

Alfalfa Fields the Gold Mines of Nebraska

At various times in the history of Nebraska discoveries of gold have been announced. While it is assured that some gold has been found in Nebraska, it is equally assured that it occurs in such small quantities that it does not pay for the expense of extracting it from the soil. In recent years another gold mine has been discovered, which yields rich returns and will never be worked out. The alfalfa fields are the gold mines of Nebraska.

Alfalfa is usually referred to as a sort of clover. Botanically considered it is a species of the genus medicago, under the order of leguminosae, while the clovers are classed under the genus trifolium of the same order. Alfalfa, therefore, is only a second cousin of the clovers. It is a hardy perennial, which comes to maturity in the first year.

When a farmer emigrates to a new state with soil and climatic conditions differing from those of his former home it is essential that he study the new conditions and readjust his farming ideas to fit them. He must adjust himself and his crops to the soil and climate, for they will not change for him. He may have lived on the low flat lands of Indiana, where he laid tilling to drain his land and plowed deeply to break up the hard clay soil. He raised corn and sold it. To better his condition he came to Nebraska, the land of good roads and healthful climate. He settles on a farm in the sub-arid district and plants corn as before. But, though he "plows deep while sluggards sleep," he remains poor. He persists in depending solely on corn in a region where corn is an uncertain crop. He gets into the rut of one of his furrows and stays there, when, if he would cease to put his dependence altogether in corn and seed most of his land in alfalfa, he would have started on the safe road to prosperity. Alfalfa has been grown long enough in Nebraska to prove that it is the salvation of the so-called "drouth districts."

Extensive Culture Recent.

The extensive culture of alfalfa as a forage plant is comparatively recent, but experiments have been made with it in eastern states for many years. In the "Transactions of the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture," published at Albany, N. Y., in 1801, favorable mention is made of it. From that date various farm journals and agricultural reports mention it and recommend the crop to eastern farmers. The details of growing and harvesting and the use and value of alfalfa as a forage plant are not so generally known as are the older crops, but each year farmers are becoming better informed concerning it and the acreage is increasing. The crop has never obtained an extensive foothold east of the Missouri, probably on account of some misapprehension concerning it. It is amusing to read the sober opinion of some learned agriculturists of a few years ago that "alfalfa will not thrive on sandy and gravelly soil, but requires rich, loamy land and should be very heavily manured before seeding." Experience has demonstrated that alfalfa thrives best in sandy soil, that rich loam is not required

thick as they should have been. On land in which the surface is sand the seed may be put in with a press drill without plowing, the bunch-grass common to such lands serving to keep the seed from being blown out by the wind. In large areas of the sandhill country this plan is the best one to follow. It may be sown any time after spring and later, taking care that a sufficient growth will be made before frost comes to insure its life till the following spring. The favorite time for sowing is in July or August. One advantage of this is that on lands suitable for small grain a crop may be harvested before sowing to alfalfa, thus avoiding the loss of use for a year. It is essential that the alfalfa should not be allowed to go to seed the first year, as this materially weakens the growth. Those who have had ex-



MOWING THE ALFALFA.

perience say it should be cut but once the first year, for two cuttings are almost sure to kill. After the first year, however, it is cut regularly three times a season and may often be cut four times.

The picture shows a plant two months old and illustrates the rapid growth, especially of the root. The seed was sown July 12 and the plant taken up September 15. It has two long stems and several others starting. The root measures fifteen inches in length and the long stem fourteen inches. A plant four years old was examined which had 100 stems of varying length and the root of which measured four and one-half inches in circumference at the top and six inches in length. Alfalfa does not spread from stolons as does white clover, but thickens at the crown of the root. The tap root extends straight down, slender the first year, increasing in size and length with age, sending off an occasional prong and numerous rootlets.

As a Profitable Crop.

