CHAPTER XIII

THE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF STARKE COUNTY

By H. R. Smalley, County Agricultural Agent

Starke County has made its greatest agricultural development, by far, within the last twenty years; prior to this time hunting, trapping and fishing were the chief occupations of the rural inhabitants. Most of the farming that was done consisted in the making of marsh hay, which was until within the last few years a very expensive business in this county. The land had not been drained, the Kankakee River overflowed every year and spread all over the surrounding country so that it was impossible to put in crops. About twenty years ago the Kankakee River, which forms the northwest boundary line of the county, was deepened and straightened and the first dredge ditches were dug and, although they were inadequate to carry off the water from the areas which they were supposed to drain, they demonstrated thoroughly that the land could be drained and that if it were properly drained it would be very valuable from an agricultural standpoint. Since that time a great many large ditches and many smaller tributaries have been dug and tile drains have been put in, to a greater or less extent, on most of our farms. Although this drainage system still needs to be supplemented by additional dredge ditches and by the laying of many more tile drains, it has transformed Starke County from a hunting and fishing ground into one of the most valuable agricultural sections of the state.

Starke County lies almost entirely in the Kankakee Valley, and for this reason its soils are different from soils found in nearly any other part of the state. Geologists tell us that the whole State of Indiana, except a small V-shaped portion in the southern part, was at one time covered by a huge ice-sheet and that when the climate changed and the ice melted there was formed a large lake in the present Valley of the Kankakee.

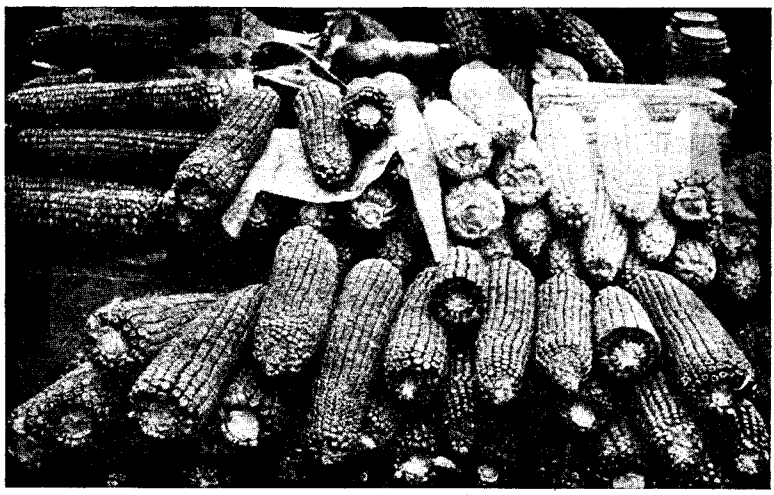
Ages passed, for it has taken a very long time for the formation of soils, and this large lake washed an outlet through its western boundary and drained away, leaving the vast marshy region much as it was when first visited by white men. When one travels over this country and sees the sand-ridges and the low lying marsh land it is not hard to imagine the prehistoric lake with its sandbars, islands, low sloping beaches and deeper waters between.

After the lake drained away and only the lower portions of its bed were occupied by water, a thick marsh vegetation sprang up, which

grew, fell and decayed for many centuries. The high sands supported only a sparse vegetation which has never accumulated because it has been thoroughly decomposed by the natural agencies of sunshine, air and limited moisture supply. Between the sands and the mucks are frequently large areas of sandy loam and peaty sand soils which contain less vegetable matter than the mucks and more than the light sands. In fact, there is every gradation of soil from pure sand to pure muck or peat and often several radically different types are found within the same ten-acre field.

Value of Potash Discovered

About fifteen years ago investigators at the Indiana Agricultural Experiment Station discovered that in most cases marsh farm soils,



Starke County Product

which are chiefly mucks and black sands, are very deficient in potash, which is one of the elements of soil fertility and which is very necessary for the production of crops, and many of the soils which would formerly not produce a respectable yield of any crop are now producing excellent crops of corn, onions, potatoes, oats, wheat, timothy and other crops less extensively grown. In fact, these black marsh soils are destined to become the most valuable agricultural lands in the state. Since the discovery of the lack of potash in our muck and black sandy soils we have learned that in some other soils, which are inclined to grow dewberry briars, red sorrel and other plants which indicate an acid condition of the soil, are in need of lime and phosphoric acid. We have also learned that for our upland sandy soils the cowpea is perhaps the crop best adapted to these soils. About six or seven years ago a few farmers began to grow cowpeas and the acreage is steadily increasing until in 1914 there were raised fully six thousand acres of cowpeas, which yielded at least fifty thousand bushels, and if we estimate the price

per bushel at two dollars, they have brought in one hundred thousand dollars to the farmers of this county.

Onion growing, which was introduced to this county only a few years ago, has in most cases proven to be profitable. Many muck fields which were previously uncultivated have been drained out and are producing from three hundred to one thousand bushels per acre. The low price in 1912 served to discourage many growers and caused them to drop out of the business, but most of those who stayed in the game every year have come through with a good margin of profit.

Another crop which is receiving considerable attention at this time is peppermint, and at present there is one farm in the county on which there were 300 acres of peppermint grown in 1914. The price of peppermint oil varies considerable and it is therefore about as uncertain a crop as onions, but some people are engaging in the business all the time and thus far they have all made a nice profit.

Starke County will see an even greater development within the next few years. It needs more and better live stock in order that our farmers can manufacture their grains and roughages into some higher priced products, such as pork, beef, mutton, butter, cream, etc., for which there is an ever increasing demand and for which the prices are almost sure to be high, owing to the continued increase in our population, which is being brought about by our industrial development.