Essay on the History of Pennsylvania Agriculture and Rural Life

To accompany the *Bibliography of Pennsylvania's Agriculture and Rural Life, 1820-1945*, the Libraries developed an essay on the general history of agriculture in Pennsylvania. This essay was completed in 1997.

Since colonial times Pennsylvania has been a national leader in agriculture. Although much of the land is mountainous, Pennsylvania has many valleys well suited to farming. Considered the "bread basket of the nation," Pennsylvania was foremost among the colonies and states in the production of food, and its farmers dominated much of the economic and political life of the late 17th and 18th century. Fertile soils and extensive forests were the natural resources that William Penn discovered when he arrived in Pennsylvania in 1682. Penn found "the land good ... the fields white for the harvest," and a multitude of native fruits and vegetation being cultivated by Delaware Indians.

Since the earliest settlements, farming and the agrarian life continued to evolve as Germans, Scotch-Irish and English immigrated to the rich soils of Pennsylvania -- bringing their agricultural heritage with them. Also among some of the first immigrants to Pennsylvania were the Amish, fleeing religious persecution in their homeland of Germany. These Amish, although of Swiss origin, came from Rhineland-Pfalz and Baden, or the Palatinate, in Germany and comprised part of the larger migration of Palatine Germans which included the Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, and members of such church groups as Lutherans, Reformed and Catholics. Since Philadelphia provided the first port of entry for most of the Amish immigrants, Pennsylvania became the principle area of Amish settlement. As the Amish reestablished themselves in Pennsylvania from the Old World, they perpetuated their agricultural tradition. Farming was not only used to continue their Old World doctrines and way of life, but it also provided stability to their New World existence and environment.

Many of the farming methods that the Amish brought to Pennsylvania proved to be more progressive than those of contemporary American farmers, thus Amish farmers assumed prominent roles in certain areas of Pennsylvania's early agricultural development. The Amish promoted an organized system of crop rotation (corn, oats or barley, wheat, and buckwheat or corn again) which greatly enhanced crop productivity and improved the quality and fertility of the ground. They also popularized the use of barnyard manure to fertilize worn-out fields, devised a system to irrigate fields and meadows, and were among the leaders in the development of horticulture -- cultivation of vegetable gardens and fruit orchards.

The Amish are also credited with such agricultural improvements as providing permanent housing for livestock, fodder, and equipment to protect them from the weather; designing the Swisser (or Sweitzer) bank barn (found predominantly in Lancaster County); and developing the Conestoga wagon for long-distance transportation.

Mechanized and specialized farming became prominent in the early 1800s in Pennsylvania and in other states, and by the 19th and early 20th century, the state's agricultural economy had

dramatically changed from its roots in the 18th century and ultimately changed the future of Amish farming. The technological revolution that swept agriculture after the Civil War which introduced science, new sources of farm power and fundamental changes in the nature of Pennsylvania agriculture directly threatened the beliefs and practices of the Amish. It was during this time that the Amish communities began to assume an intentionally independent path, resisting science and technology to retain their agrarian customs and practices in an effort to preserve their own identity.

The Amish remained true to their agricultural lore provided by the Bible and their superstitious traditions, especially ones that guided the planting and harvest seasons. Astrological information, such as the "rising, setting, places and Eclipses of the Sun and Moon" as well as "the geocentric places and aspects of the planets and fixed stars" were the agricultural law for the Amish, and some non-Amish farmers as well. Weather signs and the influence of the heavenly bodies offered more natural and therefore more reliable guides for proper and productive farming.

Many Amish also perpetuated the ancient German folklore, proverbs and superstitions by planting grains in the waxing of the moon to prevent rotting and setting hens on an odd number of eggs during the sign of Leo. Other Amish, and even Pennsylvania German farmers, followed such practices of hanging hex signs and/or cutting a triangle in the lintel of their barns to protect the livestock from witches and other evil spirits.

By the late 19th century, the production of feed crops -- such as corn, oats, rye, barley, alfalfa, and hay -- and cash crops -- such as wheat, tobacco, flax and hemp -- became important Pennsylvania agricultural industries along with dairying. Livestock farming also became a dominant industry of this time period. In 1936 livestock and livestock products accounted for seventy-two percent of the cash income of Pennsylvania farmers while field crops accounted for twenty-eight percent.

Farming and agricultural-based industries in Pennsylvania continue to prosper to this day including food processing the highly productive dairy and poultry industries that serve urban areas. Pennsylvania is home to over 2300 food processing firms including Heinz, Kraft, Kellogg, Quaker Oats, Nabisco, Pillsbury, Pepperidge Farm, Keebler, Stroehmann, Borden, Welch's, Mrs. Paul's, Tyson, Old Original Bookbinder's, Hanover Foods, Lucky Leaf and Musselman's. As one of the candy capitals of the country, Pennsylvania can claim companies such as Hershey, M & M Mars, Whitman and Wilbur.

