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Cultivation of Hops in the Schoharie Valley

Gerry Stoner

Hops was a major crop throughout the lower (northern) end of the Schoharie Valley in the eighteenth century. The industry declined as more productive lands were opened to the west and it was decimated by the “noble experiment” (Prohibition) in January 1919. Mary Bowers’s article reprinted here specifically relates to the Town of Seward, but it also describes hop farming that occurred in any of the lower Schoharie towns. The [Knickerbocker News](#) article describes the music played at the end of hop harvests at that same period of time.

Hops farming in the valley made a resurgence with the repeal of the 18th Amendment in December of 1933, but commercial cultivation of hops faded completely in the 1950s. For this later period, we offer the .pdf file of a Schoharie County Historical Review article by [William Pindar](#) called “Hops in Schoharie County.” An excellent recent article by Mark Simonson for the *Daily Star* of June 27, 2009 provides an overview of hops production in Middleburgh and is available on the [Daily Star](#) site.

Hop Growing in the Town of Seward

Mary S. Bowers, Town Historian

The production of hops in Schoharie County was a major industry for many years. The N.Y. State Gazetteer (1860) gives the agricultural production of hops, as reported by State Census of 1855, as 440,754 pounds in Schoharie County.

As I am concerned mainly with the town of Seward, the agricultural statistics from census of 1865 of that township was 224,542 pounds of hops harvested during 1864. Nearby Sharon produced 234,596 pounds for that same year. Both towns were the largest producers in the county at that time.

The market was favorable and buyers plentiful. The climate and soil conditions seem to be well suited for hop raising. The fertile valleys and even hillsides were ideal.

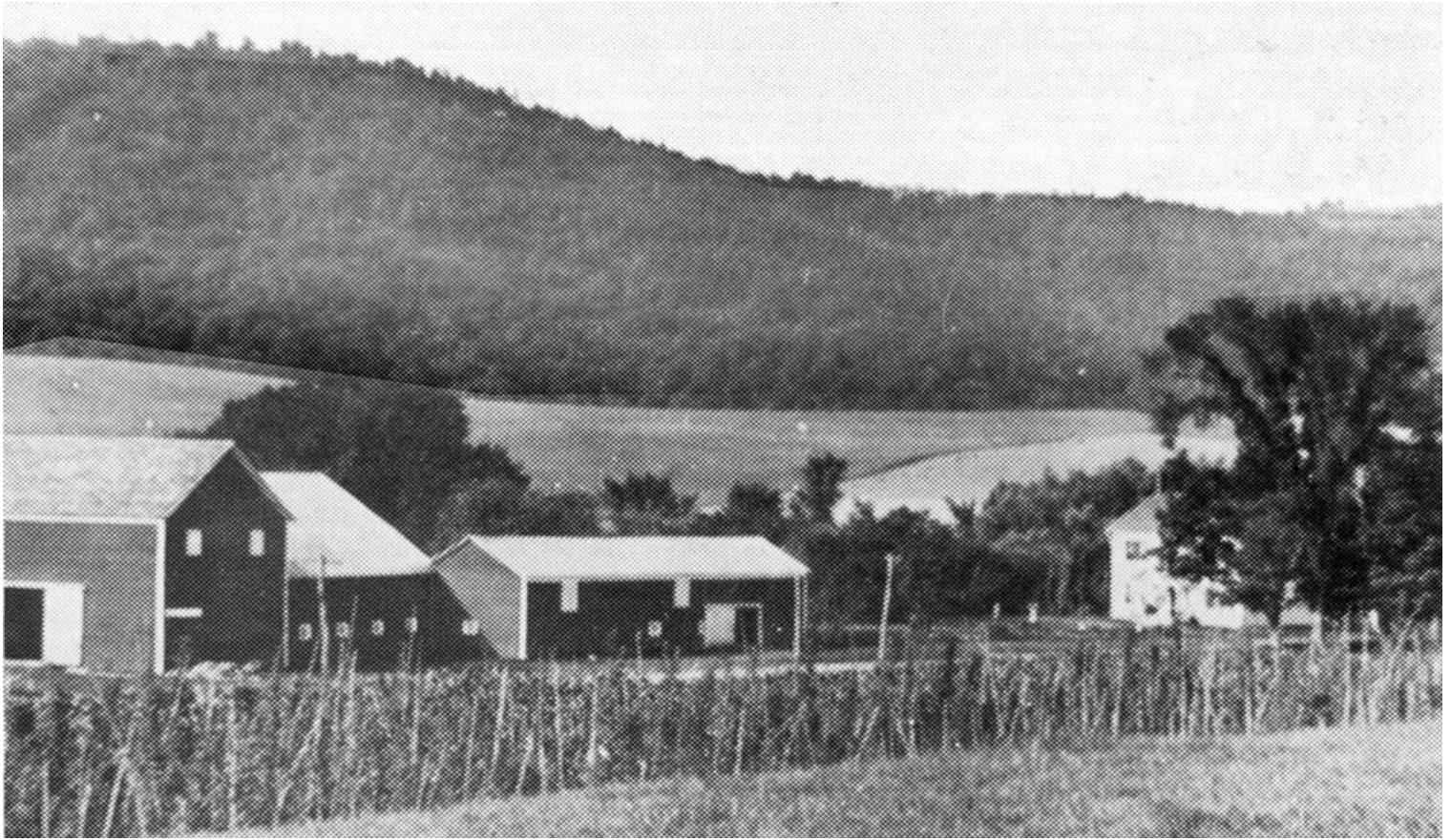
While so many were engaged in this business that it would be difficult to enumerate each grower, but a few would be the Hynds farm in Hynds ville; Wm. J. Dunckel of the Clove, who was the first to introduce hop raising in this area; Patries. and Handys of Bush Street Road; Fance, Fraats and Hynds of Seward; Hagadorn, Esmay, Devenpeck, France of Dorloo; Sternberg, Frederick and Rowley of Gardnersville; and many more.



