



THE LONG ISLAND FORUM

THE MAGAZINE OF LONG ISLAND'S HISTORY AND HERITAGE



EARLY FARMING IN
FOSTERS MEADOW

FRED STONE OF
CHIN CHIN RANCH

A HOUSE CALLED
ALABAMA

MANHASSET BAY ESTATES

Sands Point Light



The Perils of Farming in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries:

The Experience of Fosters Meadow

by Paul W. Hoffman

From the notes of the pig in the early morn, we are reminded that hog killing time is at hand.

The Queens County Sentinel, December 16, 1897.

Fosters Meadow was an area at the tail of the Hempstead plains, which incorporated modern day Elmont and parts of North Valley Stream, Laurelton, Rosedale and Springfield. Beginning in the 1850's, the area and nearby parts of Franklin Square and Valley Stream were settled by German immigrants who established farms

that provided produce for the large cities to the west.¹ They were attracted to the area not only for its friable soil, but also for its access to markets. Subsequent to the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the influx of inexpensive grains and cereals from the Midwest, farmers in the area turned to market gardening, which was also known as

This page: The March farm on Central Avenue in Valley Stream. Note the windmill used to drive the irrigation pumps and the absence of electric lines. *Kenneth Labovner Collection.*

truck farming. The farmers delivered their fresh vegetables by horse drawn wagons to the markets in the City of Brooklyn, which were originally at the foot of Fulton Street but relocated to a site on Wallabout Bay in 1884.²

Farming was and is today an arduous and perilous task. Risks are taken everyday, starting with the financial risk that the farmer will receive a greater payment for his crops than the amount he invests in the effort to plant, grow and market them. In addition to the financial risks, there are physical risks to the farmer, his family and his livestock. This study encompasses a period beginning around 1870 and ending by 1910. Although there were advances in agricultural equipment, farming practices did not change drastically during that period, though they did soon after with the arrival of electricity and the replacement of market wag-

ons with trucks. To better understand the perils facing the farmer, we should first understand what they were producing.

A good picture of the farms of Fosters Meadow comes from information contained in the 1870 federal census. Besides the more familiar population statistics contained in the census, there are separate agricultural schedules which required the census enumerator to ask over fifty questions about farm assets and annual production. Thirty-four German farmers have been identified in the Fosters Meadow area listed on those schedules. Their average farm consisted of approximately twenty-eight acres of improved land, ranging from a six-acre farm of Charlie Kiesel to ninety acres for Herman Sappelt. Some of the farms included woodlands and other unimproved land. The average farm was valued at nearly \$5,000; farm



A fully loaded market wagon ready for the trip west. ~~Edward J. Smith, New York City, 1884~~

Ralph Schmitt Collection



Horsedrawn steamer pumper in operation at a fire in Elmont, 1914. *Franklin Square Historical Society.*

machinery and implements assessed at less than \$300; livestock valued at \$420; and the estimated value of all farm production was approximately \$1,800 per year. Horses were an important part of the working farm, not only to pull plows and farm carts, but also to haul the produce to market. All of the farmers had at least one horse with some owning as many as five. None of the farmers used oxen, but two had teams of two mules or asses. All kept milk cows with five being the largest herd. Butter, rather than milk, was the cash crop with an average annual production of over one hundred ten pounds. Most of the farmers kept pigs, but none more than six. Almost all farms raised Indian corn, averaging over 200 bushels, and Irish potatoes (as opposed to sweet potatoes) of over 275

bushels. Hay, rye and oats were raised and probably sold as livestock feed. Some winter wheat, buckwheat, peas and beans were raised, but the largest crop was grouped under the heading of "Produce of market gardens." This included carrots and cabbages, lettuce and squash, and all the fresh vegetables bound for the tables of Brooklyn and New York City. The average annual value of this market produce was approximately \$850, while that of the animals slaughtered or sold for slaughter was \$120. Not surprisingly, the variety of crops raised was very similar from farm to farm. However, Joseph Roeckel produced four pounds of beeswax and eight pounds of honey, while Anton Roeckel produced one bushel of clover seed, four bushels of grass seed, \$25 of forest prod-

ucts and four gallons of wine in addition to the more mundane cereals and vegetables.⁵ Although this research only included German farmers, the data is not significantly different from that of their neighbors who descended from English and Dutch populations.

