

BRADFORD COUNTY HISTORIC BACKGROUND by Ted Keir, 2005

BRADFORD COUNTY is a part of the dissected Allegheny Plateau, carved by the eroding forces of the Susquehanna River and its many tributaries. Glaciation occurring nearly twelve thousand years ago also played a prominent role in creating many irregular natural features consisting of flat, stream valleys bordered by steep, rough mountains. The great ice sheet was responsible for leaving ponds and wetlands, huge deposits of sand and gravel and moving the soil and rocks to determine the flow of water in the creek and river watersheds.

Thousands of years before Europeans came to what is now Bradford County, migrant Indian hunters and fishermen roamed the forested hills and valleys. They had little knowledge of agriculture but made primitive stone weapons and tools that aided them in survival as they set up camps where wildlife was most abundant. These stone age people found the streams supporting great numbers of fresh water fish. With no barriers present on the Susquehanna River, there were great spawning migrations of shad, eels, herring and other fish from the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay that found their way up the river and its tributaries. Fish were taken with bone or flint spears, bone fishhooks, nets and weirs. The artifacts of this early culture may still be found along the streams, near hillside springs and hunting paths in the hills.

A great transition took place in the life of the Indians when they started to practice agriculture. Their desire and ability to become good gardeners and farmers ranks with contact with white people as the two most significant events in the history of the Indians.

Trees were girdled and seeds were planted beneath the dead branches. Slowly the land was cleared using crude tools. Fires would be built around the base of the trees, controlled by rings of clay and as the flames ate into the wood, grooved stone axes would be used to cut away the charred wood. Fire, when controlled and directed, was a very useful tool, not only in felling trees and cooking food but as a weapon for protection from dangerous animals.

The limbs of the felled tree were burned off and the log trunk rolled or dragged to a place where it could be used later. Wood was used for dugout canoes, dishes, hide stretchers, stockades and wooden poles used to construct dwellings.

The soil was worked with stone hoes attached to a short handle and holes were made in the soft earth for the seeds. Because of the abundance of fish, they were often used for fertilizer. Before the seeds were planted they were soaked in water containing vegetable poisons to discourage grubs, wire worms and crows. The principal garden crops grown were corn, beans, pumpkins, squash, potatoes, sunflowers, melons, gourds and tobacco. The Indians did not use the "broadcast" method of planting seeds but planted in rows and hills so cultivation with the stone hoe was made easier.

Corn was the most important crop grown and the Iroquois grew at least three types. A "flour" or dent type that was ground up for meal; sweet corn that was relished on the cob; and a fluffy, white popcorn completely unknown to the white man at that time.

Vegetables as well as meats were dried and stored for winter's use. Cache or storage pits are found at nearly every village site. Garden food was supplemented by nuts, mushrooms, herbs, roots and wild berries when in season. Hunting and fishing was still important but survival did not depend entirely upon the success of finding game in the forests and fish and mussels in the streams.

The important thing about agriculture was that it brought the nomadic Indians together in small villages where they could work together for mutual protection and plant, tend and harvest the crops that would help them survive the harsh winters. As they cleared more land and tended more crops, living conditions improved. Better living quarters were built, pottery and better implements were developed as the people had more time to devote to the improvement of handicrafts.

The early whites that came to Bradford County found the frontier very dangerous because of unfriendly Indians, hence there were very few settlers that braved the perils before the early 1800s. The Hartley and Sullivan Expeditions were successful in destroying many Indian villages, burning the grain fields and gardens and making the region safe enough for hardy white settlers and their families to homestead. In the Sullivan Expedition in 1779, General George Washington sent one-third of the Continental Army into this region to kill or drive out the hostile Indians.

A number of the soldiers taking part in the expedition against the Indians were so impressed with the fertile soil, beautiful forests of pine, hemlock and hardwoods, and clean streams teeming with fish, that they returned after the war with their families to build homes and start farming the partially cleared lands. The early settlers, who were mostly of English, Irish and Scotch-Irish extraction, settled in the river valley but as the stories about this land of milk and honey spread, the migration increased. Many settlers pushing up the valleys of the Susquehanna tributaries began their life anew along Towanda, Wyalusing, Wysox, Sugar Run, Tuscarora, Tunkhannock, Sugar and other creeks throughout the region.

If soil is the cradle of life, it was also the lifeblood that helped colonize the region. The soil would grow nearly any grain or plant. The first crops grown by the settlers were corn and potatoes. As they cleared more acres, wheat, rye, oats, buckwheat, flax, barley and hops were grown. Hay was an important crop from the time of the first white settlers and remains so today. In addition to field crops, pumpkins, squash, cabbage, beans, peas and other vegetables were grown for home consumption as well as for sale. Maple products, first made by the Indians of the region, were also exported by the county settlers and continue to be part of the economy today.

In 1832, the major commodities exported by the county were grain, flour, whiskey, fruit, salted meat, livestock and lumber. The lumber industry had begun to decline by about 1880 as the forests were used

up. By this time, dairy had become the dominant industry. A North Central Railway agent in Troy, on Sugar Creek, reported that over 3 million tons of butter were shipped out by rail in 1880.

For nearly a hundred years, Bradford County claims to have led the nation in the production of buckwheat although it is not grown commercially in the county today. Another successful crop, not grown in the county presently, was tobacco. In the 1900 Bradford County Directory, 340 tobacco growers are listed and 17 cigar manufacturers.

Coal and lumbering industries flourished briefly. Railroads and a canal were built and many mills were established along the fast flowing streams but most all of this development is gone today. There has been a revival of interest in lumber and wood products, partially due to increased knowledge of timber management which makes it possible to utilize forest lands in a more sustainable manner.

However, agriculture - and dairying in particular – has continued to remain the most important activity in the county. Today, Bradford County ranks third in number of milk cows in the state and is one of the major suppliers of fluid milk to the New York - New Jersey area. The Leprino mozzarella plant in Waverly, New York supplies most of the Pizza Hut restaurants in the nation with cheese, much of it produced with milk from Bradford County cows. Several other regional processing facilities also utilize county milk for non-liquid dairy products such as cheese and yogurt.

At the turn of the 21st century, Bradford County had become one of the premier veal producing areas in the country. With approximately 100 veal growers scattered around the county, it became a major supplier to the urban east coast markets. A relatively new industry in America, veal production was pioneered by Walter Newton of New Albany in the 1960s, using techniques from Europe. Newton set up a contract system with a number of farms in the county and his example was followed by several other leaders in the veal industry, in particular Rathbun Veal and Hickock Veal. The growth of the veal industry increased the price of bob calves; resulting in an expanded packing and slaughtering industry; and creating a network of jobs in trucking both calves and feed.

Bradford County has continued to attract new farmers due to reasonable land prices and an operating infrastructure of services to the agricultural sector. The county boasts two weekly farm papers that help to draw farmers from other parts of the east. In the early 1970s, a group of Amish farmers moved into the northeast part of the county. While numbers have diminished in recent years, these families have combined many of the traditional farm enterprises of Bradford County: maple syrup, hay, veal, dairy for cheese production, lumber, and others.

The county continues to maintain a vital agricultural sector and is becoming increasingly popular for recreation.