Hop Picking, Alonzo Hynes Farm, Seward, 1910. Photo courtesy of the Schoharie County Historical Review.

The culture of hops varied little throughout Schoharie County. Much of the equipment was made by hand. In those days “The Organization that helps farmers help themselves” was unknown. The farmer had to rely on self judgement, know the productiveness of the soil, be his own weatherman, take a gamble on the results of the harvest, and most important of all, when and to whom to make the sale. He didn’t receive monthly checks for his produce, but only once a year did he get the much needed cash. Hops were his chief source of income, along with minor industries such as dairying, sheep raising, apples and other minor produce.

The hop yards ranged from small fields of an acre or more to larger farms where several acres were cultivated. Nearly all farms, large or small, had a hop house, a good size one story building used for curing and storing of hops and housing of hop equipment as well as other farm machinery.



The Hynes Farm, Hyndsville, 1910. Photo courtesy of the Schoharie County Historical Review.

Hop Culture

Suppose we start with a newly planted yard. Plants or cuttings were obtained from runners of established plants. As these runners spread quite rapidly over the ground, a new yard was easily and inexpensively started from old roots. In spring the “sets” were planted in hills, each hill about six feet apart, in rows of some distance, enough space to allow a horse to get through for plowing and cultivating. The first year, poles were not required. The poles were mainly cedar, and usually shipped in flat cars by railroad.

In an established yard, poles were set in March or April, then plowed between the rows, grubbed and cultivated. By May or June the task of hop tying began. This job employed a number of people, both men and women. In tying hops, the vines were tied to the pole about two feet above the ground and trained east to west around the pole. About six or seven feet from the ground a nail was driven into the pole and hop twine tied to it. This twine came in large balls and was made of heavy, firm, yet smooth twisted material. It called for great skill to carry the twine from pole to pole and only men who were experts were allowed to do this job. A fourteen foot pole was used, called a “twining pole,” with an extension down one side, screw eyes at bottom, top and end of extension, through which the twine was threaded. The ball of twine was carried in a pail by the man or “twiner” and with this pole, the twine was wound around the top of pole and carried down to next pole opposite. This process was repeated throughout the entire yard.

All this work had to be completed by June or first part of July, for then the “haying” season began.

As the season advanced and hops became heavy on poles and twine, great damage was often caused by hail and wind storms.

Preparation for Harvest

Preparing for the hop harvest involved a great deal of extra labor. The hop house had to be cleared of non-essentials, kiln cloth replaced if needed, hop boxes and tents repaired, hop sacks mended, new ones added if necessary. The “pickers” and “box tenders” engaged for the season. Many of the local people were hired from year to year, they usually boarded themselves while the “city pickers” remained at the farm during the harvest.

