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The Reaper Industry in Brockport

Helen Hastings

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As a great niece of William H. Seymour and long time resident of Brockport, New York, I have become well acquainted with many phases of the history of the reaper industry here, and in further preparation for writing this paper I have studied all that pertains to the subject in Monroe County histories.

I have also read carefully the leading biographies of Cyrus Hall McCormick.

The subject of the patent controversies is a perplexing one but I have tried to follow its main outline, and the authorities for certain of my statements are given below:

“Cyrus Hall McCormick and the Reaper” by Rueben Gold Thweite pp 246, 247, 248.

“Cyrus Hall McCormick” by William T. Hutchinson, P 233 – About reapers sent to Chicago-and chapters on the Patent Extension Battle and the Second Reaper War, 1848-55.

“The Century of the Reaper” by Cyrus McCormick, pp 26, 27, 28.

Helen M. Hastings

The Reaper Industry in Brockport

It was because of the chance meeting of two people in Washington, D. C. and the conversation between them that the manufacture of reaping machines had its beginning in Brockport, New York, a century ago. One of these persons was a Northerner – the other, a Southerner, the latter being Cyrus Hall McCormick.

Cyrus McCormick whose name is always associated with the reaping machine, was born on a farm in Rockbridge County, Virginia, in 1809. But this farm was not such a farm that we see around us in Monroe County, New York, today. Everything was primitive-when the grain ripened, it was cut down laboriously with a sickle or a cradle-scythe, only slightly more effective, and then as slowly garnered by hand.

McCormick's father was obsessed by the idea that he could invent a reaping machine. He had a small blacksmith shop on his farm, in which he had originated various farming tools which were practical and which had been used with success, but all his efforts to produce a reaping machine were failures, though he kept right on trying.

Cyrus, who with growing skepticism, had watched the older man working at his hobby through the years, finally took over and, profiting by what he had learned by observation, he was able to produce a reaper that really worked.

According to the record, young McCormick obtained a patent on his invention in 1834, and then, still experimenting, he began making reapers during the winters, on his father's farm in Virginia. In the summers he went about giving field trials of his reapers and selling a few of them, but the conviction grew upon him that the North and West were the best markets, not only because they were great wheat-growing regions but also because of their superior transportation facilities.

The story is told in all the Monroe County histories of the meeting in Washington, of a man from Brockport – usually said to be Elias B. Holmes – and Cyrus McCormick, who was on his way north at that time. Mr. Holmes informed the young man that Brockport, New York, on the Erie Canal, was in the center of a fine wheat-producing region – “no better wheat anywhere!” – and that Backus & Fitch, who owned a foundry in the village, would most probably make his reaper for him. McCormick must have been favorably impressed by what he heard about Brockport, for he soon demonstrated his reaper on the farm of Frederick P. Root, south of here, and arranged with Backus, Fitch & Co., to make reaping machines for him under his supervision. Something went wrong – Backus, Fitch & Co., would only make a few machines and McCormick soon turned to the Globe Iron Works, the other foundry in the Village, and arranged for them to make one hundred of his reapers for the coming harvest of 1846. The proprietors of the Globe Iron Works – Seymour and Morgan – made the full number asked for and, as this was the first time reaping machines had been produced in quantity in the country or anywhere else, they have rightly been called pioneers in the manufacture of the reaper.

It says, in Hutchinson's biography of McCormick, that, although Genesee Valley grain suffered particularly from a blight that ruined much of the Eastern wheat, Seymour and Morgan alone did well in this harvest of 1846. The Mexican War was in progress and an army of 50,000 must be fed. There was a frantic demand for reapers in the West and most of the hundred machines built by this firm were shipped by canal to Buffalo and thence by steamboat to Chicago, for use on the prairies.

The next year, Seymour & Morgan were ready to make reapers for McCormick again but they learned that he expected a royalty of \$30.00 on every machine made for him, and this they considered too much. Cyrus was unwilling to modify his demands, no agreement could be reached, and so the young man let it be known that he was through with Brockport, and refused further use of his patent to the Globe Iron Works.

Here was a situation indeed – the manufacture of reaping machines had made an auspicious beginning in Brockport and there was no disposition to give it up; yet, how could it continue under the existing conditions? McCormick was already fighting another inventor – Obed Hussey – and there was every reason to believe that, if they infringed on his patent rights, he would soon be fighting them.

William H. Seymour, who frequently quoted Shakespeare, might have said, at this juncture, “There is a tide in the affaire of men,
Which, taken as the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”

Difficulties and dangers might lie ahead but there seemed only one course to take and that was to go forward.

A number of the early settlers were inventors, as was demonstrated by the labor-saving devices they produced in foundry and workshop and placed on the market. Fortunately, a few of them chose to grapple with the principle of reaper construction. The Globe Iron Works soon began the manufacture of a reaper brought out by George H. Barnett, which, it was thought, did not infringe on existing patents. They built three hundred of them and were promptly sued by McCormick, who must have been on the watch. So, abandoning this model, the Company began the production of reapers after plans perfected by Mr. Seymour, the new machine being known as the New Yorker.

Mr. Seymour obtained a patent on this, and five hundred of the machines were made when the company was restrained from selling them by an injunction granted to McCormick by a Judge of the Federal Court. An appeal was made against this decision and, while the trial was of McCormick vs. Seymour & Morgan was going on in the United States Circuit Court in Canandaigua, Seymour's

harvester with a self-rake which was attached to a unique form of grain deck called the quadrant platform, was on exhibition in that city.

