

# A FICKLE INDUSTRY

## The Ups and Downs of Those Producing Hops

### FEW MADE RICH; MANY POOR

#### Prices Have Ranged from Five Cents to a Dollar; Acreage Fourth What It Was Once

The hop harvest in those towns of Madison county that still stick to the industry, although greatly diminished as compared with years in the past, is now on. Throughout the villages of the hop section the rattle of hop wagons at the peep of day is now heard; the hobo is in evidence on all sides, hop "digs" are thicker than "dime socials" in the rural districts during the winter months, and throughout the centrally located towns of the county, the energy of every grower as well as that of his family and all other available help is bent in securing within as little time and in the best condition possible his crop of hops.

The yield this season will be the lightest in many years and probably will not average more than 500 pounds to the acre, as against an average yield of seven or eight hundred that is ordinarily picked. However, the quality is said to be first rate and as most of the crop is on the top of the poles the picking is good.

It requires seven bushels to fill the standard box. Although consisting of seven bushels of green hops, a box of hops after being dried shrinks up to only twelve pounds. Pickers are paid from 30 to 35 cents per box with board and 50 cents when the pickers work near home and board themselves. Pole pullers, or box lenders, receive \$1.25 per day and board, and \$1.75 when they board themselves. A home picker will earn anywhere from a dollar to \$2.50 per day, depending upon the "picking" and the nimbleness of the picker. Years ago, when nearly every farmer in and around the village raised hops and it was considered the proper thing for

ent conditions the cost of production must be very near the fifteen cent mark. While the period of the birth of the hop industry in this county is not known for a certainty, it is generally conceded that hops were grown on Madison county farms as long ago as 70 years, and probably at an earlier date. Owing to the rapid fluctuations of the market, the liability of the crop at different stages of development to damage or complete ruin from vermin and unfavorable weather conditions, to say nothing of the large amount of money tied up in the crop, the industry is and always has been a most hazardous one. In a single year prices have been known to jump from five to thirty cents a pound and vice versa. Crops of prime quality harvested within the past twenty-five years and for which some growers were offered thirty, forty or even a higher price per pound, were sold a few months later at five or ten cents per pound, and in some instances were finally used for horse bedding.

Few if any of those growers who made a practice of holding their crop for higher prices and after it was ready for market ever profited from the custom (or their experience either for that matter), while on the other hand scores of at one time well-to-do farmers have been ruined through hanging on to their crop for more money.

A few years since it was not at all uncommon to find growers of this class, who hoarded their growths of two, three and even five years, stored away in their kilns, in the vain hope that the market might take an upward spurt and an opportunity be afforded to secure as much or more than was offered at the time of the harvest. Many of these "chronic holders," as they were termed by their neighbors and buyers, are today entirely penniless and will melancholy relate how fifteen, twenty or thirty years ago they "owned the best hop farm in town;" that their crop of hops held over for one season would have, if sold at the right time, paid every cent of their indebtedness and permit them placing one, two, five or perhaps ten or fifteen thousand dollars in the bank. But the crops were held on to with the hope of receiving, a little later, more money and a larger price than had been paid their neighbors; the farm was mortgaged to meet the heavy expenses of producing last season's growth; perhaps the next crop was a failure or prices ruled below cost of production, and maybe, not profiting by one year's experience in holding, the

and which compelled hundreds who had not previously been driven out of the business, to plow up their yards, were the lowest that had ever been experienced. But as a matter of fact away back in 1869-'70 prices fluctuated between 6 and 15 cents per pound during February of the years named. However, between the first and last years referred to hops sold during February of several years within that period for from 25 to 65 cents per pound.

These rapid fluctuations in prices, the reason for which may be attributed to many causes, the heavy expense for growing and harvesting, the speculative features growing out of the uncertainty of prices as well as of yield and the large extent in which many farmers engaged in the business, is what has always made the hop industry a most uncertain and perilous industry, in fact, little less than a curse to the county. While some growers through close calculating and fortunate selling have in the end made money, hundreds have been ruined, and it must be apparent to the careful observer that if the farmers of the hop producing towns of Madison county had never grown a hop but had during all these years followed dairying with the same intelligence and thoroughness as is now manifested there can be no doubt but what they would, on the whole, be better contented, in a better financial condition and show finer farms and better buildings than at present.

Although most growers succeeded in selling their crops of two or three seasons a few years since at from 20 to 30 cents, it is becoming more evident each year that owing to the heavy production on the Pacific coast and manipulated markets, coupled with the fact that fewer hops are now required in the manufacture of a given quantity of beer, the prices ruling for a period of say ten years, forty years ago, are not likely to be duplicated.