The misfortune of Joseph Schroeder provides evidence of the holdings of a Fosters Meadow farm of the period. Schroeder, of Washington Square (now Franklin Square) defaulted on a chattel mortgage that was apparently secured by all his equipment, livestock and crops. The advertisement for the auction of his property on February 24, 1897 sets out the items for sale:

1 gray horse, 1 black horse, 1 bay horse, team of mules (black and roan), Jersey cow, 5 pigs, 25 chickens, 2 4-basket-rack market wagons, 1 2-seat wagon, express wagon, farm cart, pr. Hay shavings, buck-board wagon, 2 sets heavy dbl. Harness, set single do [ditto] cart harness, potato planter, wheelhoe, 3 2-horse plows, 1 Boss plow, 2 cultivators, 2 harrows, grindstone, lot double and single whiffletrees, neck yokes, wagon cover, 25 potato baskets, 25 tomato crates, 4 hot-bed frames, ladders, 8 straw mats, 4 market blankets, lot forks, hoes, shovels, spades, picks, crowbars, clevises (sic), rope, chain, &c. 500 bu. Corn, 50 bu. Russia turnips, 9 rows cabbage, 50 bu. Potatoes, 100 bu. Carrots, 100 bu. White turnips, mow of hay, mow of rye straw, all corn stalks inside and outside of barn, 14 bu. Pride of the Market peas, grown from the D.M. Ferry & Co.'s stock.⁶

The every day successes involved with farming were rarely recorded. Farmers rarely recorded information along the lines of— Decided to thin the parsley today and finished before dinner.— It is the unusual and the misfortunes that may be captured by contemporary recorders. Such entries and anecdotes can give us a glimpse of the pitfalls

Two main sources have been used to gather information for this study:

SAP: The diaries of
Robert Sappelt

QCS: *The Queens County Sentinel*⁶

HS: *The Hempstead Sentinel*⁷

LID: *The Long Island Democrat*⁸

HI: *The Hempstead Inquirer*⁹

WEATHER

The traditional best friend and worst enemy of the farmer is the weather. It is probably the most talked about, yet least controllable, aspect of earning a living from the soil.

SAP: August 22, 1881. *It is very dry. The flea beetles are eating everything.*

SAP: September 7, 1881. *It is hot and dry. 108 degrees in the afternoon.*

SAP: October 5, 1881. *Cold wind. Everything froze last night, even the cabbage.*

SAP: March 12, 1888. *We had the biggest snowstorm in 20 years...Until the 19th nobody could drive to market. (This is the storm known as the "Blizzard of '88").*

SAP: December, 1893. *We had a very bad year, because from the beginning of May until the middle of September, we had very little rain.*

HS: August 6, 1902. *New potatoes are rotting, badly.*

HS: July 14, 1904. *Early potatoes are rotting in some fields.*

FIRE

Farmhouses and all out buildings were made of wood. The barns contained highly flammable hay, straw and other materials that made them the greatest risk, whether from natural causes such as lightning, or through the careless use of lanterns and other open flames. The arrival of electricity to

The farm communities helped finance the railroads

D. L. VAN NOSTRAND,

Auctioneer.

Auction Sale

OF

Horses, Cows, Pigs,

Poultry, Wagons, Harness, Grain, Produce,

CORN STALKS, RYE STRAW,

FARMING UTENSILS, ETC.

NOTICE OF MORTGAGE SALE.

Notice is hereby given that, default having been made in the payment, according to the terms thereof, of the amount secured by a certain chattel mortgage executed by Joseph Schroer to John R. Burtis, dated the sixth day of January, 1897, and filed in the office of the Town Clerk of the town of Hempstead on the seventh day of January, 1897, I shall expose for sale at Public Auction, by virtue of said Mortgage and the power of sale contained therein, on

Wednesday, the 24th Day of Feb., 1897.

At 10 o'clock in the forenoon, at the residence of Joseph Schroer, situated at
Washington Square, L. I.

