

TWO LOCAL NEWSPAPERS AND AGRICULTURE;

1869, 1911, 1949

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How did the newspapers of a once-small, agricultural village that became a bituminous mining center treat the agricultural life of the area? The following remarks have been made in an effort to indicate the outlines of an answer. The town was Punxsutawney, in southern Jefferson County, Pennsylvania, and the first newspaper file selected was that of the *Plaindealer*, a weekly.¹ At that time, the village consisted of some 550 persons. The next file chosen was that of the *Punxsutawney Spirit* for 1911, for the town was by then firmly wedded to coal mining and its attendant industry, railroading. The 1949 file of the same paper was taken up next. The *Spirit* of 1911 and 1949 were dailies.

The distinctive feature of the *Plaindealer* was the advice column, usually located on the last page of the four-page edition. Sometimes the column consisted of one lengthy article, but more often it contained from two to five short items. The subjects discussed fell within one or more of the following categories: marketing; farm management (including the home); farm labor; livestock; implements; soils and pastures; remarks on the values inherent in agricultural life; conservation; agricultural societies; and information about industries associated with agriculture in the area.

In 1869, marketing posed a serious problem for the farmers in southern Jefferson County and northern Indiana County. The roads were often in miserable condition; as late as mid-June, 1869, the Indiana-Punxsutawney road was said to be almost impassable. The spring rains must have created real havoc, for in the issue of April 8, 1869, the editor commented wryly, "There appears to be a bottom to the roads, but you have to feel for it . . ." However, the editor did little but complain about the situation. A letter to the editor proposed a railroad down the Mahoning Valley in order that the coal and iron beds could be

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1 The files for both the *Plaindealer* and the *Spirit* are to be found in the Punxsutawney Free Library. As this was intended to be only a slight survey of the situation, I used no other sources than those indicated in the text; therefore, no footnotes have been used.

developed, but no one seemed to seize on the idea as a boon to farming at that time. Although one news item mentioned that sleds loaded with grain were headed east, no mention was made as to proper places for sales. An article, lifted from the *American Agriculturist*, suggested that farmers sell early to take advantage of the higher prices, but the proposition was put forward on a general basis only, for no specific crops or markets were named. Other than an occasional listing of the prices of the market in Punxsutawney, no figures were quoted. The effect of the poor roads on mail delivery, which came in from Brookville, Indiana, Summerville, and Luthersburg two or three times weekly if the weather was good, and the subsequent effect on the farmers' marketing practices, were not mentioned. The economic effect of poor communication with Pittsburgh and other major areas may have been assumed, but it was not explicitly stated. Consistently, merchants of the area offered to accept greenbacks, stamps, rye, wheat, corn, potatoes, wool, lumber, hides, pelts, or shingles in exchange for goods, a practice which indicates a low development of marketing. There were no complaints of depression, nor were there any indications that the situation was abnormal.

Efficient farm management occupied a sizeable amount of space in the *Plaindealer*. A good home and happy family were included in this area of endeavor. Hammering at getting the farmer to take care of the seemingly minor items, the editor encouraged tidy farmsteads. "Practical" remarks abounded: fix fences; mend barn doors and gates; keep drains open; make sure that implements were in good repair before they were put away; and keep harness mended. In other articles the care of livestock was emphasized on the same basis, namely, economic saving. An article of December 23, 1869, went on to another of the editor's pet projects, the idea that a just balance in the economic and sociological aspects had to occur before the farm was successful. In his opinion, a bad house and a bad barn indicated a poor operation, while a good home with a bad barn was only slightly better. A bad home with a good barn was taken to be evidence of a love of money, a rather unhappy state of affairs. A good house and a good barn meant a good life for the family. It is clear that an attempt was being made to get the farmers to make an accounting of their operations and to make sure that no one aspect of living was being neglected.

Closely related to the articles on repair and so on was the promotion of conservation measures. Sometimes it was difficult to tell whether

the main intent was to secure a greater short-run return in crops or to build up the farms of the region in the long-run. One thing was clear: it was recognized that a direct connection existed between land care and economic returns per soil-unit involved. Effective use of manure, liquid wastes, and land-building crops was discussed, along with the value in applying lime. The protection of quail and a "yellow" bird, otherwise unidentified, was advocated also. Toads were praised for their insect-controlling ability. One note went so far as to say that toads should be introduced deliberately into gardens and that an inverted flower pot, which had one edge resting on a stone, should be provided as a home.