The Cherry Valley branch train played an important part in transporting hop pickers from distant places to the various railroad towns where they were met by the farmer by whom employed.

The house wife’s task was not an easy one. Huge quantities of food had to be prepared well in advance. (I have often heard my Aunt relate these words “we were all summer getting ready for hop picking.”)

As freezers of any kind were unknown in those early days—meat had to be preserved by an entirely different method. Perhaps in later years the “ice box” was used but this was small compared to the amount of food that was required. Much of the meats used were of salted variety, salt pork, corned beef, dried smoked beef and smoked hams, carefully stored. Later, fresh meats, veal, beef, mutton were placed in the ice house wrapped in a clean cloth, then in a bran sack and placed between cakes of ice and covered with sawdust.

Jars of preserves, pickles, relishes, large quantities of fried cakes, cookies and cakes that would remain fresh, such as fruit and applesauce cakes, were made in advance. When the harvest began, fresh cakes and pies were baked almost daily. The large swing shelves, tables, and screened cupboards in the cellar were about the only way of keeping fresh foods from day to day.

Extra sleeping quarters were needed, while houses were large in those days and bedrooms not a few, yet often an attic was converted into sleeping quarters or extra rooms over a woodshed or workshop were used. All these extra beds called for many bed linens and blankets, all of these made ready for use.



Hop Picking, Patrie Farm, Janesville, about 1895. Photo courtesy of the Schoharie County Historical Review.

Harvest Time

The hop harvest usually began the last of August or fore part of September and lasted well into September and often into October, depending on size of yards and if a heavy yield of hops. As the hops reached maturity, the blossoms were examined. They had to be firm, rounded and when the hop was broken open, emit a strong pungent odor from the golden yellow pollen inside. This was an indication that the harvest was at hand.

No doubt many a farmer had often made the remark "we begin picking next week." The pickers were notified and within a day or so were ready to begin work. Local help was often transported to and from the yard by his employer with a hay-rigging or perhaps an old band wagon. Work began about seven in the morning. At that time of year mornings were usually cool and heavy dew called for extra wraps and an ample supply of gloves, as vines remained wet for some time. When pickers arrived at fields, the hop boxes were in place. A box was about 8' x 4' and divided into four sections or single boxes. Each box 24" deep. At each corner were heavy wooden handles about 2' long, placed between two heavy pieces of wood nailed to box. These were used to carry boxes from one setting to another. Sometimes a muslin tent was attached to box to protect from sun or sudden light shower. In center of the ends of box was an upright to which the tent, when used, was fastened and on which the "lug" pole was placed through large holes. This lug pole was used to rest the pole of hops on while pickers stripped the hops from vines into the box. Each full box in the yard had its own setting. This set consisted of at least 16 hills. When all hops were picked in the set, the box was then carried into a new setting. Each "tender" cared for one box (consisting of the 4 singles). He cut the vines above the ground with a heavy knife and with a jack, pulled the heavy poles. A strap hung from one shoulder and fastened to iron clamp which gripped the pole tightly. The pole of hops was carried to the box, resting the end of pole on the lug pole. Pickers were instructed to "pick clean"—no vines and no large leaves and to clean up hops which had fallen to the ground. When a pole of hops had been picked and the picker was ready for more, the familiar cry of "Hops-Hops" was audible. The tender supplied a new pole of hops and stripped the vines from the one already picked. A box of hops when full was 24" high. Great care was used not to jar the box, causing hops to settle. The looser the hops could be kept, the more the picker could be credited with picking. When a box was full, the call "Sack-a-box" was heard and the tender scooped the hops with his arms into a huge sack, held firmly by the picker. The sacks picked up later with the hay wagon were tied at end and laid aside, to be carried to the hop house.

An average picker could pick 4 or 5 boxes a day. Some more, all depending on condition of hops. The price per box was from 50–60 cents for those boarding themselves, those receiving board and lodging with the farmer received 40–50 cents.

The wearing apparel for women usually consisted of old clothing, large brim straw hats or cloth sunbonnets and heavy cotton "hop gloves." Often long stockings were attached to gloves and drawn up over the dress sleeve. Kerchiefs too were used around the neck. One had at all times to protect ones face, neck and arms from the rough, prickly vines. Bugs and worms were numerous and kerchiefs helped to protect neck from these.

Mothers often brought smaller children with them. Too small to pick in a box, they were given a basket or bucket to help mother fill her box and rewarded with a few cents per basket.

