

Introduction

"... it is curious how seldom the all-importance of food is recognized. You see statues everywhere to politicians, poets, and bishops, but not to cooks."

—George Orwell

Although there probably are no statues of cooks in Nebraska, the state recognizes the importance of food by being historically one of the major producers of food commodities for the nation.

The Nebraska Statistical Handbook for 1970 shows that Nebraska ranked fifth in the nation in the production of corn for feed, fifth in wheat, third in sorghum and sixth in sugar-beet yield. In 1971, Nebraska ranked third in the number of cattle on its farms and sixth in the number of hogs and pigs.

In his story, Mike Sweeney discusses the relationship of Nebraska and agriculture

and how the state has resisted the trend toward urbanization.

Although Nebraska has not followed this trend, the state's farmers have followed another trend by adopting technological innovations that have changed the meaning of farming. Kathy Chenoweth talked to a farmer about changes he has witnessed and how he views those changes.

Val Swinton talked to another farmer, Curt Brown, formerly a student at UNL, who just returned from Washington D.C. where he was part of the farmers' protest.

A Washington study done last year said that half of all hamburger and one of every four pounds of beef consumed is eaten away from home. Most of this beef is sold in restaurants. Shelley Smith talked to managers of local fast food restaurants about the history and growth of the industry.

For food that is consumed at home, Cindy Coglianese talked to food store

owners and nutrition experts about the differences between health, natural and organic foods and the food sold on supermarket shelves.

The same concern that prompted the rise of stores selling more natural foods also has resulted in the popularity of vegetarianism. Betsie Ammons and Alice Hrnicek explored this change in eating habits.

Bakery Production and Marketing last year published a report that said two-thirds of every dollar spent in supermarkets results from decisions made in the store. Store managers and marketing professors who talked with Cathy Higgins explained the objectives of food packaging.

The one aspect of food everyone is familiar with is the preparation. But UNL photojournalism. Prof. George Tuck says that Americans don't spend as much time on this part as they could. Tuck, who

studied cooking in Paris, described to Mary Fastenau the differences between French and American cooking.

fathom

Magazine editor: Deb Shanahan. Layout editor: John Minnick. Editor in chief: Pete Mason. Advertising manager: Denise Jordan. Photography chief: Ted Kirk. Production manager: Kitty Policky. Business manager: Jerri Haussler.

Fathom is a magazine published and distributed tri-weekly on Fridays by the Daily Nebraskan.

Unless covered by another copyright, material may be reprinted without permission if attributed to Fathom, magazine of the Daily Nebraskan.

Cover photo courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Silver-tongued orator saw silver mines in farmer's fields

By Mike Sweeney

It was sweltering inside the old Coliseum of Chicago that July day in 1896 when William Jennings Bryan stood up to address the 18,000 people gathered to choose the Democratic presidential nominee.

The air of the convention was tense. The meeting marked the first open clash between the party's two factions—a silver faction wanting unlimited silver coinage to increase the money supply, and a gold faction, intent on limiting the silver supply and preserving the value of the dollar.

Bryan advocated unlimited silver because it would help ease the farmers' economic troubles. The farmer, Bryan believed, was essential to the country's economy.

When the "silver-tongued orator" spoke to that Chicago crowd, his words wove a spell that electrified the audience and won him the nomination.

"You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard," Bryan said. "We reply the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile farms; burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

CONSIDERING THE number of people then living in the rural areas, Bryan may have been right in attributing so much economic importance to the farmer. America had a rural complexion in the 1890s, with 64.9 percent of the country's people living in rural areas (places with less than 2,500 people), according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

But in the 83 years since Bryan's speech, the country's complexion has changed.

The 1970 census indicated only 26.5 percent of the population lived in rural areas. The number of people employed on farms has fallen from a high of 13.6 million in 1910 to 5.5 million in 1970.

Nebraska, however, has been an exception to the urbanizing trend. Almost half of the state's people live in rural areas. If Bryan were alive today, he probably would be happy to learn that the farmers of his home state still exert economic clout.

"The state's economy goes as the agricultural economy goes," said Glen Vollmar, chairman of the UNL agricultural economics department.

THE AGRICULTURAL and industrial segments of the state's economy are related, Vollmar said. Many of the state's business and factories cater to the needs of the food producer and the food consumer.

Vollmar said there is a trend among the states to increase the emphasis of the non-agricultural economy, but Nebraska hasn't followed the pattern as much as the other states.

"Nebraska is slower than the rest of the country," Vollmar said.

He said the state has stayed basically agrarian because it has large amounts of natural resources excellent for agriculture, such as soil and ground water.

In addition, Nebraska is not near the industrial centers of the country's coasts. Anything manufactured in the state must be shipped long distances, and that discourages large companies from locating here, Vollmar said.

The agricultural roots of Nebraska—a state that has defied the trends of urbanization and heavy industrialization—lie deep in history.

Nebraska flung open its doors to small farmers on January 1, 1863, when the Homestead Act took effect.

THE HOMESTEAD ACT, James C. Olson writes in *The History of Nebraska*, said "any person who is head of a family, or has arrived at the age of twenty-one years . . . could upon the payment of a \$10 fee, file claim upon as much as a quarter section." The homesteader would re-

ceive a final patent on the land if he lived on it for five years.

The enthusiastic rush for Nebraska land was typified by the first person to file a claim under the act, Olson writes.

Daniel Freeman, a Union soldier home on furlough, apparently persuaded the registrar of the land office at Brownville to open up shortly after midnight, Jan. 1, 1853, the day the act took effect. Freeman filed a claim on a quarter section of land along Cub Creek north of Beatrice, then left the land office to join his regiment.

The western half of the state was initially considered unfit for settlement and was called "the Great American Desert," Olson writes. However, a promotional campaign by the railroads helped demolish this belief, he said.

Despite periods of drought, economic depression, and grasshopper plagues that caused some settlers to leave the state, Nebraska's population boomed from 122,993 in 1870 to over a million in 1890.

VIRTUALLY ALL of the population increases between 1890 and 1910 came in the cities, Olson wrote. Yet despite its growing cities, Nebraska remained a rural state, with 65 percent of the population living on farms or ranches or in small towns in 1930, and 46 percent in 1960.

Today, the 1979 *World Almanac and Book of Facts* reveals Nebraska has about 70,000 farms which produce one-tenth of the nation's corn and one-twentieth of its wheat.

A portrait of the average Nebraska farmer would show a person satisfied with his job, but who may hold an extra job or have money invested in a city.

Nebraska farmers tend to have relatively high job satisfaction, according to associate sociology professor David Johnson. He said farmers like being their own bosses and feel a certain mystique about working on the land.

Nebraska farmers also tend to have more than one source of income, Vollmar said. He said more and more farmers from small and medium farms are involved in "off-the-farm activities."

Some get second jobs in the city, others live off investments, Vollmar said.

VOLLMAR SAID U.S. farmers have greater non-farm income than they do farm income.

The farmer's portrait also shows the size of his farm has been increasing steadily.

"The number of large farms is increasing," Vollmar said. He pointed out that in 1977, 25 percent of the state's farms produced and sold 85 percent of the market.

In spite of the trend toward larger farms, Vollmar said he thinks there always will be a place for the small farm in Nebraska.

"As long as he (the small farmer) has access to the market, can get capital and produce efficiently, there will always be a place for him," Vollmar said.

William Jennings Bryan would have preferred it that way.



Photo courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society

A Nebraska farm family at the turn of the century.