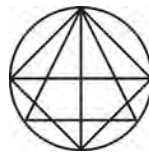


THE HOP FARMER'S YEAR

The Seasons, Tools and Methods of Hop Growers
in New York State's Golden Age of Hops

Albert C. Bullard



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in New York State's Golden Age of Hops**

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This book is dedicated to all the folks who shared their family stories, their artifacts, their hop houses and their joy in remembering New York's hop heritage.

BOOK PREVIEW

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Hops & Hop Houses: An Introduction	3
History: The Hop in New York State	6
January to July: Preparation, Planting and Cultivation	13
Preparing the Hop Poles	14
Wire Yards	17
Hop Frames	21
Setting the Hop Poles	24
Grubbing the Hops	27
Training and Tying the Hops	36
Stringing and Winding the Hops	38
Cultivating the Hops	43
Dusting the Hops	47
August and September: Harvest and Processing	50
Preparing the Hop House	50
Preparing for the Pickers	54
The Harvest	58
Hop Boxes	59
The Hop Pickers	68
The Box Tender	70
Hop Knives	71
Pole Pullers	74
Hop Jacks	83
The Sacker	86
Hop Stoves	88
Hop Rakes, Shovels and Pushers	96
October to December: Baling and Selling	103
Baling the Hops	104
Screw Presses	105
Ratchet Presses	111
Other Presses	113

Bale Pins and Hop Needles	116
Hop Stencils	118
Weighing the Hops	120
Hop Samplers	120
Hop Triers	126
Hop Sampling Kits	128
Appendix: Hop Houses of Central New York	131
Common Hop Houses	133
Step-up Kilns	135
Pyramid Kilns	137
Round Kilns	139
Unique Styles	140
Cows	142
Large Hop Farms	143
Notes on Further Reading	147
About the Author	149

The pole yard was less expensive and some of the poles might be cut on the home farm, as Leon did in 1894. Wire was always more costly to convert to, and farmers already had a good system, so why change?

Did the pickers prefer to work in a wire yard or a pole yard? Again I do not know and have never found anything to support either view. I do know that tradition is a hard thing to change. The pole yard was the traditional yard in New York State. When the last commercial hops were grown in the 1960s, they were grown on poles.

Did the large growers use wire yards? The size of the grower did not determine the use of a wire yard. The largest hop grower in the state at the turn of the 20th century was Jimmy Clark, with over 150 acres of hops. Clark used poles, and the photos of his yards and harvesting make this clear.

