

The Hop Industry (1886)

The following article is excerpted from Amos O. Osborn's History of Sangerfield, written in 1886.

In 1821, Benjamin Wimble, an Englishman, planted the first hop yard in Sangerfield on land of Jotham Tower, in the west part of Waterville. The enterprise in this town was wholly due to the fact that, with trifling cost, the swamp could supply the poles and the distilleries the fertilizers. It was then believed that the business, all other things being favorable, could not profitably be carried on without abundantly enriching the soil. And these were the causes that in after years, placed the town so much in advance of all its neighbors in hop growing. Mr. Wimble's yard consisted of only four acres. The vines were planted six feet apart and four poles were set in each hill. The cultivation was excellent. The poles were lined across the whole field, and the curve at the top of each, turning outwardly for the double purpose of letting the sun to the hills and shading the space between, presented an attractive appearance and was a general curiosity at the time. Wimble did not succeed in the business. At first it was very promising, but he had borrowed the capital, and low prices following in two or three years it proved disastrous. His success, however, in making a large crop had been complete. The yield was very large and favorably remembered. In 1834 Gurdon Avery of Hamilton, Madison county, bought land near the village of Marshall, and again began the cultivation. He had considerably increased his acreage, when Charles D. Palmer began another yard and continued setting out until he had twenty acres. The business was so successful-such large yields-in one case 3,900 pounds on an acre, that it grew rapidly, until most of the farms around the village and the swamp had hop fields in cultivation. It was thought when the distilleries ceased running the business would no longer be profitable, but it remained remunerative, small yields being better than any other kind of business, and it was now undertaken with the view of manuring from the farm alone, and some of our richest hop growers have made their money without other sources of fertilization. There is no enterprise among farmers depending so much for productions as upon good cultivation, nor in a season of low prices is there any so completely dependent upon mere luck for profit. A very large yield of well cured hops is often worse than no yield, and a very large yield with the price greater than ever known before will be equally bad without judgment to realize it. Growers with every element of good management in ordinary farming are at such times often the prey of extreme indecision and are morally powerless to act in any direction. These instances are repeated year after year with no improvement. Sangerfield is full of such cases. I have known a hop grower with 12,000 pounds decline to sell until he could get a dollar a pound, then refuse a dollar and six cents and finally after the opportunity was lost, chase the price down till it reached 20 cents, then frantically catch it better than nothing. Another with 10,000 pounds has refused to sell at 60 cents, preferring to wait until the "p'ise was on the p'int of turning," fancying that he had always done so and succeeded, and find himself, when the season had passed with his hops on hand and no demand for them. One grower in town always sells when they are ready for market, "because he can not sleep until they are sold." Another, with five successive crops on hand has never had the moral power to part with them at any price. Another, after being in the business three years, disgusted with the results, has sold out to a neighbor and that neighbor has cleared enough from the same hop yard the first year to pay the whole cost of land, poles and tillage. The dealers in the town have, as rule, been very fortunate, though mere temporary speculators often have not been. One instance in 1882 was an important exception, the speculator clearing \$60,000. But another quite as notable was the loss of \$30,000. From this small four acre yield of Benjamin Wimble, in 1822, the

business has increased until the present time, when nearly every farm in town has its hop yard. This industry has given rise to another quite new and of marked character and success - the hop extract business - which as yet is confined to this village. The lupuline of the hop, which is its valuable product or principle, if left in the strobile and stored, in any way yet known, rapidly loses its strength, and in two or three years becomes nearly worthless. This process chemically extracts this element, reducing the weight to a twelfth of the pressed hops, and is preserved in cans pure for an indefinite time.

New experiences in hop growing are annually arising and upon them depend extremes never before known or anticipated. This is the case the current year, when the entire crop of the state is quite destroyed by the hop aphid, or some disease that depends upon the presence of this insect or is its constant attendant. Two varieties of the hop, the "Palmer seedling" and "Humphrey" having a wide cultivation in this country, have been originated by Waterville cultivators, one by Charles D. Palmer, and the other by Mrs. Humphrey. The Palmer is a very early tho' not a very productive variety, and the Humphrey is a late but more vigorous and prolific one. Both are popular for special objects.

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