

Agriculture From The Past

Fairbanks Town & Village Assn. for Development

Agricultural production in Alaska has never met the food and fiber demands of the State's population. Agriculture in general has been virtually a second occupation or hobby to most Alaska farmers.

George Gasser, former Commissioner of Agriculture for the Territory of Alaska back in 1947 reflected his views of the evolution of agricultural production in Alaska:

"When the West settled, the lure free land for everybody was the magnet that started wagon trains rolling across the plains. The emigrants were hungry for agricultural independence. They plowed up miles and miles of virgin land and planted them to food crops and grain. In a short time, there was a glut of farm products. Everyone had crops to sell and there were not enough people to buy and eat this food. The farm had arrived ahead of population and industry.

In Alaska the situation was reversed. Gold and fish were the magnets that drew thousands to the Northland. Towns grew up overnight near the gold fields and around canneries. Up here population and industry arrived ahead of the farmer.

In Alaska there have always been more mouths to feed than local production could take care of. At no time has there been enough food produced in Alaska to make more than a dent in the demand. That's why I say the agricultural opportunity in the Territory today is tailor made."

With little encouragement from local residents or the governors of the Territory of Alaska, Dr. C.C. Georgeson of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) came to Alaska in 1898 during the Klondike gold rush to establish agriculture as an industry.

Dr. Georgeson developed a variety of wheat which was grown successfully for a number of years by farmers in the Tanana Valley. During World War I, the local wheat was ground in a feed mill and the flour was locally used.

In 1921, the farmers of the Tanana Valley raised 3,500 bushels of spring wheat which was ground into flour and consumed in local towns and settlements. Even a larger area was seeded in 1922, but heavy rainfall, lack of sunshine and a cold wave destroyed crops in the latter part of August. The 1922 wheat crop was the first time early maturing grains had failed so completely in the Tanana Valley.

In 1903, a man in the Forty-Mile area found it feasible to raise hay for market in which the price of "outside" hay was some-



G. W. Gasser at the Agricultural Experiment Station in College, Alaska.
University of Alaska Archives,
Charles Bunnell Collection

times as high as \$200 a ton.

In 1908, A.V. Richert produced 2.5 tons of tomatoes in his greenhouse and 15,000 head of cabbage, 15,000 stalks of celery, 10 tons of potatoes and large quantities of turnips, beets, carrots, parsnips, peas, and beans on his farm in the Tanana Valley.

From the turn of the century to the Mid-thirties, the Fairbanks area of the Tanana Valley was the center of commercial agriculture.

Unsuccessful goldseekers and miners began to homestead and farm their land in 1900. The farmers found a market for their produce in the nearby mining camps.

In 1909, William Young, a farmer in the Fairbanks area, reported to Dr. Georgeson that he had an income of over \$7,755.00 from his crop that year, and in addition, Young had a barn full of hay for his own use.

The construction of the railroad enabled farmers to transport their products to buyers in the Interior or southcentral Alaska.

In 1917, a 1400-acre land withdrawal was made for the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. A complete livestock research program was in operation by 1921. In 1925, Alaska pea seed was released for commercial production. A total of 880 pounds of pea seed was sold to growers in the lower forty-eight.

In 1927, the Experiment Station planted a one-acre plot of sugar beets in Fairbanks. Results from the experiment showed that sugar grown in Interior Alaska had a sugar content of 16.5 to 17.4 per cent which is satisfactory for refining. The average beet weight was one pound; small compared to the average weight of sugar beets grown in successful sugar beet areas which run from 2 to 4 pounds.

The cost of growing 4.4 tons of sugar beets on the one-acre plot was

\$205.90.

In a report to the USDA concerning the sugar beet experiment, Dr. Georgeson said the success of the experiment would indicate a possibility of a sugar beet factory built in the Tanana Valley, but the factory would need at least 5,000 acres of sugar beet production to support it.

By 1939, the most important crops in the Tanana Valley were hay, grain and potatoes. Potatoes were the chief cash crop with yields averaging 4 to 7 tons and prices ranging from \$2.50 to \$5.00 per hundred pounds.

In 1939, there were 41 farms in the Tanana Valley. Farmers owned a total of 10,274 acres of land. A total of 2,306 acres were utilized as cropland acreage and 600 acres were cultivated. The total land value of the farms was \$247,765 (\$25 an acre) and building values totalled \$299,725. Implements and machinery assets were valued at \$55,740. Operating expenses such as feed and labor costs for 1939 farming operations totalled \$48,422.

The average Tanana Valley farming operation in 1939 had 250 acres of land; 56 acres in cropland and 14.5 acres cultivated. The total value of the average farm in the Interior was \$14,710.

The total revenues received from the sale of produce from the Tanana Valley excluding farm crops in 1939 was \$96,362.

The two commercial dairies and one experimental farm dairy in the Tanana Valley in 1939 was pastured for four months in the summer and stall fed in the remainder of the year. Oats, barley, peas, vetch native grasses and other cultivated grasses were grown for summer pasture and winter feed. Oat-pea

(See "The Past" pg. 23)