Yamhill County Crop History Project

Community-Involved Historical Discovery

LOCAL HISTORY SPOTLIGHT

by Russ Karow and Gloria Lutz

AGRICULTURE has been an important industry in Yamhill County since the mid nineteenth century. Early growers were leaders in farming innovations and promotion. Levi Davis, for example, invented a grain combine in 1862, and the town of Lafayette held Oregon’s first county fair in 1854.1 Yamhill County remains an Oregon agricultural force to this day. In recent years, the county has ranked in the top eight in overall agricultural product value (over $280 million annually) and is number one in the state for hazelnut and broiler chicken production. It is also in the top three in tree fruits, berries, and egg production. Tourism, especially related to the wine industry, is gaining ground as an economic force in the county but still accounts for less than half the value produced by agriculture.2

Given the prominence of agriculture, a growing public interest in food sources, and a general interest in history, Gloria Lutz, Landscaping Coordinator at the Yamhill Valley Heritage Center in McMinnville, decided to gather historical information about the crops of the county. Prior to her work, no single source existed that documented Yamhill County’s historical crops. Her primary goal was to share this information with the many grade K–12 students who visit the center each year, but she also recognized it would be of interest to many others as well. Having secured a small grant from Trust Management Services, LLC, of Waldport, Oregon, she began initial exploration.3 Russ Karow, a professor emeritus of Crop and Soil Science at Oregon State University (OSU), agreed to take on the project and enlisted the assistance of Chianna Tolton, an OSU undergraduate student with a Communications major and Agricultural Science minor.

(RIGHT) J. KENNETH RILEY is pictured in 1915 with giant celery plants that he grew in Yamhill County. Until this research project began, this bit of history about celery production in Oregon was not known.
Karow and Lutz mined the information available electronically in the Oregon Agricultural Information Network (OAIN) at OSU and in the Century Farm records held by the Oregon Historical Society and Farm Bureau. Karow scoured the paper crop reporting records from the OSU Agricultural and Resource Economics Department (AREC, now Applied Economics) held in OSU’s Archives and Special Collections. These combined efforts — about fifty hours of work — resulted in spreadsheets that included the first records of pioneer-introduced crops in Yamhill County, beginning in the 1840s (pulled mostly from Century Farm data and supplemented by discussions with community members) as well as information from the 1930s through 2012 (pulled from OAIN and AREC paper records). Then the magic began.

These initial spreadsheets were printed in large-scale poster format and posted at the Yamhill Valley Heritage Center. They were also printed on ledger-size paper and handed out to local agricultural supply dealers and agriculture and history teachers, and to anyone else with an interest in crops and history. Lutz asked people to scour their family records and to pick the brains of their elders to fill in missing pieces between the first crop introductions in the 1840s and the first data records, from the 1930s. Lutz also used written statements recording family history to begin to fill in the gaps. The response to this challenge was quite gratifying and continues today. The posters are kept in Excel format and will be updated routinely as new information is obtained. Comment forms are available near the poster display at the heritage center. Viewers are invited to contribute their knowledge to further enhance the timeline.

Another piece of this project involved “first plants” utilized by Native Americans in the region. The knowledge and educational skills of David G. Lewis and Greg Archuleta, Ethnohistory Research, LLC, were enlisted, and they produced a publication titled “Native Plants and Tribal Uses In Western Oregon.” This

GLEN WATTS AND KEN ROGERS (left to right) examine the poster-size printouts of the Yamhill County Crop History Project spreadsheet at the Yamhill Valley Heritage Center in McMinnville, Oregon.
copyrighted publication is being used at the Heritage Center to provide visitors with detailed information about native plant use by western Oregon tribal peoples. Lewis can be contacted about other uses of this publication or interest in development of similar materials for other parts of the Pacific Northwest.

What were some of the more interesting findings of this project? Levi Davis was a mid-nineteenth-century grower and inventor in Yamhill County. He and his brothers built and patented the first combine used in Yamhill County and the second, according to a local newspaper article, patented in the United States. While canola has raised a firestorm of concern in western Oregon in recent years due to its purported potential to damage the area’s specialty seed industry, the crop is far from new in the region. Canola was bred by Canadian plant breeders in the early 1970s. It is a version of rapeseed — a crop that is over 4,000 years old — with low erucic acid and glucosinolate. As part of our work, we obtained documentation of rapeseed production in Yamhill County in the 1960s. We had never thought about celery production in Oregon, but we discovered that J. Kenneth Riley grew massive celery plants in the mid 1910s. There is also documentation of cranberry production in 1909. The First and Second World Wars each had an effect on international transportation and thus access to some agricultural products. Sugar was one of the affected commodities, and we found documentation of sweet sorghum and sugar cane production in Yamhill County in the 1940s. Founder crops — those brought to new areas by Euro-American settlers — are always of interest. The usual array was present in Yamhill County — wheat, barley, oats, flax, clovers, apples, potatoes — but there were also some less-common species. Early production of pears, sweet cherries, and walnuts foretold the agricultural future of the county.

Large posters are now on permanent display at the Yamhill County Heritage Center. They offer an opportunity for old timers to reminisce about days and crops gone by and for younger generations to learn about the varied and sometimes surprising crop histories of their county. Plants, crops, and foods have been of interest to people across time. If you have interest in the history of crops in your area and would like to initiate a community-involved history project, we suggest exploring a path similar to this one taken in Yamhill County.

NOTES


3. For information on Trust Management, LLC, grant information, see http://trustmanagementservices.net/index.html (accessed July 6, 2017).

4. OAIN records are available online and an access code is needed to most easily mine the database: http://oain.oregonstate.edu (accessed July 6, 2017).

5. For information on Trust Management, LLC, grant information, see http://trustmanagementservices.net/index.html (accessed July 6, 2017).