A conservative estimate places the season's crop of three cuttings at three tons per acre, but it has been known to yield six tons per acre. When it is borne in mind that

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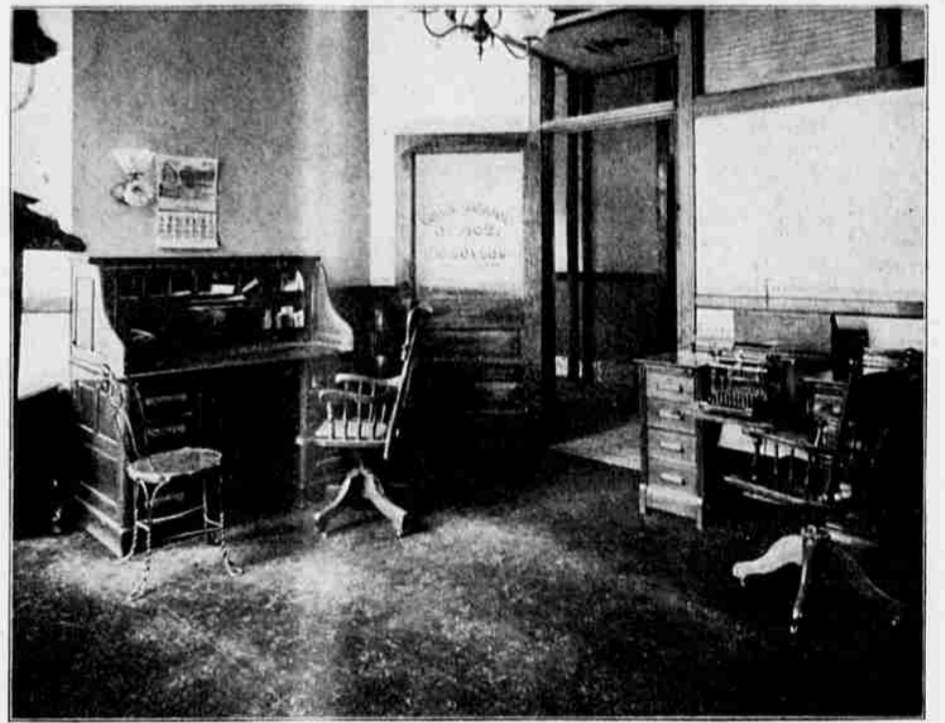
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LOADING WAGONS IN ALFALFA FIELDS.

and manuring is altogether superfluous. Those lands of Nebraska which are unsuited to corn are the lands which are specially suited to alfalfa. Most of the plants of the order leguminosae, to which alfalfa belongs, thrive in dry soils. Though the great essential of alfalfa is water, it is not necessary that it receive it as rainfall, but only that its roots may find water. Throughout the Platte valley water is very near the surface. The soil is sandy, without clay harpan, and the waters of the Platte and its tributaries are absorbed and held as in a sponge. Where nature has been stingy in the average amount of rainfall it has generously provided a storage system by which the mountain snows are held for future use. It only remains for the Nebraska farmer to learn what crops can make the best use of this stored moisture. When the alfalfa seed has been moistly germinated its roots will reach downward to the damp sand and find moisture to keep it growing.

Methods of Cultivation.

Methods of preparing the ground and seeding vary according to soil and location. Land which is hard is thoroughly plowed and harrowed until finely pulverized. The seed may be sown broadcast or put in with a press drill. Twenty to twenty-four pounds of seed are used to the acre. In this as in similar crops it pays to be generous with seed. Some fields now growing are not as

this crop is certain every year for an indefinite term of years, it will be seen that alfalfa is indeed a wonderful crop. It does not exhaust the soil, for it contains a very small percentage of phosphates and its roots go to great depths. Many plants of this order have this peculiarity of being a benefit to the land instead of reducing it. It is conjectured that they derive much of their nourishment from the atmosphere and in some ways exert a disintegrating influence on the alkalis of the soil. Experiments in eastern states deduced the fact that lands which produced a poor yield of wheat, after being laid down in alfalfa for a number of years were again sown in wheat, produced a much greater yield than before.

Whether fed to stock green or cured alfalfa has proven itself wonderfully nutritious. It is cut when just coming into bloom, usually having an average height of two feet or over while it is succulent and tender and before the stems become woody. It should be well cured before stacking, for if stacked too green the fermentation of the juices will cause it to heat and spoil. Fed as hay it will bring horses, cattle, sheep or hogs through the winter in good condition without grain. Fed to milch cows it insures a good yield of rich milk. It is especially valuable for growing animals and far



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