The difficulties in securing good farm labor and the attendant problem of retaining rural youth on the farm also came in for attention. The claim was made that better farm labor could be hired if housing were provided for family men. A yearly basis of employment was said to be the best. "Help your help . . ." was the tenor. Another item reflected favorably on the coeducational policy of the Iowa Agricultural College, the editor stating that the farmer's wife should be as skilled in her work as the farmer in his. Another article complained about the difficulty that young men encountered in earning a living on the farm. The editor wanted to find out if anyone had a solution, for he had none.

An interesting theme that ran through the *Plaindealer* in 1869 was the mystical love of the land and the feeling that agricultural pursuits provided the basis of all other economic and social endeavor. Farming was called "this pleasantest of all pursuits," and it was said that "the farmers . . . are the founders of civilization." "The Independent Farmer," as quoted in the June 17, 1869, issue of the *Plaindealer*, was an extreme example of this agrarian creed. Perhaps this stanza will give some idea of the message that it carried:

To him the Spring comes dancingly
To him the Summer blushes,
The Autumn smiles with yellow ray,
His sleep old Winter hushes;
He cares not how the world may move,
No doubts or fears confound him;
He trusts to God and loves his wife,
Nor griefs or ills may harm her,
He's nature's nobleman in life—
The Independent Farmer.

Items which supported the formation and continued existence of agricultural societies were found in the *Plaindealer*. In August, 1869, it was suggested that the farmers of southern Jefferson County and northern Indiana County begin a fair. However, in the newspaper at least, there was no reader support for the proposition.

During the year there were articles devoted to livestock, many of which were related to the management phase of farm life; it was pointed out that efficient and humane care of animals was tantamount to profitable operation. In other instances, instruction was given in the selection of good lines of stock (e.g., Southdown and Cotswold sheep were fitting choices for the farmers of the region). The importance of proper feeding was recognized. In this case, it was not a question of abuse, but rather a matter of the farmers' achieving optimum egg, weight, and labor production. As was usually the case in discussion of seeds and plants, the farmers were encouraged to use their best stock as a basis for future growth and production. "The cheap cow has produced another equally valueless . . ." Another area of interest was in the curing of illnesses among livestock and the eradication of insect pests among the crops. Probably, most of the cures and insect-killers mentioned in the newspaper were the result of empirical observations. Usually the articles were of the type in which one farmer related a method that had worked for him and which he was generously passing on to the others.

In connection with the agricultural pursuits of the region, lumbering was often mentioned. Once it was derided as being a liability to the farmer, for it meant that he worked at farming for only half a year, consequently reducing the care and attention that he could give his farm. In April, 1869, it was noted that 421 rafts had gone down to the mouth of the Mahoning during the spring. Probably two or three hundred more rafts went down by the time the last freshet had passed. The peak of the lumbering industry in the area had long since passed, but the part-time work seemed to provide the farmer with a needed cash income. Judging from the merchants' barter offers, timber and the finished products from it gave a good cash crop. The following advertisement, of January 7, 1869, gives a refreshing insight into the relationship between farming and timber-cutting, particularly in stanza five.

A NEW SONG
TUNE: "*Yankee Doodle*"

Come all ye men that want good bows
To fasten up your lumber;
Come let me know what kind you want,
And let me know the number.

But don't you buy inferior bows,
(Perhaps you've bought already;)
You'll lose you [sic] bottle and your clothes,
You'll stove in Sally's Eddy.

My bows are long and very strong,
You'll find them rough and ready
For Phoenix and for Pilot Rock—
You're safe in Sally's Eddy.

Come Bell & Hastings, Shields and Graff,
Come Mitchells, James and Thomas!
I'll work away by night and day,
To furnish all I promise.

I'll trade my bows for wheat or rye,
For oats or corn or buckwheat;
I'll trade for butter, eggs, or pork,
But not a bite of duck meat!

But now I think I've said enough
For any man of reason;
My bows are made of wood that's tough,
They're cut and made in season.

But if you're still inclined to doubt,
You'd better come and try them;
But when you come to see my bows,
You're very sure to buy them.

The sources of the agricultural information and advice handed out by the editor apparently came from some thirty-seven books, magazines, and newspapers, with the latter predominating numerically. Of course, the figure quoted above does not include the omnipresent "Exchange" or such listings as a "Southern paper." It would be interesting to know

how many of the sources were used at first-hand; in all probability, most of the information was secured via the local western Pennsylvania newspapers that came on an exchange basis.

