of 142,800 acres. County Agricultural Agent Bob Kaiser reports a total of 317 dairy herds in 1982, with most of them (70%) Grade B producers. Grade B milk is for cheese and related dairy products. There were 11,600 cows at that count, with a total production of 139,200,000 pounds of milk.



That works out to about 1,395 gallons per cow, which is an indicator of just how much milk production has improved in the past 60 years. The total value of dairy products produced in the county in 1981 was \$17,809,000.

It took the basic industriousness that farmers everywhere share, plus a big dose of determination to make farming succeed in Lincoln County. Farmers had to work hard to make it, as if farmers anywhere had an easy time. The photos on this page are a reminder of the pioneers who paved the way. FN



(Pictured, from top). A barn raising. A project like this involved all the relatives and neighbors that a farmer could muster. Below that, a picture of local farmers raking hay. "You've got to make hay while the sun shines," advises the saying, and you make it sometimes when it doesn't. At left, a threshing crew in a photo loaned by Harvey Storm. In the photo below, a group shot at a Lincoln County family gathering. Photo donated by Mrs. Alfred Kloss. FN

