

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN

"Give us this day, our daily bread" - Jesus



This wonderful photo showing wheat harvest comes to us through the courtesy of Mrs. Janice Cummings. In my estimation, this was taken back in the 1920's somewhere, perhaps in the Town of Barre. We notice here a self-binder being driven by a man seated at the control levers. Three work horses are hitched together to pull this harvester which cut and mechanically bound up sheaves (bundles) of wheat and tied them with binding twine. In the foreground, we can see a couple of bundles dropped off from a previous swath around the wheat field. Note the fly net on the first horse which fluttered about as the horse moved to keep horse flies from biting the poor beast. As a child growing up on a farm in the late 1940's and early 1950's I can clearly remember such a scene as this. My father thought he was real progressive when he cut the tongue part way off the binder so it would fit the draw bar of the tractor, thus replacing the horse power.

Dumping the bundles off along the way meant work because others had to come along and stand these bundles up into shocks. In time these were pitched onto a wagon and drawn to the barn to await the day of threshing. I recall Howard Bigger with his big Huber tractor and threshing machine always did my dad's threshing.

While all this was hard work, the self-binder for harvesting was a great labor-saving device. Although it was the forerunner of the combine, it was the successor of the reaper which simply cut wheat and dumped it into small piles on the ground, after which someone had to come along and make a bundle out of it by using a few strands of straw to tie it together. The reaper was the successor of the grain cradle and the grain cradle succeeded the sickle, all of which was more work than the reaper.

At this season, we can readily see "amber waves of grain" on the local rural landscape. As we now come into wheat harvest, I think of how important this crop was to our pioneer ancestors in this region. It was so important to these early settlers

they even named places for it. Think about it! Wheatland in Monroe County and Wheatfield in Niagara County. And reapers were perfected and manufactured in Brockport. By the mid-1830's this region was nicknamed "the bread basket of the world" and Rochester was called "the flour city" because of the water power used for milling purposes along the Genesee River. In fact, all our villages and many of our hamlets grew up where there was water power to run mills. Yes, wheat was very important to us and the rest of the country before the mid-west took over grain production. To this day we can still see grain elevators in Buffalo which bespeak of a by-gone era of Great Lakes shipping.

How did this all occur? In 1810 our Governor, DeWitt Clinton rode on horseback up the Ridge Road and was very much impressed with the fertile landscape of the Ontario plain. He was convinced that we needed a canal, which was ultimately begun in 1817 and completed in 1825. Pioneer farmers who previously had no market for their wheat then found a ready route of transportation and consequently the price of wheat went up greatly. DeWitt Clinton was indeed right. For our climate and terrain was far superior to the New England states' climate and terrain for raising wheat. As a result our region flourished, not only in farming and milling, but also other related businesses such as foundrys which produced agriculture equipment. There was even such a foundry at Waterport which produced plows and cultivators. In fact, the "better mouse trap" which was manufactured by two brothers from Kendall, David and Claudius Jones, can perhaps be attributed to wheat production. That's right! Years ago when farmers had wheat stored in bins in barns, it attracted rats and mice. With all the investment of hard work in "bringing in the sheaves," every farmer surely wanted to rid his premises of those dispicable varmints - hence "the better mouse trap." And yes, the world "beat a path to our door."