

Wilmot Historical Society Annual Meeting (2020 & 2021)

Sunday, October 24, 2021

Presentation

Steve Taylor grew up with sheep in Plainfield, New Hampshire and for a time in his youth sheared them by hand at 50 cents/head. He and his family raised sheep in the 1970s and '80s, at one point having a herd of 200 breeding ewes. His wife had a wool business and the farm also sold lambs. In the 1980s the wool market evaporated as fewer and fewer people used it for knitting and less and less clothing was made of wool. The immigrant groups who had demanded fresh lambs gave rise to a generation that was content to buy legs of lamb at the supermarket.

The Taylor farm continued to raise dairy cows until 2018, but now raises only beef cattle. His wife once referred to their family farm as “a 4H experiment gone haywire.”

The sheep boom period, said Taylor, was the only era during which New England farmers made good money. Generally, the region is challenged by a growing season only four or five months long, extreme swings in temperature through the year and a landscape that was 92-95% covered with forest. When European settlers arrived this region – central New Hampshire – was covered largely with hardwood forest and the trees were enormous. We, said Taylor, have no appreciation of how hard it was to clear this land for agriculture.

Land clearance

The land was cleared by a process called “stubbing.” It began with girdling trees, which killed them, whereupon the crowns died, and they lost their leaves. It was then possible to plant crops underneath them. After a few years the trees were dried out enough to burn them where they stood. The entire tree did not burn; the upright charred trunks covered the landscape, giving the process its name. After 15 or 20 years, the roots were rotted enough so that a team of oxen and a chain could pull over the trees and remove them.

By 1800 75% of New Hampshire south of the White Mountains had been cleared for agriculture. It began as subsistence agriculture and evolved into commercial agriculture that included raising grains and livestock.

Provenance of the sheep

In 1809 President Thomas Jefferson appointed William Jarvis as the American ambassador to the Spanish court. Jarvis was from Boston, but had a farm in Wethersfield, Vermont, across the river from Claremont, NH.

In Spain he saw Merino sheep for the first time. They were unlike New England sheep breeds, which were small and produced little wool and were not economically important. Merino sheep were larger and had long, thick wool. Jarvis made arrangements to import Merino sheep to the New World.

Previously, efforts like this had been blocked because European countries refused to allow good stock to be transported to the New World and thereby compete with the products from Old World farms. A form of protectionism.

However, the Iberian peninsula was about to be invaded by Napoleon in 1809 and the Spanish and Portuguese needed money, so they sold sheep. The first shipment was of 15,000 with half going to the New World and half to Great Britain.

The name “merino” means “over the sea” and the breed probably originated in North Africa.

Jarvis got 6,000 sheep transported to New England. He wanted only rams because the most efficient way to increase numbers rapidly was to breed the Merino rams with New England ewes. He had 300 shipped to his Vermont farm. They came ashore at Newburyport, Mass. and were driven overland to Wethersfield, Vt.

Jarvis was careful to put only 15-20 animals on a ship. He did not want to lose a large investment when one ship went down or was raided by pirates/privateers. Later importers were not as wise and lost sheep when they failed to provide enough food and water and shepherds for the trans-Atlantic voyage.

The boom

The economic boom was instantaneous. Taylor compared it to the dot com boom. He used numbers from his own hometown of Plainfield, NH by way of example.

In 1815 there were 1,169 sheep in Plainfield. In 1825 there were over 10,000 sheep in the town.

In the 1820s a breeding ewe cost \$4. This was a time when a day’s wages were less than \$1.

The economic success of sheep farming attracted investors from Boston and New York. This money was used to build wool mills in New England after 1816, which created mill towns. (The next wave of mill building would be *cotton* mills after the Civil War.)

In 1835 a sheep census was done for all towns in New England. There were:

- 465,000 sheep in New Hampshire
- 1.1 million in Vermont
- 3,100 in Andover, NH
- 4,700 in Sutton
- 8,900 in Grafton

Taylor believes that the numbers for Wilmot were misreported or inaccurately recorded because only a few hundred are listed.

To keep their herds separate, sheep owners had to build barriers. But all the trees had been cut down, so there was no wood, and metal fencing had not yet been developed in the early 19th century. Therefore, stone walls were erected, generally 4 feet high.

Challenges

- Growing enough to feed the sheep. Hay had to be harvested with sickles and scythes. All hands were needed to amass enough.
- Timber wolves preyed on the sheep. There was a sustained effort to kill them through shooting, trapping, and burning down their habitat.
- Sheep had parasites and other diseases, including
 - stomach worms. This was treated by pressing tobacco for its juice and then force-feeding it to the sheep.
 - Foot rot was not deadly but debilitating and gave the sheep lesions that made them susceptible to other problems. Tobacco juice was rubbed on the lesions.
 - Ticks may have come over from Europe on the sheep. Brooks were dammed and the water laced with arsenic and the sheep were dipped in the water.
- Malnutrition was a problem because the hay was of poor quality by the end of the summer. It was traditional to start haying on the Monday after the Fourth of July. This is now known to be too late. Up to a third of the nutrition is lost on this schedule. Also, because of the primitive tools used, the hay was harvested continually through the summer, which meant it was mostly lignin by early September. Consequently, sheep died through the winter.

Sheep were traditionally sheared in June and then sent into the uplands to be on pasture. The lowlands were reserved for growing fodder because the soil was better.

The sheds where sheep were kept were very simple.

End of the boom

People who raised sheep made good money until 1837, when several factors brought the boom to an abrupt end.

1. President Andrew Jackson blew up the financial system, causing an economic panic that became a depression.
2. Counterfeit currency made in Canada was rampant in New England. Many merchants would not accept money at its face value, destabilizing the regional economy.
3. The Erie Canal opened in the 1820s and then the railroads expanded into the Midwest and commodities began coming east and undercut New England prices.
4. Australian and Argentine wool imports began.
5. As the industrial revolution progressed, fewer people needed wool clothes. More people worked indoors, where cotton clothing was more comfortable.
6. Perhaps the biggest factor was the exhaustion of upland soils. Farms at higher elevations had to be abandoned, and the land reverted to forest.

Legacies of the sheep boom

Architecture. The money made from sheep was put toward the construction of attractive and substantial residences and public buildings like churches and mills.

All those stone walls. In 1871 there was a national survey of “fences” which included walls. In New England there were more than 250,000 miles of stone walls.

Kevin Gardner of Hopkinton, NH, a stone wall expert, notes that few stone walls are four feet tall anymore because they have sunk into the substrate. Gardner can identify the nationality of the builder by looking at different styles of wall building.

Many stone walls disappeared in the 1920s and ‘30s during the construction of state roads. The walls were repurposed to make the road beds. There was also a government program to dig holes and fill them with the rocks from the walls.

Socio-cultural impact of the boom

At the end of the boom the land began to revert to forest and the population left the region.

Derelict properties in several towns between here and Newport, NH, were purchased by Austin Corbin. He owned the Long Island Railroad and developed Coney Island, NY, but was from Newport. He bought 24,000 acres of land, fenced it off and stocked it with elk, bison, and boar. He was killed when his buggy overturned after a horse was spooked by an opening umbrella, but his son continued the project. The estate was owned by the Rugers until recently.

In 1898 Gov. Frank Rollins started “Old Home Day” in order to try to attract people to abandoned farms and towns with depleted populations.

Many abandoned properties were also bought by summer people.

The wool mills are entirely gone. One of the last to close was Dorr Mill in Guild, NH. The local wool that it sheared from New England sheep today has no commercial value; it is entirely a boutique undertaking.

Notes taken by Bill Chaisson.

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