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When the Hop Was King in New York State

In the 19th century, New York State experienced a “Golden Age” of hop growing. The Empire State was an agricultural powerhouse that produced almost 90% of the hop crop of the United States. But the sixty-year dominance of this market was achieved by vast numbers of small, independent hop growers. What were the methods and tools they used to do this? What caused New York to relinquish its leadership in this lucrative, but labor-intensive market?

The interest in growing hops commercially for craft and farm breweries has surged once again, thanks to the craft beer renaissance in New York. What can today’s small-scale hop growers learn from their predecessors? In *The Hop Farmer’s Year*, hop historian Al Bullard uses the farm diary of one successful Upstate farmer to answer these questions. Throughout the book, the author provides a guide to the seasonal cycles of running a hop farm, presents a fascinating survey of the unique hop tools used by the growers, and gives us insight into how they were used, and at what time of the year.

Bullard studied the tools and technology of hop growing for fifty years, and is a leading expert on New York’s success during the 19th and early 20th centuries. “It’s amazing to me that by the 1880s, the state was producing 21,000,000 pounds of hops annually, but that this was done by small farmers. Hops were just another crop in their annual growing cycle,” he stated. “Although hops were grown in many counties, the majority of this production was focused in Otsego, Oneida and Madison counties, which were the center of hop culture.”

The book follows the 1894 farm diary of Leon Van Patten of Middlefield Center, not far from Cooperstown in rural Otsego County. The diary is typical of the period, and highlights what hop growers did during the calendar year. The author describes the seasonal cycles of the preparation of the hop yard, the cultivation of the growing vines, the harvesting and processing of the hops, and the baling and selling of the final product. Throughout each chapter, the tools used during each season by the growers, farm hands, seasonal pickers and sellers, are explained and illustrated in detail. Bullard, a retired Cooperstown school teacher and an antiques dealer, has collected these tools for decades. “While there were many tools developed specifically for the hop industry during that time, standard farm tools were also used for hops too. But if a tool didn’t come specifically from a hop farm or a hop house, I didn’t consider it a hop tool,” he explained.

When Bullard attended the Cooperstown Graduate School, he was given an assignment to map all the man-made objects within a single square mile of the local area. It was then that he saw his first hop house and gained an interest in the hop history of New York State. Hop houses, or kilns, were a unique structure unlike other farm buildings. The appendix of the book includes a survey of the different styles of hop houses that were used during that time, when they were on almost every family farm in Central New York. Bullard noted, “When I first encountered them, they were everywhere. Now they are almost all gone.” Some were converted to other uses, some were torn down, and others just simply fell down. “It’s sad,” he added, “but at least we have many of the tools and other items from the great hop times.”

The Hop Farmer’s Year is published by Square Circle Press of Schenectady. Owner and Publisher Richard Vang once covered the beer industry in New Mexico, and then later in New York. During the mid-1990s, New York was well behind the rest of the country in the craft beer industry. “There were just a handful of brew pubs and microbreweries in Upstate New York -- and no commercial hop yards,” Vang said. “It was in Cooperstown that I first heard about the legendary hop industry. I had to write an article about it, and everyone told me to talk to Al Bullard. Everything I learned about hops, I learned from him. Naturally, when he came to me to publish his book, I jumped at the chance.”

The book has over 200 illustrations and is the first-ever study to focus specifically on the hop industry of New York State. The book launch will take place at the 20th Annual Madison County Hop Fest in Oneida, where, for his lifelong study of hop culture, Bullard was crowned “Hop King” in 2002. The book goes on sale to the general public on September 19th, and will be available through the publisher’s web site and other major online retailers. Any libraries or retailers interested in the book are encouraged to contact Square Circle Press or one of its distributors.

The Hop Farmer’s Year: The Seasons, Tools and Methods of Hop Growers in New York State’s Golden Age of Hops

by Albert C. Bullard

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