

IN EARLY VERMONT, GRAIN WAS MORE THAN FOOD

By MARK BUSHNELL - Published: January 31, 2010, The Barre Montpelier TIMES ARGUS

It was a hard time for the people of Charlotte. During the spring of 1790, they were suffering through a food shortage "amounting almost to a famine," according to one chronicler. Desperate times called for desperate measures, so some townspeople built a bateau — a flat-bottomed boat — and paddled and sailed their way south on Lake Champlain. They were hunting for someone who could sell them enough grain to ease the suffering at home.

Reaching Whitehall, N.Y., at the lake's southern end and more than 50 miles from Charlotte, they found no one with grain to spare. They pushed on. They traveled another 50 miles before finally finding the grain they sought in Walloomsac, N.Y., near Bennington.

The suffering of the people of Charlotte notwithstanding, grain usually was a reliable staple. Over time, people came to rely on it for more than food. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, grain was the coin of the realm in Vermont. In a time when actual coins, or bank notes for that matter, were in extremely short supply, the economy depended on bartering. Grain was perhaps the most commonly exchanged good. Everyone needed it and not everyone had it.

Stories of the importance of grain fill the pages of Abby Hemenway's multi-volume history of the state, the "Vermont Historical Gazetteer," which was published in installments during the second half of the 1800s. The Gazetteer contains town histories written by local residents that chronicle Vermonters' dealings with grain.

Early settlers, who hadn't yet established their grain crops, had to buy grain from farmers in neighboring towns, according to one writer. Since actual currency was scarce or nonexistent, these newly arrived farmers bought the grain with their labor, usually by helping harvest hay.

Interviewed in the mid-1800s for a town history of Goshen, farmer Nathaniel Belknap, 76, recalled the deprivations he had faced upon arriving from New Hampshire. "I tell you, we saw hard times. The young folks now-a-days couldn't begin to stand it as we did," said Belknap, sounding a timeless refrain. But he makes a strong case. "I moved into my log-house, here in the woods, when there was but one board on it, and that I brought from New Hampshire." His wife added that "for weeks after, I could lie abed and count the stars."

Belknap searched for corn to buy but found none nearby. He wasn't established enough to have purchased a team of oxen, so he walked the 13 miles to Pittsford. There he purchased five pecks of grain, which would have weighed about 70 pounds, and trudged home with it on his back, stopping at a gristmill along the way to have it ground.

Just enough

Stories of such Herculean tasks are common in early Vermont histories. For settlers in Wheelock, the nearest gristmill was in Danville. They made the 12-mile trek with their grain "upon their shoulders or upon handsleds, the route being indicated only by spotted trees."

All this trouble was worth it. Grain wasn't exactly a luxury. Most Vermonters aimed at self-sufficiency in managing their farms. They raised just enough chickens and cows to keep them supplied with eggs and milk, and enough pigs and poultry to provide some meat. They had a horse or ox to do the heavy pulling and maybe a few sheep to produce the wool for their family's clothing. They planted vegetables and fruit trees, and sowed European grains like wheat, oats and barley to replace the native grasses that had covered the land.

Any surplus grains — or eggs, milk, meat or wool — might be traded with neighbors to make up for anything a

family was short on.

During the early 19th century, Vermont farmers mastered the art of growing grain. In the years before the agricultural potential of the Midwest had been realized, Vermont became known as the region's breadbasket. Farmers would sell their surplus to the large coastal markets around Boston and New York.

The grain that remained in Vermont acted as a kind of currency. You could use grain to pay your school and other taxes. St. Johnsbury residents voted at their town meeting in 1789 to raise \$80, payable in grain, to hire a preacher for the local church. The grain harvest, or perhaps people's interest in hiring a preacher, ebbed and flowed. Most years, the town collected enough grain to hire the preacher. But in 1801, wrote a town historian, "The first of February came, the grain and the minister came not."

The going rate for a minister was higher in Burlington. Residents there voted in 1799 to pay the minister \$200 worth of grain. Of course, all that grain wasn't for the minister to eat. The extra was like a bank account he could dip into to barter for other things he needed.

Against the grain

Samuel Kendall had all the grain he needed — in fact, a bit too much. During the 1820s, Kendall, one of the leading citizens of Enosburg, was having trouble finding a market for his grain. He decided to build a distillery to make whiskey with the surplus.

After running the distillery for about two years, Kendall one day watched a poor man carrying a load of corn toward the gristmill. The man stopped as he passed the distillery. He stood rooted, looking back and forth between the distillery and the gristmill.

Finally, temptation got the best of him. He traded the corn for whiskey, instead of grinding it into much-needed meal for his family. Kendall rushed into the distillery and had his brother re-bag the corn and give it back to the man. The incident changed Kendall, who closed his distillery and became a determined temperance supporter.

Others also gained reputations as virtuous grain dealers. After settling in the Essex County town of Brunswick in 1784, David Hyde cleared his land and planted grain. He was said to have been generous in his dealings with his neighbors: "he always heaped the half bushel, and in weight he made no account of the fractions of a pound, frequently remarking that 'weight and measure was the Lord's, but the price was his own.'" Which was his way of saying that he wouldn't fret over reaping the full worth of what he had sown.

Rich return

James Tarbox of Randolph amassed a tremendous amount of grain sown by others. After settling in town in 1789, Tarbox established a prosperous mercantile business in his home. For years, he let customers buy items on credit and took grain as payment, amassing so much that he had to build a large storehouse to hold it. Eventually, so much of his capital was tied up in grain that he decided to close his store. And still the grain poured in from former customers repaying old debts.

His friends warned him to stop accepting grain. But he wouldn't hear of it. Any year now, he told them, people would run low on grain. He urged his friends to start collecting grain, too, and assured them that when demand was high, he wouldn't start selling his grain until they had sold all of theirs. His friends joined the grain business.

One spring, in about 1810, Tarbox decided that a grain shortage was developing. He advertised that he had grain to sell. He told people that if they couldn't pay cash, he would still provide grain to any customer who could produce a letter from his town's state representative, attesting that he was an honest man.

Tarbox set his prices, with corn and rye selling for 20 percent less than wheat. But he advertised that at least one-third of each order had to be for wheat, on the assumption that in a time of scarcity, customers would make a run on the cheaper corn. He began selling his grain in late June and within a month had sold out. By one account, the grain ended up in every town north of Randolph.

The sales prevented the kind of suffering the people of Charlotte had experienced 20 years earlier, and they made Tarbox a wealthy man.

Mark Bushnell's column on Vermont history is a weekly feature in Vermont Sunday Magazine. A collection of his columns was recently published in the book "It Happened in Vermont." He can be reached at vermontpastlane@gmail.com.