

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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WHEN SHEEP WERE MOWERS



Before there were gas propelled mowers or human pushed mowers or hand powered sickles or scythes, there were sheep. There were even some breeds of sheep that were bred for their gnawing or gleaning ability. Yes, that's right, they were our lawn mowers of long ago.

Now in the midst of spring, many of us contend with lawn care and the power of the gasoline engine. How serene it must have been in the 19th century as those silent mowers, save for a blat, clipped/and chewed and gnawed their way through the grasses. Although I've heard it said, "The sheep that bleats the most, misses a nip now and then."

I wonder if our predecessors were so demanding to lawn perfection as we seem to be today? Indeed, the gasoline engine has done a lot to change the appearance of our landscapes and the course of history.

When the sheep did the work of mowing for us, it may have been easy to sit back and watch, but when nothing is maintenance free. Sheep had to be sheltered, sheared, fed and fenced. It is perhaps fencing which has changed as much as anything over the years, to affect visually, our Orleans County landscape. If sheep were your mowers you needed a fence. Everybody had fences around their dooryards, barnyards, fields and pastures. Fences, everywhere fences! After all, there were a lot more four-legged animals around years ago. People put up fences to keep their animals in. Now, what fences there are, we're more apt to put up to keep people out.

County native Don Perry says, "Everything is backwards now. It used to be that people ate in the house and went to the toilet outside. Now they eat

outside and go to the toilet in the house." At any rate, I don't think we realize just how many fences there used to be.

There were stick fences, stump fences, stone fences (walls), rail fences, picket fences, board fences, hedge fences, castiron fences, chain link fences, woven wire fences, barbed wire fences and eventually there came electric fences. No doubt a lot of these fences were to keep the mowers where they belonged.

I recently ran across this old picture of two lawn mowers (sheep) which was taken on the Albion Golf Club course at Eagle Harbor around 1905. The photo shows a woven wire fence attached to some rustic fence posts to contain sheep. Here sheep were allowed to roam, keeping the fairways mowed. I believe human power was however, employed behind some kind of mechanized mower for the greens.

The Eagle Harbor Golf course was established in 1898 and was the third organized Golf Club in the United States. It was located on the Eagle Harbor Waterport Road around Otter Creek. It was a six-hole golf course situated on both the east and west sides of the road. According to some, it was a difficult course to play on. I can believe that, as you no doubt had to watch where you were stepping. In 1900 a club house was built on the west side of the road along with a tennis court. This was later run by the Cole family but closed operation around 1940.

Today, parts of this golf course have gone completely back to nature. After all, it's been many, many years since any sheep were empowered to mow the grass.