The trial took place in the summer of 1851. It went against Seymour & Morgan for the injunction granted McCormick was sustained by the preceding judge. This, however, was not the crushing defeat it appeared to be; McCormick had established a factory of his own in Chicago in 1847 but he was no better off than the other manufacturers now unless he could get his patent monopoly renewed. It had expired in 1848 and, although he was making determined efforts to obtain the seven-year extension of time permitted by the existing patent laws, other manufacturers were as determined as he was to do everything they could to prevent him from having it.

In those days of American business, competition meant warfare to the bitter end; no quarter was given or expected, and, according to statements made in “The Century of the Reaper”, published in 1931 it was Seymour & Morgan who led the battle against extension of this 1834 patent.

William H. Seymour, born in 1802, had reached middle life and he probably had always been of a peace-loving disposition, averse to warfare of any kind; but Dayton S. Morgan, the junior partner of the firm, was of a different temperament and full of the vigor of youth. Under his leadership the firm pursued an aggressive policy during the never-ending patent war that began soon after 1850.

In “The Century of the Reaper”, just referred to, which was written by a grandson of McCormick, it states that Seymour & Morgan had strong political influence and they fostered a cleverly organized campaign to arouse active opposition among farmers to the royalty charged by the reaper monopoly.

The law provided that, in considering extension of patents, due regard should be given to the public interest, thus leaving it open so that if an invention had come into extensive use and was of great benefit to the public opposition to the patent might be considered favorably. The Board of extensions of patents received a remonstrance signed by one hundred citizens of New York State, asserting that McCormick had already made a great deal of money from his patent monopoly and the unrestricted use of this much-needed invention would be a boon to the farming population. Two of the three members of the Board, who were the Secretary of State and the Solicitor of the Treasury, were sensitive to this determined opposition and their verdict was against extension, but the Commissioner of Patents, third member of the Board, favored granting the extension solely because of the unusual merit of the invention.

When the Board of Patents ultimately ruled against McCormick by its two to one decision, he refused to accept defeat and turned to a higher authority. One of his biographers said he gloried in a fight and liked to follow the line of the most resistance; so it was not surprising that he appealed to the Congress of the United States to grant a special Act renewing his patent. Thus he dragged the reaper controversy further into national politics and the result of this was that on Capitol Hill the case became a cause célèbre which occupied much of the attention of Congressmen for several

years. Again and again the McCormick Bill was reported on favorably by committee, but “an immense array of political, social and commercial influences was brought to bear against it.” An anti-McCormick lobby was organized in Washington and the farmers of this country were said to be up in arms. Among the lawyers employed by the rival manufacturers were some who were famous or soon to be. Abraham Lincoln took part in these legal skirmishes, also Edwin M. Stanton, who was to be the future president’s Secretary of war; William H. Seward, ex-governor of New York, and others who were eminent attorneys in their time. In one way, all of this prolonged controversy served both sides for it kept the public aware of the importance of reaping machines and was therefore a good advertisement for all concerned.

And while the long-drawn-out tug of war continued, it must not be supposed that the Brockport manufacturers had given up their cherished plans to make reaping machines; injunction against them were futile so long as McCormick’s patent rights, which expired in 1848, were not renewed.

Inventors in Brockport went on with their work and patented some valuable improvements in automatic raking. By 1852 the firms of Seymour & Morgan and Huntley & Co., who were the successors of Backus & Fitch, out on the market their self-raking reapers which differed somewhat in construction but each possessed important principles essential to a perfect machine. These patents were subsequently consolidated to a perfect machine, each party holding specified interest. All of this ushered in new suits over the infringement of patents – sometimes one company took the offensive, sometimes another – and it was all only a phase of the everlasting battle over patent rights; royalties must be paid, or else!

Seymour’s “Quadrant platform” had come into general use, yet the patent was held by Seymour & Morgan and no other manufacturers could use it without paying license fees. This statement may need clarifying: for anyone who visits the Edison Institute at Dearborn, Michigan, will see there a group of ancient reaping machines made by different companies, and the only one of them which does not have the quadrant platform is that of the Globe Iron Works (Seymour & Morgan). This can be explained by the fact that this primitive-looking wooden reaper with its rectangular grain-deck was built before 1851, when the quadrant platform was patented, and the others were built later.

In Hadrick’s Agricultural History of New York State there is a full page illustration of the New Yorker at work in the field, taken from an old wood cut. It has a quadrant’s platform and is drawn by two horses, but the text does not show where it was made or who made it. It was a Brockport product, made by Seymour & Morgan.

Mr. Seymour gradually withdrew from participation in the business but did not finally retire until 1878. Meanwhile, the reaper-making industry expanded rapidly here, so that Brockport became known far and wide as a manufacturing center. The other firm producing reapers here was the Johnston Harvester Company, which was successor to Ganson, Huntley & Co. in 1868 Samuel Johnston, an inventor, came to town and bought a controlling interest in the business. Reaping

machines made here were sold all over the country and in foreign lands. But in 1883, the Johnston Harvester Company's plant on North Main Street was almost completely destroyed by fire, and Batavia was considered a better location to rebuild than Brockport. However, D. S. Morgan & Co., better situated than its rival, being at the side of the Erie, afterwards Bargo Canal, and with a spur of the New York Central Railroad close at hand, continued in active operation until Mr. Morgan died in 1890.

The reaper manufacture industry here brought prosperity to our Villager and made life easier for farmers everywhere.