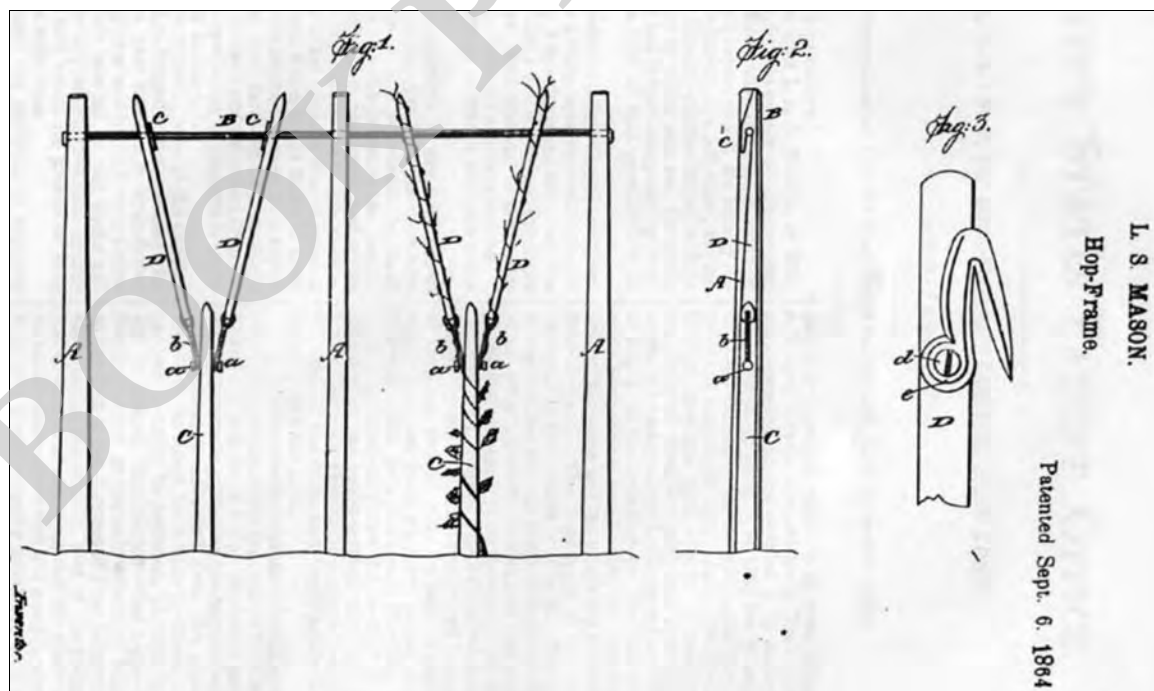


Jimmy Clark's "Hop City." The hop poles are visible along the right side of the road.

Hop Frames

A third method of growing hops is referred to in 19th-century literature. This was the hop frame. A hop frame refers to any system that is not a simple wire yard. I have never seen any pictures of a hop frame and no artifacts of this type of system are known. The only sources we have for these systems are the patent records.

Based on the patents, two categories of hop frames were tried. The first was a system that created a frame with a combination of wood and wire supports upon which the hops could grow. Sometimes the plan was simple, as in the case of a hop frame patented in 1864 by L.S. Mason of Middlefield Center, in Otsego County. In this system, stacks with a wire running between them were placed 12 feet apart or more. In each hop hill, a stack extended 4 feet out of the ground. To this stack were attached two removable, wooden or metal training-sticks that were supported by the wire above. One advantage of this system was that it gave the hops more stability in high winds. In addition, it was easy to harvest, as all one needed to do was remove the training-sticks to get the hops down for harvest.



Patent drawing for a Mason hop frame.

Some grubs might be considered as early examples of recycling. Many times old rasps were made over into hop grubs. An interesting example of this method is a grub with rather broad and flat tines that have a flared end. On the tines can still be seen the pattern of the old rasp that was used to make the tool.



Rasp grubber.

The foundry in Munnsville made another type of grub. In an old catalog, they refer to this tool as a “hop grub hoe.” It was sold for use in the hop yards and the cultivation of grapes. This tool has a double head. On one side is a horseshoe-shaped, two-tine grub, on the other a small hoe. The tool is very heavy and has a rugged handle. Some of these Munnsville grubs are lighter in weight, but follow the same pattern. I have never seen a marked grub of this type.



Center: Munnsville grub.

Cultivating the Hops

Grubbing, training, tying, stringing and winding the hops were tasks that often were performed simultaneously in different parts of the yards. Leon's entry for May 8 reads, "Arthur twined hops all day. Still grubbing the hops." And well into June (11-13) the diary records, "Putting hops on twine."

At the same time, in other parts of the yards, cultivation of the hops started as early as April 23. This process would continue until the yards were so thick that it was impossible to work a horse-drawn cultivator through the rows, usually by the end of June. This advice from Jimmy Clark was one of his keys to success as a hop grower. His yards were always famous for their weed-free appearance.

The cultivator should be used sufficiently often to keep down weeds, and the hills should be dressed with a hoe three or four times. Never let the weeds get the upper hand. As soon as the poles or stakes are set, start the cultivation, three or four times in a row both ways, and keep going over the yard every week until within about two weeks of picking. Whatever may be neglected, don't fail to cultivate, cultivate, cultivate, as that loosens the soil, admits sun and air, releases the plant food, keeps down the weeds, and advances and increases the crop very materially. Late cultivation also helps to bring the hops to burr.

Cultivators used in the hop yards were of several styles. Some cultivators were specifically used in the hop yards while others were more general cultivators. The photo below of four cultivators from the 1995 hop seminar shows the basic types.





Advertisement from a Waterville Newspaper.

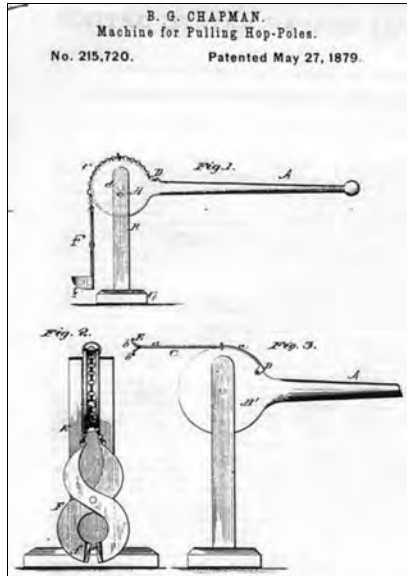
On some farms the owner saw to the purchasing of insurance on the hop house and the hop crop. Fire was the big danger, as the hop stoves were burned very hot and the dried hops would make excellent kindling. These policies were for short terms, about sixty days.