In order to show the fluctuations in prices during the years the industry in this county was at its height, we give in the following table the prices of state hops as quoted on the New York market during the middle of February in the years named, taken from Emmett Wells' Hop Circular, being as follows:

1869	6 to 12	1878	5 to 13
1870	20 to 27	1879	7 to 15
1871	8 to 12	1880	27 to 35
1872	25 to 65	1881	15 to 23
1873	40 to 45	1882	17 to 25
1874	30 to 40	1883	80 to 90
1875	33 to 43	1884	16 to 28
1876	12 to 17	1885	12 to 18
1877	10 to 20	1886	5 to 11



Ancient Cobble Stone Hop Kiln Just South of Eaton Village

everybody, from the village belle to the staid old maid, as well as the matrons of the best homes of the town, to get out into the hop yards and hustle for their health (and incidentally for pin money), records of from five to seven boxes picked between sun rise and sun down, were not at all uncommon. However, through the rapid reduction of acreage that has taken place during the past dozen years there are comparatively few hops in this section to harvest and few villagers now engage in the health giving and to many congenial occupation.

Twenty years ago there was scarcely a farm, however small, within a mile or two of the county seat that did not grow from three to thirty acres of hops. At present there is not to exceed half a dozen yards in the same territory and on every hand may be seen neglected hop kilns and mammoth stacks of unused poles—giving silent testimony to a forever departed and at one time rich community's most important and always fascinating industry.

The decline of the hop industry has been equally as marked in every other town in the state's hop producing district and it is safe to say that in Madison county less than 25 per cent of the acreage devoted to that crop twenty or more years ago can be found in hops at present.

The counties making up the hop district and whose soils are peculiarly adapted to the culture of this crop, consists of Otsego, Madison and Schoharie. While some hops are produced in the country around Malone and in one or two towns in Lewis and Chenango counties, the bulk of the famous York state hops have been produced in a belt within the counties first named.

The rapid decline in production has been due to several causes, the principal among which are the low prices that have prevailed during late years and the more sure and easier profits to be derived from dairying.

With a market almost free from old goods, present quotations for hops are not at all encouraging. While there is little or no buying at present, the best offers on contracts do not exceed fifteen cents, and fifteen cent hops at present does not mean as much to the grower as did shilling hops a few years ago. This increase is due to the rapid increase in the cost of labor and in fact everything used by the grower in caring for and harvesting his crop. Fifteen or twenty years ago it was a generally accepted fact that it cost close on to twelve cents to produce a pound of hops. If this calculation is correct, under pres-

grower after being offered a good price for his second crop held that also and in time sold his entire, and at one time valuable holdings, for little or nothing, and—lost his farm.

Such is the uncertainty and risks connected with what until recently was the county's greatest industry. Chapters might be written of the financial wrecks, at one time wealthy and influential farmers, who are now reduced to pauperism, as a result of their years of effort and speculation in the production of hops on a large scale.

Perhaps in no one year were so many growers ruined while others were made rich, only a few of the latter though, as during the memorable season of 1883-84, "the dollar a pound year," when with a big crop the price of hops within a few months jumped from 40 cents to a dollar per pound. Probably the large majority of growers that season received for their crop a price in the neighborhood of 50 cents, while a few lucky ones who let go at the proper time received a dollar, or even better. However, the effect of these phenomenally high prices were in the end ruinous and demoralizing. Some growers in their eager, and true to human nature, craving for a still higher price, and after refusing a dollar or perhaps as high as a dollar ten per pound for a bumper crop that had cost them not more than ten cents per pound to produce, clung to their crop and in time sold all for a dollar or two per bale.

The high prices of that year also bred extravagance: Some growers were induced to mortgage their farms in order to purchase additional land or another farm, the values of which had rapidly advanced in the hop producing sections to from one to two hundred dollars per acre. Suddenly a reaction set in; the following year's crop sold around 16 and 20 cents; the most of the crop two years later went for prices as low as 5 and 10 cents. Then followed a complete failure of the crop—the last straw. Assignments and mortgage foreclosures became numerous, financial ruin was apparent on every hand and not a few suicides and cases of demented growers who recently feeling secure and in easy circumstances, had found themselves within a few short months completely ruined. Others not so hopelessly involved are still struggling along under the heavy burden of a mortgage, assumed through some unfortunate hop transaction or failure to sell their crop at the proper time during that year of unparalleled high prices.

Many growers are inclined to believe that the low prices prevailing for several years in the late 80's and early 90's