On the Hempstead Turnpike, one mile west of Hempstead, the property described in said Mortgage, as follows:

1 gray horse, 1 black horse, 1 bay horse, team of mules, (black and roan), Jersey cow, 3 pigs, 20 chickens, 11-basket-rack market wagons, 1 2-seat wagon, express wagon, farm cart, dr. hay shavings, buckboard wagon, 2 sets heavy dbl. harness, set single do, cart harness, potato planter, wheelhoe, 3 2-horse plows, 1 Boss plow, 2 cultivators, 2 harrows, grindstone, lot double and single whiffletrees, neck yokes, wagon cover, 25 potato baskets, 25 tomato crates, 4 hot-bed frames, ladders, 8 straw mats, 4 market blankets, lot forks, hoes, shovels, spades, picks, crowbars, sieves, rope, chain, &c. 500 bu. corn, 80 bu. Russia, turnips, 9 rows cabbage, 50 bu. potatoes, 100 bu. carrots, 100 bu. white turnips, mow of hay, mow of rye straw, all corn stalks inside and outside of barn, 14 bu. Pride of the Market peas, grown from the Dr. M. Ferry & Co.'s stock.

Sale Positive.

Terms Cash.

Dated the 5th day of February, 1897.

John R. Burtis, Mortgagee.

D. L. Van Nostrand, Auctioneer.

Advertisement for the sale of Joseph Schroer's livestock and farm equipment and implements.

The Hempstead Inquirer, February 19, 1897.

SAP: July 12, 1893. Mrs. Barb's barn burned down for the second time.

SAP: September 3, 1899. Lightning struck and burnt down Samuel Krummenacker's barn in Springfield, 2 horses and 2 cows perished.

HS: September 12, 1901. The explosion of a lighted lantern in the barn of Henry Hartman, on Thursday evening of last week, caused the building to take fire and in an hour or two, the structure was destroyed. Horses and wagons were saved, while a quantity of hay and three sets of harness were consumed. Loss \$750; insurance \$591.

HS: December 1, 1904. A couple of big loads of corn stalks had just been stacked upon the premises of Joseph Schraeder's the other afternoon when a fire broke out and totally destroyed the entire lot. The neighbors had lively work in saving the barns and dwelling.

THE MARKET TEAM

The farmer's most prized asset was the team of horses that drew the market wagon full of produce. A good team might be spared the labor of plowing and other farm chores and used almost exclusively for the trip to market. The farmer and team would set out in the evening with a fully packed, carefully balanced load. The farmer might stop at a livery stable west of Jamaica during the night to water his animals or exchange his team for a fresh one for the final leg to Brooklyn. The original team would be picked up on the return home the following day. Stories passed down by a number of farming families report that a good team could return to its barn with the farmer asleep in the wagon.¹⁰ Reports of the death or injury of a good market horse were more likely to be recorded than death or injury of a hired hand.

HS: September 28, 1899. Mr. Nicholas Hoeffner lost one of his market horses last week. The animal was kicked by his mate in the stable, had his leg broken and otherwise injured.

HS: July 11, 1900. Mr. John Hoffman lost one of his valuable market horses last week. The animal in some way broke its leg in the stable, death resulting.

HS: August 23, 1900. One of Mr. Anthony Rottkamp's market horses displaced his stifle-bone in the



Wallabout Market in Brooklyn around 1920, capturing the market during the transition from horsedrawn market wagons to motor trucks. *Old Brooklyn in early photographs 1865-1929.*

stable at market, Wednesday night. The marketman was obliged to leave him.

HS: August 29, 1901. One of Uncle Nicholas Hoeffner's horses died while at market last Friday, from colic. The animal was the most valuable one owned by Mr. Hoeffner.

HS: July 14, 1904. Daniel Hoeffner's bay mare, a fine market horse, ran a nail in her hoof a few days ago. She has been disabled since but is believed to be recovering.

OTHER ANIMALS

Horses were not the only large animals that caused problems for the farmer. Bulls and cows had their share of troubles, although there were few stories about the pigs.

QCS: January 13, 1898. When Mr. Anthony Rottkamp arose on Monday morning, he discovered his two cows had broken out of their enclosure. On looking around, he found one at a neighbor's, the other had fallen down a

cesspool some ten feet. With the assistance of a pulley and neighbors, the cow was with difficulty removed.

SAP: November 8, 1887. Andreas Maier was gored by our bull. He died on the 9th and was buried on the 10th in Foster's Meadow Cemetery.

