The Historical Development of Agriculture in Illinois

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Illinois' agricultural history is long and complex. Illinois' first settlers, the Native Americans, practiced hunting, gathering, and fishing and made use of the resources of the woods and prairies. By the tenth century, Native Americans combined men's hunting with women's agricultural activities to meet the needs of their communities. The earliest crop Native American women cultivated was corn, imported to Illinois from the Southwest.

By the early years of the nineteenth century, Euro-American settlers were making their way into what is now Illinois. They followed the tree line and the rivers in the southeastern region of the territory. Early settlers often came to Illinois from heavily wooded areas. They were convinced that the quality of a piece of land could be judged by the trees growing on it. As a result, Illinois' fertile but treeless prairies had little appeal for them. Instead, settlers moved into wooded areas, gradually clearing and cultivating wooded plots. Clearing twenty acres often took a generation.

Early settlers arrived with few resources. In 1831 Rebecca and "John Burlend arrived in Pike County from England. They owned almost no tools and only a few poor-quality animals. The Burlends planted wheat, corn, and garden crops and earned a small cash income from the maple sugar their trees produced. The Burlends survived and eventually thrived largely by way of hard work and determination. Every member of the family devoted his or her effort to building and maintaining the farm.

After 1830 farmers migrating from New England and the Southeast began to make their way onto the prairies. The prairies posed a new set of problems for farmers. Below the land's surface were tough, fibrous roots of tall prairie grasses, extending downward a foot or more. A simple wooden plow could hardly penetrate the surface. Enterprising farmers responded by constructing enormous breaking plows that required five or six yoke of oxen and two men to drive the oxen. Even so, the earth clung to the wooden or cast-iron plows, forcing farmers to stop every few feet to clean the soil from them. In 1837 a blacksmith named John Deere...
solved both problems with the invention of a steel plow that could cut the roots of prairie grasses and shed sticky prairie soils.

As new technologies became available, farmers adopted machines such as the McCormick reaper that made their work easier. In 1845 Cyrus McCormick invented a machine that could cut an acre of wheat in an hour and a half. The McCormick reaper cost $120, a substantial investment in that day. By the 1850s, farmers with a large amount of land would also use new threshing machines to separate the grain from the chaff. In spite of these technological developments, however, farming remained hard, physical work that required the efforts of an entire family. Labor tended to be scarce and expensive, so families made use of all of their members. Men worked in the fields and cared for animals. Women tended their homes and to their children's needs, while raising chickens, milking cows, cultivating a garden, and doing field work as needed. Farm women rarely confined themselves to the household, however, and they took great pride in

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their contributions to the family's income. Children began work at an early age, first aiding their mothers in the house and the barnyard, and then moving into the fields. Work became more sex-defined as children moved into adolescence, but parents generally expected daughters to work in the fields if needed.

Because of the cost of land, housing, fencing, and tools, farming in Illinois was not for the poor. In 1850 it cost about $1,000 for a farm family who wanted to own or rent a farm and to establish a successful enterprise. While this might seem like a modest sum today, it represented anywhere from four to ten years' work for a mid-nineteenth-century farming family.

By 1900 many Illinois farms were becoming more specialized. Although farmers in southern Illinois continued to grow a variety of crops, those on the state's prairies tended to focus their energies on growing corn and raising hogs. In time, soybeans become one of the state's primary crops.

In the twentieth century, farming in Illinois has become more expensive and more technologically advanced. Some farmers adopted the use of tractors to meet their labor needs during World War I, and many more adopted tractors during World War II. As a result of this technological revolution, Illinois farmers were able to increase production of food, even
though many young farm laborers went to war. After World War II many farmers made use of ever-more expensive technology and adopted the use of hybrid seeds, pesticides, and herbicides—all the result of intensive scientific research and experimentation. Meanwhile, mechanical corn pickers became readily available, making what had been tedious manual labor considerably less difficult. By 1950 it took only five to seven hours to cut an acre of corn. One hundred years earlier, it had taken from thirty to thirty-five hours. Such improvements, however, came at a price. In 1997 a new John Deere combine equipped with a corn header cost more than $250,000.

Agriculture in Illinois has come a long way since the early nineteenth century. Farmers now grow a more specialized group of crops and have more specialized tools with which to do their work. Because very few farm families raise all of their own food and machinery has decreased labor requirements, farm women often work off the farm to supplement their families' income, rather than working in the fields. Farm children spend fewer hours working for their parents than their predecessors did even fifty years ago. Because of new technology, farm work in general requires less time-consuming manual labor. It is also true that farming has become more prohibitive to enter because of the cost of land and machinery. Between 1831 and 1845, John and Rebecca Burlend built a farm out of a tiny investment, a few hand tools, and lots of hard work. It is highly unlikely that their great, great grandchildren, similarly equipped, could do the same today.