

HISTORY FROM OHA

Hop to it: Central New York's time as as hops-growing leader

BY KAREN Y. COONEY

Wanted: 500 Hop Pickers wanted at my yard, Monday, September 5th... Positively no children allowed in the yard. — John Greenway

During most of the 1800s, these advertisements ran annually in August and September as Central New York was one of the top growers of hops in the country. Local trains filled with newly hired men and women of all ages, nationalities, and from all walks of life, who traveled to the many area hop yards to help bring in the harvest. In some cases, the hop yards were located far from the nearest train stations. This would necessitate further long, crowded wagon rides to the hop yards. Preparations for the pickers' arrival and subsequent month-long stays were very involved as they all boarded with their employers.

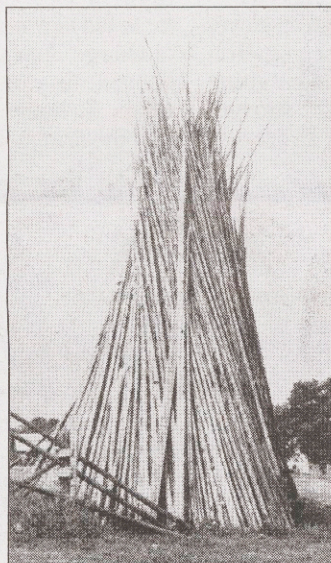
The farmer's wife thoroughly cleaned the farmhouse and *barns* in anticipation of the hop workers' arrival. She took up her best furniture and rugs, put them under temporary lock and key, and replaced them with cots and bedding while also supplying linens and toiletries. Food preparations were massive and extra supplies of tea, coffee, sugar, and baked goods were purchased and produced. It was understood that good food helped to insure that pickers returned year after year.

Central New York was a prime hops growing area due to its location (between 35 and 55 degrees latitude) and the length of the growing day. These vigorous, pleasantly fragrant vines grew as much as 6 inches in one day and required sturdy trellises in order to grow properly. The tiny barbs on the vine, that could grow up to 25 feet in length, adhered themselves to the wires strung between the trellises. Farmers could only use 'female' hop vines and subsequently dedicated their energy during the growing season to evicting any 'male' plants from

the growing field. A mature female hop vine yields cones (a grouping of flowers) containing yellow glands that secrete lupulin. This substance is necessary to make beer foamy, give it its distinctive flavor and help to extend shelf life. The vines usually came to maturation at the end of August or beginning of September. Hops are sensitive and therefore susceptible to grubs, mildew, and pests — making them a difficult crop to manage.

At the onset of the harvest, pickers were arranged in groups of four around a large wooden box divided into quarters. This box was covered by an awning to help protect the workers from the sun. Each box was located in a "set" that is eight rows of hops in each direction. Men known as "box tenders" brought the vines to the pickers and carried away the discarded vines. Workers were required to remove only the cones of flowers from the vines. Both men and women wore gloves as the bristles on the cones caused painful welts. Women covered their forearms with cut-off stockings as added protection. When each worker's box was full, he/she shouted "hop sack" and the yard boss would empty the hops into a sack that was then taken to the kiln for drying. The pickers received a ticket every time they filled their section of the box. The completed tickets would then be submitted at the end of the season for compensation. Workers' picking speeds varied, causing numerous rivalries. An average worker filled two boxes per day with others filling up to eight. Wages were based on the season's yield.

Once the sacks of hops reached the grower's kiln, they were spread out on the slatted floor that was



covered by a large burlap tarp. The farmer then went below, where a large woodstove had been installed. The stovepipe was divided into two pipes that split to frame the room spreading heat below the hops. Brimstone (chunks of unrefined sulphur) was placed on the top of the stove and the resulting fumes bleached the hops. The process generally took from 12 to 16 hours to complete. Once thoroughly dried, the hops were slid into another room where they were baled and then transported to the buyers. These bales were highly flammable and frequent warehouse fires occurred. Today, the dried hops are pressed into pellet shapes and stored in vacuum packages to avoid this hazard.

Although the pickers worked extremely long days from pre-dawn to dusk, evenings were reserved for dancing. The dances were usually held in the employer's barn. This allowed the farmer to better control where and when the pickers socialized while still making sure everyone was rested properly for the next day's work. Occasionally, a more formal affair was

arranged at the local hotel or dancehall, providing the ladies with a more dressed-up occasion. Sundays were reserved for clothes washing and church going.

At the end of the approximately month-long season, workers were transported back to the train stations to return home. Hop picking was unique in that it served to bring people from all walks of life together to work and socialize in a close-knit community for a short period of time. It was viewed as a mostly pleasant change of pace, resulting in many workers returning annually.

Unfortunately, the hops-growing industry in this area disappeared in the early 20th Century due presumably to a mold epidemic and a drop in profits. Major North American hops growers now mostly reside on the West Coast. There has, however, been a recent upsurge in the number of hops growers in Central New York with the interest in micro brews and improvements in growing practices.

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