SAP: November 21, 1887. The bull put a hole into the front leg of the white horse Jack.

SAP: December 1, 1887. The bull gored Ferdinand [Schmitt] in 14 different places.

SAP: December 26, 1887. The bull was butchered.

THIEVES

In rural areas of these times, just about everyone had a few chickens in their yard. Even when the farmers did not raise enough to justify a trip to market, chickens and other fowl were raised for the farm's own egg and meat consumption. The poultry seemed to be the favorite target of thieves, both the two-legged and the four-legged variety.

HS: June 28, 1900. *Last Friday evening some one entered the hennery on the premises of Mr. Andrew Kraus and stole the entire lot of fowl, 35 in number. The thieves left no clue.*

HS: April 25, 1901. *Andrew Kraus was awakened by a noise that proceeded from his chicken house Sunday night. He arose and took his gun to investigate. He found that a dog has visited the house and ate the best rooster in the flock and had returned for more. Mr. Kraus promptly emptied the contents of the gun into the canine, which broke its leg and shattered its jaw.*

HS: October 15, 1903. *Fifteen of the finest heads of cabbage in T.C. Hendrickson's garden jumped the fence last Thursday night. Whether the Guineas went with them or some other folks has not yet been determined.*

LID: December 1, 1903. *Anthony Hoeffner's hennery was entered the other night and every fowl taken, some thirty in number. The chickens roosting in the trees were misad.*

HS: March 24, 1904. *Last Sunday night, Anthony Rottkamp had a number of geese killed and mangled by dogs. Daniel Hoeffner lost a turkey the same way. The dogs are still at large.*

HS: August 1, 1907. *Several nights last week two strange dogs played havoc with chickens belonging to Frank Wicks, Henry Zimmer, Frank Hartman, Charles Goeller, Leo Green, George Froeblich, Father Zeller, Henry Hartman, John Hoffman and Henry Hoeffner. It is said that nearly two hundred head of fowl were killed. The yard of George Kna was entered but an ugly bulldog tied near the hennery saved his fowl. One of the curs was shot by Benjamin Rottkamp.*

ACCIDENTS AND INJURIES IN THE FIELDS

Farming has always been a dangerous occupation. Both natural phenomena and simple machinery could cause severe damage.

SAP: May 24, 1873. *Saturday night at 5:30 o'clock lightning struck on our field and killed Henry Holder and gave a head injury to David Henker. They were cutting asparagus.*

SAP: January 28, 1889. *Voorhis Mount cut off 2 fingers with the feed cutting machine.*

HS: May 17, 1900. *Master Philip Hoeffner of Little Neck, grandson of Mr. Nicholas Hoeffner, met with a serious accident last week. He was caught in the horsepower machinery which his father was using in drawing water. He was with difficulty rescued. His arm was terribly mangled. It was thought on account of blood poison setting in, the arm would have to be amputated, but last reports under the treatment of Dr. Fensterer, the little fellow is doing nicely.*

SAP: February 24, 1904. *Arender Smith's son of Rockville Centre was buried alive in a carrot pit and is dead.*

COLLISION WITH MODERN TIMES

At the turn of the 20th century, newer and faster means of transportation were being introduced. Railroads were being built and trolley lines were becoming prevalent, especially in Queens and Kings counties. The farmer in his horse drawn wagon proved not up for a head-to-head match. The encounter could be fatal.

HS: November 16, 1899. *Andrew Kraus of this place, while driving a wagon loaded with produce to market last week, was run into by a trolley car in the vicinity of Ridgewood. Both wagon and car were going in the same direction and it was when Mr. Kraus tried to turn out of the way that the car struck the rear of the wagon, throwing wagon and horses to one side, the wagon on top of one of the horses, breaking its back and injuring the animal so that it died. Mr. Kraus fortunately escaped injury. The wagon was not so badly damaged.*

HS: August 28, 1900. *The Brooklyn Times says that John Helfrich, a produce dealer of Elmont, was struck by a Myrtle Avenue trolley on Monday afternoon while on his way home. When near Richmond Hill on the right track the wheels of a passing van caught the front wheel of his wagon, the collision throwing the horse in front of an approaching westbound trolley. Helfrich was thrown heavily to the pavement, but escaped with a few bruises. The wagon was not damaged to any great extent. The horse was cut and bruised and may have to be shot.*