Concurrent with the prosperous evolution of agriculture-based industries in Pennsylvania during the late 19th century, came the founding of institutions and agencies for the discovery and dissemination of agricultural knowledge. Organizations such as the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, the State Agricultural Society, the State Board of Agriculture and the Grange provided much needed educational activities and forums for Pennsylvania farmers. Farm journals also began to flourish as a means to disseminate information on improved methods of farming. The Farmers' Cabinet (Philadelphia, 1836- 1848), the [Pennsylvania] Farm Journal (1851- 1857), the Pennsylvania Farmer and Gardener (Philadelphia, 1859-1864), Practical

Farmer (Philadelphia, 1863- 1922), the Farmers' Friend and Grange Advocate (Mechanicsburg, 1874-1902), the Pennsylvania Grange News (Chambersburg and Harrisburg, 1904- 1979), the National Stockman and Farmer (Pittsburgh, 1877-1928) and the Pennsylvania Farmer (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, 1912-to date) were (and are) among the most valuable of farm journals published in the state.

The State Board of Agriculture -- which was established in 1876 primarily to enforce State laws relating to agriculture -- became an important educational agency in the state. By the late 1870's farmer's institutes and "movable" schools of agriculture began to appear as a corps of speakers traveled continuously across the state giving instruction in the specialized fields of dairying, poultry or fruit growing.

By 1855, the state founded its first agricultural college: the Farmers' High School. Located in the fertile valley of central Pennsylvania, the Farmers' High School, now Penn State University, awarded the nation's first baccalaureate degrees in the agricultural science in 1861. In 1862, the Morrill Land Grant Act enabled the school to expand its mission by offering instruction in agriculture and other utilitarian subjects at a cost affordable to people of average means and the school was renamed the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania. By 1863, Pennsylvania's General Assembly had designated the school the Commonwealth's sole land grant institution. In 1874 the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania was renamed the Pennsylvania State College, and in 1953 it became the Pennsylvania State University.

The Agricultural Library at Penn State has served as the only major research center for agricultural literature and related materials for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania since its beginnings. The Agricultural Library was formed as a result of the Hatch Act of 1887, which provided federal funds to establish an agricultural experiment station in each state. Experiment stations were required to publish research bulletins and progress reports, to establish an exchange program with other states, and to make their findings available to the public. Thus each experiment station was bound to create or contribute to a library. Exchange of these early publications at Penn State continued for many years and played a significant role in establishing one of the larger collections of historically significant agricultural materials in the nation.

In 1902, the first library endowment of any kind at Penn State-- and the first endowment to purchase books on agricultural subjects for the Agricultural Library -- was established by George Blight, a member of the Penn State Board of Trustees from 1867-1869. Over the past ninety-one years, the George Blight Agricultural Library Fund has supported the acquisition of valuable additions to the University Libraries' agricultural collection and continues to be used to purchase books in this subject area.

Holdings at the University Libraries include early American agricultural periodicals on agrarian life, and rich historical information found in monographic form on country life, domestic economy, history of agricultural education, farm life, farm buildings, rural schools, rural church, and social life and customs. Also included are fragile early Penn State University masters' theses and doctoral dissertations on such subjects as the history of agriculture, agricultural education and the impact of agricultural technology on society. This collection of materials is a crucial

historical resource for research and scholarship nationwide and supports faculty research and the graduate and undergraduate history and agricultural programs at the University.

The importance of these collections for the study of the history and rural life of Pennsylvania is evident in the complex topics which can be researched through these materials, such as societal shift and cultural change from family farming to agribusiness; historical changes in the domestic consumption of food and agricultural products; and the modernization of farm life. Whether academic scholar, researcher, historian or practical farmer, there is a wealth of information to be tapped from this collection.

The scholarly value of the agricultural literature found in the collections at Penn State and other Pennsylvania repositories is evidenced by the following publications, which drew upon the rich primary resources at Penn State: *Pennsylvania Agriculture and County Life, 1640-1840*, by Stevenson W. Fletcher, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission), 1950; *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1840-1940*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission), 1955; *The College of Agriculture at Penn State, A Tradition of Excellence*, by Michael Bezilla, (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press), 1987; *Community in Rural America*, by Kenneth P. Wilkinson, (New York, Greenwood Press), 1991; *Farm Women in the United States, an Updated Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography*, by Susan Bentley and Carolyn E. Sachs, (University Park, Pa., Center for Rural Women), 1984; *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change*, by Sally McMurry, (New York, Oxford University Press), 1988; *Cultural Geography of the United States*, by Wilbur Zelinsky, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall), 1992; *Pennsylvania's Changing Labor Force: Women and Their Families: a Background Report for the Governor's Conference on Responses to Workforce 2000*, by Gretchen T. Cornwell, (University Park, Pa., Population Issues Research Center), 1990.