In examining the *Spirit* of 1911, a daily, one wonders if agriculture any longer existed in the very region that was covered by the *Plaindealer*. Only indirectly did comments of rural life enter the 1911 paper, usually through the gossip and news columns submitted by correspondents in the outlying communities. Once in a while, there would be an occasional news item concerning farming, and occasionally, some comment would appear in the editor's column which concerned itself with events of a more or less social nature in Punxsutawney. Clearly, any agricultural information inserted was incidental; there were no attempts to aid agriculture or even to report fully on rural activities. Implicitly, the *Spirit* of 1911 was dedicated to the attitude that rural economic and social activities were inferior to the urbanized interests of the town itself.

Outsized potatoes and enormous radishes which had been lugged proudly into the office were duly mentioned in the editor's column devoted to small notes, as was the fact that chestnuts were selling in town for ten cents a quart. Demonstrations in local orchards by commonwealth representatives, a threatened hog cholera epidemic, reports of exceptional yields of potatoes, turnips, and buckwheat, and a program for a farmers' institute constituted the main items of agricultural news reporting. A bad wind and rain storm in August ruined some of the buckwheat crop. Oddities of agriculture were definitely of more importance, news-wise, than any other aspect of farming. Even advertisements were not directed to rural people. Only three firms made their bids to farmers; one was a druggist who had a patent worm medicine for animals; another was a baker who had some used water buckets, egg crates, and flour sacks for sale; and a third was a cider mill operator who needed one thousand bushels of apples. Two dealers in building materials mentioned in a small way that they kept fertilizers and implements, although their ads centered around construction materials. It is difficult to point out effectively just how inconsequential were the rural news items and advertisements, though it is easy to say that the service aspects in regard to agriculture were totally lacking in the 1911 *Spirit*.

The last year to be surveyed was 1949, and the similarities between that year and 1869 are greater than those between 1949 and 1911, or between 1911 and 1869. The agricultural activities of the Punxsutawney region were reported fully. The inclusion of non-Punxsutawney

social news on the society page was only one evidence of this. Also, as in 1869, it was clearly the intent of the editor to make his newspaper an aid to the farmer as well as a news-carrying vehicle. A great many short articles emanating from the offices of the various rural extension workers were used. In addition, ads placed by local banks and a packing company carried direct advice.

The tone of the 1949 articles was not vastly different than that of the *Plaindealer*, both trying to present usable information, in the main. Management was deemed very important, although by 1949 the idea of proper care had become quite complex. For instance, farmers were warned in January, 1949, that, in addition to the physical requirements of the coop, vitamins A, D, and G had to be provided for the chickens. Similarly, in March, directions were given for the protection of swine litters, along with the name and number of the free extension circular concerning that subject. If the farmer desired to make use of it, the newspaper made the range of outside help quite extensive. In this respect, the 1949 *Spirit* differed from the 1869 *Plaindealer*. However, the *Spirit* articles did tend to emphasize the same, day-in, day-out attention that should be given the repair and other aspects of farm maintenance. Items which stressed care and alertness with respect to livestock were given prominence also. Private business firms, in addition to their regular ads often devoted to farmers particularly, presented specific items of agricultural advice. The use of the classified section of the newspaper by the farmers themselves is worthy of note here also.

The editor of the *Plaindealer*, who tried to support and encourage agricultural societies, would have thought himself in Beulah Land if he could have seen the 1949 *Spirit*. Every kind of specialized interest from prospective farmers among students to beekeepers had their meetings and activities advertised, promoted, and praised. Out of all this had come, apparently, a sense of regional integration. The fact that a large aerial photograph of a farm was as newsworthy as any of the town events, and the matter-of-fact reporting that only 83 of 218 graduating seniors lived in the borough were two evidences of this. The almost total exclusion of farm news of 1911 was gone.

The agrarian creed had disappeared from the newspaper, thus creating the greatest variation between the *Spirit* of 1949 and the *Plaindealer* of 1869. Nowhere in the last year surveyed was there any suggestion that farming was the only good life. In general, the outstanding characteristic of the last year was the pronounced way in

which agricultural and non-agricultural items were treated as parts of the whole, with no especial emphasis given to one or the other. In short, lack of differentiation was the keynote.

In summary, two things stand out: the regionalism and sense of integration which were expressed; and the intention of giving service to farmers which could be found in the *Spirit* of 1949 and the *Plain-dealer*. In 1911, the town of Punxsutawney apparently had fond hopes that it could divorce itself from the older agricultural base, deriving all its gain from an industrial complex based on coal, iron, glass, and rail-roading. By 1949, had come the realization that the town was dependent on both phases, agriculture regaining some measure of stature in the process.