HS: June 13, 1907. *John Stattle, son of George Stattle, while on his way to market with a team and loaded wagon, was run into near Cochran Boulevard, west of Jamaica, by a car of the B.R.T. The wagon was struck in*

front, demolishing one of the wheels, throwing Mr. Statile upon the macadam. He landed on his head and was rendered unconscious for several hours. He was removed to St. Mary's Hospital in Jamaica, where his condition is quite serious. When the turnout was struck one of the horses freed itself and dashed away, the other animal being fast was drawn quite a distance. Both animals were injured. The contents of the load were strewn over the highway.

HS: July 15, 1909. Joseph Hartman, 35 years old, a farmer of Central Avenue, had a narrow escape from death last Saturday, as he was driving his farm wagon and a team of horses across the railroad tracks at St. Albans. He did not hear an approaching train which struck the rear horse, killing both, and threw Mr. Hartman some distance from the wreck, causing a compound fracture of the leg below the right knee and a possible fracture of the skull. He was taken to St. Mary's Hospital.

HI: November 24, 1899. Anton Krumenacher [Krummenacker], a farmer of Fosters Meadow, was struck by a trolley car at Jamaica on Friday and received fatal injuries. That death was not instantaneous is remarkable. With his chest bone shattered, four ribs fractured and his collar bone broken in two places, the farmer drove to the Wallabout market in Brooklyn, and sold his load of vegetables. He then drove to St. Catherine's Hospital and asked to be 'fixed up in a hurry,' as he wanted to hurry home to his wife and eight children. He was detained at the hospital and died there Sunday morning. Krumenacher was six feet three inches tall and proportionately

heavy. He left his home early Friday evening and stopped at a hotel near Jamaica that night to water his horses. He was holding his horses when the trolley car struck him. Persons at the hotel advised him to discontinue his journey to the market, but he made light of his injuries and drove away. He was busy at the market until noon on Saturday. He then drove to the hospital. His wife was summoned to his bedside.

Dr. Casey of St. Catherine's Hospital said: "I did not suppose that any man could go about and attend to business after receiving such injuries, but Krumenacher was a model of perfect physical manhood. He was thirty-eight years old and large and healthy. His will power must have been equal to his physical strength. He may have hastened his death by going about after he was hurt, but I doubt that his life could have been saved even though he had received proper care and treatment at once."

These reports chronicle just some of the problems that beset the farmer. These troubles and others such as crop prices, diseases and fungus, development pressures, and conditions of the roads make agriculture a tough and demanding way to make a living even today. However, the area that was once Fosters Meadow continued to be a vibrant farming community until the middle of the twentieth century. Eventually, it succumbed to development pressures and to lower crop prices, brought about by cheap vegetables arriving at its markets in refrigerated trains and trucks from areas in the South.

Paul W. Hoffman lives in Jamesport. Eight of his great-great-grandparents, Joseph Hoffmann and Carolina Geiger, Johann Maerz [March] and Eva Geis, Nicklaus Kreischer and Gertrud Becker, Friedrich Reiser and Margaretha Knoblauch, were among the original German farmers of Fosters Meadow.

END NOTES

1. Author, "Fosters Meadow — The origins and transformation of a German farming community," *Long Island Forum*, Vol. LXIV, No. 3, 11-20.
2. Marc Linder and Lawrence S. Zacharias, *Of Cabbages and Kings County — Agriculture and the formation of Modern Brooklyn...* (Iowa City, IA: 1999), 57-60.
3. *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Agriculture Schedules, Towns of Hempstead and Jamaica, NY.*
4. *The Hempstead Inquirer*, (February 19, 1897), 2.
5. Robert Sappelt's diaries, privately owned by his family.
6. *The Queens County Sentinel*, Hempstead, NY.
7. *The Hempstead Sentinel*, Hempstead, NY. Successor newspaper to *The Queens County Sentinel*.
8. *The Long Island Democrat*, Jamaica, NY.
9. *The Hempstead Inquirer*, Hempstead, NY.
10. George R. Reiser, interview with the author, September 19, 2001.