Toward a Recovery of Nineteenth Century Farming Handbooks

While researching texts written about nineteenth century farming, I found a few authors who published books about the literature of nineteenth century farming, particularly agricultural journals, newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures. These authors often placed the farming literature they were studying into an historical context by discussing the important events in agriculture of the year in which the literature was published (see Demaree, for example). However, while these authors discuss journals, newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures, I could not find much discussion about another important source of farming knowledge: farming handbooks. My goal in this paper is to bring this source into the agricultural literature discussion by connecting three agricultural handbooks from the nineteenth century with nineteenth century agricultural history.

To achieve this goal, I have organized my paper into four main sections, two of which have sub-sections. In the first section, I provide an account of three important events in nineteenth century agricultural history: population and technological changes, the distribution of scientific new knowledge, and farming’s influence on education. In the second section, I discuss three nineteenth century farming handbooks in connection with the important events described in the first section. I end my paper...
“substantial increase in [a farmer’s] ability to earn income” (Danhof 5). This improvement allowed the relations between the rural and urban populations to strengthen, resulting in an increase in trade. The urban population (defined as having over 2,500 inhabitants) in the northern states increased rapidly after 1820. This increase accompanied the decrease in rural populations, as farmers who “preferred trade, transportation, or ‘tinkering’” to the tasks of tending to crops and animals found great opportunities in the city (Danhof 7). Trade and transportation thus began to influence farming life significantly. Before 1820, the rural community accounted for eighty percent of consumption of farmers’ goods (Hurt 127). With the improvements in transportation, twenty-five percent of farmers’ products were sold for commercial gain, and by 1825, farming “became a business rather than a way of life” (128). This business required farmers to specialize their production and caused most farmers to give “less attention to the production of surplus commodities like wheat, tobacco, pork, or beef” (128). The increase in specialization encouraged some farmers to turn to technology to increase their production and capitalize on commercial markets (172).

The technology farmers used around 1820 was developed from three main sources: Europe, coastal Native American tribes in America, and domestic modifications made from the first two sources’ technologies. Through time, technology improved, and while some farmers clung to their time-tested technologies, others were eager to find alternatives to these technologies. These farmers often turned to current developments in Great Britain and received word of their technological improvements through firsthand knowledge by talking with immigrants and travelers. Farmers also began planning and conducting experiments, and although they lacked a truly scientific approach, these farmers engaged
in experiments to obtain results and learn from the results. Agricultural organizations were then formed to “encourage... experimentation, hear reports, observe results, and exchange critical comments” (Danhof 53). Thus, new knowledge was transmitted orally from farmer to farmer, immigrant to farmer, and traveler to farmer, which could result in the miscommunication of this new scientific knowledge. Therefore, developments were made for knowledge to be transmitted and recorded in a more permanent, credible way: by print.

**The Distribution of New Knowledge.** Before 1820 and prior to the new knowledge farmers were creating, farmers who wanted print information about agriculture had their choice of agricultural almanacs and even local newspapers to receive information (Danhof 54). After 1820, however, agricultural writing took more forms than almanacs and newspapers. From 1820 to 1870, agricultural periodicals were responsible for spreading new knowledge among farmers. In his published dissertation *The American Agricultural Press 1819-1860*, Albert Lowther Demaree presents a “description of the general content of [agricultural journals]” (xi). These journals began in 1819 and were written for farmers, with topics devoted to “farming, stock raising, [and] horticulture” (12). The suggested “birthdate” of American agricultural journalism is April 2, 1819 when John S. Skinner published his periodical *American Farmer* in Baltimore. Demaree writes that Skinner’s periodical was the “first continuous, successful agricultural periodical in the United States” and “served as a model for hundreds of journals that succeeded it” (19). In the midst of the development of the journal, farmers began writing handbooks. Not much has been written on the handbooks’ history, aside from the fact that C.M. Saxton & Co. in New York was the major handbook publisher. Despite the lack of
information about handbooks, and as can be seen in my discussion below, these handbooks played a significant role in distributing knowledge among farmers and in educating young farmers, as I now discuss.

Farming’s Influence on Education. One result of the newly circulating print information was the “need for acquiring scientific information upon which could be based a rational technology” that could “be substituted for the current diverse, empirical practices” (Danhof 69). In his 1825 book *Nature and Reason Harmonized in the Practice of Husbandry*, John Lorain begins his first chapter by stating that “[v]ery erroneous theories have been propagated” resulting in faulty farming methods (1). His words here create a framework for the rest of his book, as he offers his readers narratives of his own trials and errors and even dismisses foreign, time-tested techniques farmers had held on to: “The knowledge we have of that very ancient and numerous nation the Chinese, as well as the very located habits and costumes of this very singular people, is in itself insufficient to teach us . . .” (75). His book captures the call and need for scientific experiments to develop new knowledge meant to be used in/on/with American soil, which reflects some farmers’ thinking of the day.

By the 1860s, the need for this knowledge was strong enough to affect education. John Nicholson anticipated this effect in 1820 in the “Experiments” section of his book *The Farmer’s Assistant; Being a Digest of All That Relates to Agriculture and the Conducting of Rural Affairs; Alphabetically Arranged and Adapted for the United States*:

> Perhaps it would be well, if some institution were devised, and supported at the expense of the State, which would be so organized as would tend most effectually to produce a due degree of emulation among Farmers, by rewards and honorary distinctions conferred by those who, by their successful experimental efforts and improvements, should render themselves duly entitled to them.³ (92)
Part of Nicholson's hope was realized in 1837 when Michigan established their state university, specifying that "agriculture was to be an integral part of the curriculum" (Danhof 71). Not much was accomplished, however, much to the dissatisfaction of farmers, and in 1855, the state authorized a new college to be "devoted to agriculture and to be independent of the university" (Danhof 71). The government became more involved in the creation of agricultural universities in 1862 when President Lincoln passed the Morrill Land Grant College Act, which begins with this phrase: "AN ACT Donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts [sic]." The first agricultural colleges formed under the act suffered from a lack of trained teachers and "an insufficient base of knowledge," and critics claimed that the new colleges did not meet the needs of farmers (Hurt 193).

Congress addressed these problems with the then newly formed United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA and Morrill Act worked together to form "... State experiment stations and extension services ... [that] added [to] ... localized research and education ..." (Baker et al. 415). The USDA added to the scientific and educational areas of the agricultural field in other ways by including research as one of the organization's "foundation stone" (367) and by including these seven objectives:

(1) Collecting, arranging, and publishing statistical and other useful agricultural information; (2) introducing valuable plants and animals; (3) answering inquiries of farmers regarding agriculture; (4) testing agricultural implements; (5) conducting chemical analyses of soils, grains, fruits, plants, vegetables, and manures; (6) establishing a professorship of botany and entomology; and (7) establishing an agricultural library and museum. (Baker et al. 14)
Works Cited

Allen, R.L. *The American Farm Book; or Compend of American Agriculture; Being a Practical Treatise on Soils, Manures, Draining, Irrigation, Grasses, Grain, Roots, Fruits, Cotton, Tobacco, Sugar Cane, Rice, and Every Staple Product of the United States with the Best Methods of Planting, Cultivating, and Preparation for Market*. Saxton, 1849.


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