

Almanacs Were Popular Farm Information Source

Two books shaped the lives of Colonial farmers. One, of course, was the Bible. The other book, although not as highly revered, was certainly respected and considered quite indispensable. It was the farmers' almanac.

Prior to the Civil War, few farmers gleaned any information about agriculture from the printed page. Many were illiterate. Most of those who could read and write were content with the simple wisdom found in almanacs. Books, memoirs of agricultural societies and farm periodicals were read only by gentlemen farmers. Most tillers of the soil considered "book farming" purely theoretical and hence impractical.

The almanac was by far the most important means of disseminating information on agriculture. It was the literate farm family's newspaper, radio, TV and magazine rolled into one. Many families stitched the annual editions together, and hung them on a nail by the fireplace. These were sometimes preserved in unbroken sequence for 50 years or more. Needless to say, no well-brought-up farm child would destroy or mutilate an almanac. To do so would be an unpardonable act of vandalism.

Not only did the almanac serve as the farmer's weather reporter, moral guide and practical advisor, it served also the function of notebook,

diary and account book. Blank pages and margins were covered with notes and comments, some of which no doubt could only be deciphered by the writer himself.

For example, a copy of Conrad's Agricultural Almanac for the year 1825 contains these notes: "First Month, 5th Bought boar pig of John Pascal 4 weeks old, 1 dollar. Fourth Month, 12th, Finish sowing oats. Hired Josiah Webster for one month at 9 dollars. Sixth Month, 27th Cradled wheat 32 bushels on one acre and one half. Eighth Month, 8th Cart run came off.

The earliest almanac published in America was originally issued by William Price at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1639. Comparatively few almanacs were distributed however, until after 1732 when Benjamin Franklin began

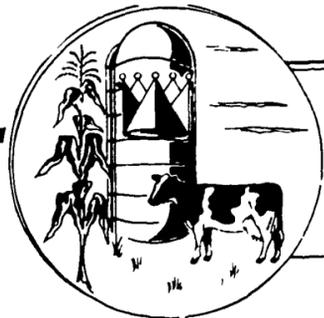
publication of his "Poor Richard's Almanac". This was the most famous almanac, and became next to the Bible, the most widely quoted publication in America.

In later years, Franklin told how he had started this book which was a milestone of American history and agriculture. "In 1732 I first published my Almanac, under the name of Richard Saunders. It was continued by me about twenty-five years (1732-1757) and was commonly called Poor Richard's Almanac. I endeavored to make it both entertaining and useful and accordingly it came to be in such demand that I reaped considerable profit from it, vending near ten thousand.

It was generally read scarce any neighborhood in the province being without it.

Some of Poor Richard's more pithy sayings were

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I feel that one of the biggest things that helped us get this production is the quality of roughage we have to feed our cows and feeding it in a balanced feeding program. We treated all our corn silage, haylage and hay with Silo King last year and it was the best quality roughage we've made. Our haylage juiced a little but that was because I chopped it over 75 percent moisture. I had windrowed my hay too tight and the

air could not get through it. I thought this haylage would stink and the cows wouldn't like it. I'm in the bottom three doors of that silo now and the cows eat it like candy.

I feel it pays to take good care of my young stock - grow my heifers and yet not get them too fat. My heifers are freshening at 2 years old and some are milking as high as 70 pounds milk. My cows get mostly corn silage (about 40 pounds per cow), 12 pounds haylage, 5 pounds hay; and grain is fed according to production. The grain ration is made up of corn, a little oats, and the protein, calcium, phosphorus, vitamins, and trace minerals necessary according to my roughage tests. I think samples should be run every 4-6 weeks to get a good job done."

Mrs. Boll Says, "Farmers' wives have to be patient because Agri-King doesn't work over-night."

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The worst wheel of the cart makes the most noise

- If you know how to spend less than what you get, you have the philosopher's stone that turns into gold

- Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterward

"Poor Richard's Almanac" was succeeded by "Poor Richard Improved", which was published from 1757 until 1773. It devoted space to such items as "For a foundered horse", and "Easy methods of increasing the milk of cows". Many of these were bits of experience contributed by subscribers.

The weather forecasts in all almanacs were a mixture of whimsy and hocus pocus, and usually more entertaining than enlightening. Statements like, "It may gather up for a storm today," or "It looks like rain but there probably will be none," were common. One almanac, with pungent humor, states, "This year the sun will repeatedly rise before many people leave their beds and set before they have done a day's work."

After the Civil War, literacy and printing presses spread rapidly through America. Farm papers and country journals were more widely read. This competition for the reader's attention was more than most of the almanac publishers could withstand, and so they turned to other endeavors.

Agrifacts . . .

One or more Guinea hens were placed in flocks of fowl to prevent molestation from hawks.

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