Some farmers also needed to go to the local print shop to get tickets for the upcoming harvest (see following page). Hop tickets were issued to the pickers according to how much they picked. They came in a variety of denominations, from a quarter box to a single box. At the end of the picking season, these tickets would be redeemed at the going rate per box.

Another way to record the amount of hops picked was with a printed punch card. These were punched once for each box or part of a box picked. I have been told that metal tickets were also in use, but I have never seen any from the upstate area.



Leon Van Patten's hop insurance policy, Middlefield Center, 1891.



Patent drawing for a Chapman pulling machine.

The basic machine is made of wood, with a base and an upright that supports a lever with a large circular head. Attached to the lever where the circular head begins, is a chain that is held in a groove in the circular head. The chain holds a forged-iron device that actually attaches to the pole and lifts it. The wood on these machines was originally given a red wash, marked with “Chapman” and the date of patent stenciled on the upright.

I have tried my puller and it is a very efficient tool. By placing the foot of the machine near the hop pole and lifting the lever arm upward, the iron puller is made ready to attach to the pole. The puller opens much like the hop dog and is clasped to the pole. By pressing down on the lever arm, the puller is tightened and the pole is lifted. If another pull is needed, one can simply lower the lever arm, and the puller will reset and be ready for another lift. The

only problem I found was that the foot was slightly unstable, and I was never able to get it to reset as it said it would in the patent.



Chapman hop pole puller with original cast-iron puller, Clayville.

Another important manufacturer was in Munnsville. The striking characteristics that set these stoves off from the Otsego type were the use of a ridged casting rather than a smooth surface on the upper section, and no bulging fire box. The stove was also held together by the use of long, threaded iron bolts. Also, in the mid-section, they were more elongated than the Otsego style. The Munnsville stove was made to burn coal, which was heralded as a great improvement. In 1873, Stringer, Barr & Company developed this style with coal-burning grates. Two years later they patented this idea and, for many years, did a good business under the name of the Munnsville Plow Company. Later, the firm was owned by Stringer, Dexter & Company, but kept the same firm name. These stoves, for all their popularity in the 19th century, are very rare today. I have seen only three examples of Munnsville stoves, and they were very different in size.

Another interesting stove was “Kelley’s Improved Radiating Furnace,” made in Oriskany Falls. Three features made these stoves unique. One was the way that the fire pot was made, with horizontal lines on it. In the Otsego models, the fire pot is always smooth-cast. The use of a track that permitted the door to the upper part to move around the body of the stove also differed from the Otsego type. In the Otsego stoves, the door was hinged to the upper part. The final feature was the decorative cast eagle found on the upper section of the stove. I have only seen one stove like this, but have been told of these eagles by several people. Also on the Oriskany stove was a very interesting cast-iron T-joint stovepipe holder. The Oriskany stove usually had only one large stovepipe hole.



Munnsville hop stove.



Oriskany Falls hop stove with a cast-iron T-joint stovepipe support.

Hops are a very light, but bulky crop to move, so a shovel that might make a large scoop would be very handy.

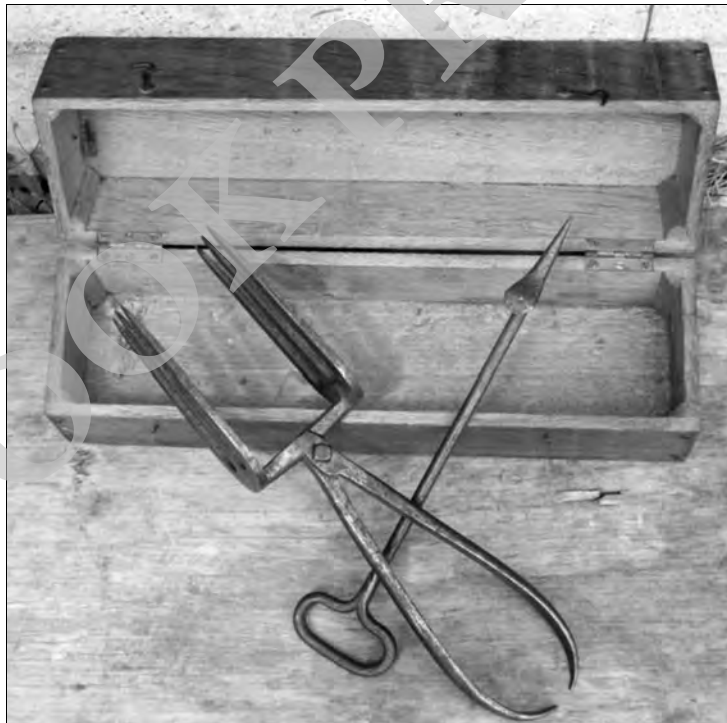
Hop shovel with original cloth bag, Otsego County. Shovel is 29 in. by 37 in.