By now, everyone was ready for lunch. Those boarding themselves usually ate in the shade of hop box or under a nearby tree, and what appetites one had at this time! If the odor of hops could possibly have an effect on ones abnormal appetite I never really knew.

Pleasant times were enjoyed along with the long hours of work. Visiting among themselves, or the singing of familiar songs, the men discussing the coming election, or perhaps making plans for the coming event the "Cobleskill Fair." At that time the Fair was held much later than today. Often extending a few days into October.

Among other things less important but always associated with hop picking was the "kissing loop." It was a loop

formed by a vine turning, making a perfect loop and twining around itself again. Whoever of the male sex found a vine of this type, would cut this portion from the main vine and run desperately in search of some fair maiden, and as the name implies, through the loop bestow a kiss or two upon the chosen one.

Doubtless many who were familiar with hops, surely remember the little “hop merchant.” It was a little rough looking cocoon, attached to a vine or leaf by a thread-like portion of what appeared to be the head, later emerging into a not too handsome butterfly. Down the back were two rows of metallic like dots, about five in each row. These dots had the appearance of either bright gold or silver. As the old saying was “if gold”—hops would bring a very good price that year—but “if silver”—the indication that a much lower price was to be expected.

Quitting time was usually five o’clock. If a box wasn’t quite full or only a few inches in box, they were measured with a yard stick and the number of boxes picked that day, plus the remaining inches were recorded in a book by employer.

The large hay wagon and team picked up the sacks of hops and took them to the hop house where they were hauled (by pulley) to upper floor, emptied and spread out evenly on floor of the kiln. This room was large. The floor was made of heavy slats spaced about two inches apart and covered with an open mesh cloth known as “kiln cloth.” This allowed the heat from furnace below to dry the hops that night. The furnace room was the size of the kiln above, the walls of which were plastered to retain the heat. Inside the furnace were iron pockets for the brimstone, as well as three or four iron kettles suspended from the ceiling. Heated horse shoes were placed in these to melt the brimstone. The fumes from the brimstone produced a yellowish color that hops required in the drying process.

Curing or drying the hops was a very important job. The man in charge usually slept in the hop-house as the furnace had to be kept fired until about three o’clock in the morning after which a slower fire was needed. Once during the night the hops had to be turned. The next day when thoroughly dry, they were scooped up with an open frame shovel with kiln cloth fastened to the frame. Then with a wooden scraper the remaining hops were scraped up, and lastly, the pollen and core were swept from the kiln, all thrown into an adjoining room until time for baling.



John S. Huitt’s Hop Warehouse #6, Cobleskill. Destroyed by fire, March 1919, Loss \$50,000.

Photo by L. H. Martin, courtesy of the Schoharie County Historical Review.

Social Life

Hop picking was a round of good times as well as hard work. An annual event looked forward to by so many, the “city pickers” who remained at the farm for the season, as well as local pickers. Young and old joined in the many pleasant activities.

The first two verses of H. H. Johnson’s poem written Sept. 1883, entitled “Hop-Picking” tells of the anticipated good times awaiting them.

“Hop picking is coming!” the boys shout in glee.
 “What jolly good times we are going to see!
 “We’ll meet all the girls we have met years before!
 “And we’ll have all those jolly times over once more!”

“Hop picking is coming!” the girls smiling say.
 “We’ve been looking ahead for many a day
 to the dances we’ll have, and the jokes and the fun,
 We’ll enjoy it so well when hop-picking’s begun!”

The evenings were spent in singing, parties, outdoor chicken roasts, visiting among the older people, and dancing was very popular. Dances were held in a barn or hop house, perhaps not too smooth a floor, but for the ever popular square dance it served its purpose. Usually some local fiddler and caller was available in the neighborhood. Saturday night was a night in town. Dances were held in nearby hotels or perhaps a town hall. The local stores were well patronized on such nights as well as on rainy days.

The roving photographer played a most important role. His photos are still to be found in many homes, usually well preserved. They told a story of hop picking. Pictures were either taken of the pickers in groups by the hop boxes or assembled in the yard or on a porch of the farm house.