Left: Man demonstrating the use of a hop shovel shown in the photo above.
Right: Cloth-lined hop shovel. Both images c. 1900; from the collection of Robert Seaver.

Hop Sampling Kits

Often a sampler and trier are found in a sampling kit, which I mentioned above. These are made of wood, leather or leather-covered wood. Usually they have a hinged top with a lock, or two hooks and eyes to fasten the lid. In the center of the top of the box is a carrying handle. Both buyers and growers used these kits. Along with the sampler and trier, other tools could be inside the kit. Often hop needles and some heavy-duty thread would be in the kit to sew the opened bale shut after the sample was removed. In some kits bale pins are also found. These were used to hold the hop sacking back while the sample was removed. Also a good, long-bladed knife would have been a handy tool. The knife was used to start the cut for the sample that the hop sampler removed. In the picture of the Rose hop office (page 125), several of these kits can be seen on the bales in the rear of the room.



Hop sampler kit with sampler and trier, Schoharie County. The box is 19 in. long by 6 in. wide by 7 in. deep.

Appendix:

Hop Houses of Central New York

One of the last remnants of the great days of hop growing in Upstate New York are the hop houses that might still be found on many farms. These buildings were a very important part of the hop culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Today they are an endangered species, and in some areas almost gone, but still remind us of that by-gone hop era.

The hop house, hop “kilm” or “kill,” differs from most farm structures because it was a building used to cure a product—hops—and prepare them for market. Today, some try to call these buildings “hops barns,” which is a totally incorrect name. Any barn is a place to store agricultural products like hay. With the exception of the off-season, hop houses were not storage buildings, but primarily processing plants.

In 1883, W.A. Lawrence of Waterville in Oneida County described the workings of a hop house as follows:

“... every hop kiln is not only a drying house, but is also a bleachery; a preserving and curing-house, and a packing-house, all in one.”

Since this building had these diverse functions, we should examine its structure before moving on to the various styles. Each hop house has two distinct sections. First, the kiln, with the furnace (or stove) room on the ground floor, and the drying room above. Second, the storage area, with the press room on the ground floor, and a storage room above.

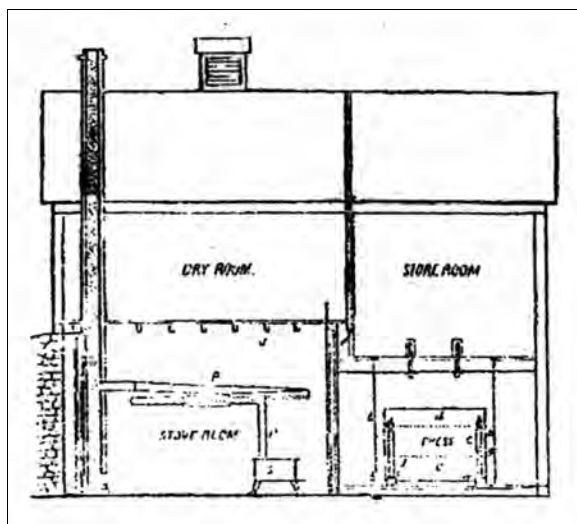


Diagram of a hop house showing the four basic parts: Furnace Room, Drying Room, Storage Room, and Press Room.

About the Author

ALBERT C. BULLARD earned his B.A. in History from Lebanon Valley College, and his M.A. in Folklife Studies and Museum Management from the Cooperstown Graduate Program of the State University of New York at Oneonta. From 1968 to 2001, he was a teacher at the Cooperstown Central School. His interest in hops and hop growing started while in graduate school, and since then he has collected the stories, tools and artifacts of New York's hop heritage. He has curated and contributed artifacts to various museum exhibits, most notably "When Hops Were King" at The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, which ran from 1998 to 2003. He has written extensively on the subject, and has given lectures and participated in seminars and hop festivals. For his activities he was awarded the title of "Hop King" at the Madison County (N.Y.) Hop Fest in 2002.