Harvest Over

For many, the hop harvest ended all too soon. New friends had been made, old acquaintances renewed, often a romance started at hop time, but another year of work and gaiety was eagerly looked forward to. So it was “good-bye” for now—but to the farmer and wife it was not quite over. Again I must quote the last two verses of H. H. Johnson’s poem “Hop-Picking,” which might have well described the situation:

Hop-picking is over! Thank God it is done!
 Hop-picking is over! Thank God it is done!
 If ever man wishes himself dead, I’m that one!
 They have tumbled my house from the cellar to dome,
 Till it looks more like bedlam than it does like a home!
 Thus the hop-grower groans as he looks o’er his place
 With despair in his heart and a frown on his face;
 And he thanks all his stars, yes each separate sphere,
 That hop-picking comes only once in a year.”
 (Hyndsville, Sept. 20, 1883. H. H. J.)

About the next step, and I dare say the most important decision to make, was the sale of hops. It was almost always a gamble. Hops have brought anywhere from the very low price of 4¢ per pound to the once fabulous price of \$1.00 per pound. A news item of October 1892 reads as follows “Few sale of hops about here, 18– 21¢. Can’t buy any more at those prices, buyers will have to bid higher. There was a train of 23 loaded cars left the depot a few days ago. Longest train ever left this depot so says Mr. G. France.”

In the early nineties hops did bring \$1.00 per pound but this all time high price was of short duration. At these prices

farmers were able to make progress, even “lay up” for future security. They had dreams, hopes and of course a desire for a higher standard of living. They plowed up more land and started new yards thinking these fancy prices would continue.

A few lines from H. T. Dana’s poem, “The hop growers Song” portrays the excitement caused by these unusual prices:

We must plow up the meadow—the wheat field the same,
And the raising of hops must now be our game,
For the wealth of the Indies will become our reward,
And we’ll praise our good luck, and give thanks to the Lord.

The sale of hops depended largely on quality, proper curing and even distribution through the bale. Often they were sold on the vine but more often after baling and in some instances sales were not made until the following year.

The dried hops which had been thrown into huge piles in the storage room were scooped up and thrown through an opening in the floor into the press below. The press had already been lined with hop baling. Two men stamped the hops firmly until the press was full, after the press was removed the bales were sewed on one side with hop twine, threaded through a heavy, curved steel needle. When the hops had been sold they were hauled to the railroad station and shipped in freight cars to distant breweries.

In the fall the yards had to be cleaned up, dead vines burned, equipment stored and hop poles carefully stacked. Before the ground was frozen, barnyard manure was applied on each hill. This was the only fertilizer used and it also served as winter protection.

Blue Mold

The hop industry which had been the chief source of livelihood for several generations was beginning to decline. In the early 1900s the downward trend began. Unfavorable weather conditions and the uncertainties of the hop market forced farmers gradually to seek other ways for farm produce. A disease known as “blue mold” was slowly taking its toll. The excellent quality of hops of former years was disappearing—disease caused hops to be reduced in size, discolored and mold appearing on both hops and leaves.

About 1912 hops were bringing 40 cents for best grades and 30¢ for poorer grades. Already some of the old yards were beginning to be plowed up, but many who had been thinking of going out of the hop raising business had decided to hold on and see what the season developed and a continuation of a fair price. Newly set yards continued to be cultivated however, in hopes of no serious recurrence of the devastating blue mold. But to start new yards was much a gamble that many were gradually going out of business and fields plowed up and used for other crops. A spray of sulphur was used at first, with little success. This was expensive and required extra labor.

Gradually hop raising gave way to the dairy industry. About 1910, Sheffield Farms began the erection of creameries in Seward, Hyndsville, and other nearby localities. This afforded farmers a good market for their products. The dairy industry has expanded greatly over the years and as a result one today finds large fields of corn and alfalfa where once was hops. Excellent herds of Holstein and Guernsey cattle are to be found on nearly every farm. There are also the fine farm organizations willing and able to assist farmers with the many problems confronting them today.

Driving through the countryside we find many of the old hop houses, some well preserved and put to good use—others either demolished or left to fall in and decay.

The hop poles, no longer needed, were used for fence posts, especially cedar, or burned for fire wood. After all the years since hops were no longer grown, one can still find a vine growing along a stone wall producing some fine hops.

In fact, in my back yard is a hill from one of these old roots, each year bearing a fine specimen of “English Clusters.” This year I am hoping for a “bumper crop” about the fore part of September. The vines have already (in May) been tied, and trained with the sun.

We might even brew a cup of hop tea!

This article was originally published in the Schoharie County Historical Review of Spring, 1965.

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March 15, 2010

