

More Tools of Yesterday

The Colebrook Historical Society's museum contains many examples of tools and implements once used on our farms and in our work places. Here are more descriptions to help those interested in such things understand better what might be on display:

Seed planters. The model we have is a smaller version of what one would expect to see in use on a large field, but as both sizes operate on the same principal, the one here is representative of all seed planters in general.

As the planter is drawn over the prepared soil, a mechanism inside turns a disk with a pattern of holes in it, allowing the seed to be distributed either in a row or, as with corn, in clusters evenly spaced. The aperture can be changed to allow different sized seed to be planted.

There are two finger-sized metal rods projecting out on either side at the bottom in front of the large wheel. These raked soil over the freshly planted seed, which was then tamped down by the wheel passing over. The angle of these rods could be changed in order to cover the seed with the proper amount of soil. As a general rule of thumb, seed should be covered with an amount of soil equal to four times the diameter of the seed; thus carrot seed is barely beneath the surface, while corn is planted nearly an inch deep. This planter could be modified to accommodate all such variations.

Planters such as this one became available in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and were a boon to farmers both large and small, as it vastly speeded up the formerly slow and tedious task of planting, not to mention the more efficient distribution of the seed, usually a fairly expensive item. The invention of planters allowed for a more efficient method of sowing seed and at the same time increasing the yield per acre.

Butter churns. We have two models on display. The smaller of the two is probably a more familiar one than the larger, mainly because there were many of them out there and they were manufactured well into the twentieth century.

The larger one, built not unlike a cradle for an infant, is quite rare. How it works seems to be pretty straightforward – grasp the handle and alternately push and pull. However, the fact that there is a handle at both ends seems to indicate that it could have been operated by two people (children?), one at each end.

There is a hole on the bottom at one end to let out buttermilk, once the fat globules had congealed into butter. At this stage, there was a good amount of liquid remaining, and the services of the butter-worker would have been employed to produce the final product. One method of working out the remaining buttermilk was to place the newly made butter in a wooden bowl made of beech or rock maple with a wooden paddle made of the same type of wood. These species have a very tight grain, which does not allow the butter to penetrate it, thus setting the stage for retained butter to become rancid, thus spoiling subsequent batches.

Individual butter patties would have been embossed with a flower or some other design by using a small butter mold, one of which is on display.

Butter molds, of which we have several types, were made in Colebrook one hundred years ago on Sandy Brook at the location of what had earlier been a paper mill. A special pantograph machine with interchangeable heads produced the carved designs. This is not what the adults of my youth told us; they said that highly skilled carvers from Colebrook produced these beautiful wooden molds in one pound and one ounce sizes.

Butter worker. This device was used to make large batches of butter, as opposed to the previously mentioned wooden bowl, usable only with small batches of five pounds or less. The butter worker wouldn't have been found on small farms where a large wooden bowl and a wooden spatula would have served. Around the time of the Civil War, let's say, a farm having 25 milking cows had only two methods of utilizing the milk – it could be made into cheese or butter. Without refrigeration and nearby markets, and with a highway network not resigned for hauling heavy loads long distances, they were the only options open to the farmer.

Butter is made by agitating cream until the fat separates into globules, leaving two products: butter and buttermilk. At this stage, the butter is quite soft with drops of buttermilk oozing from the shapeless mass that emerged from the churn. To finish the process, a device such as our butter worker was used, whereby the semi-finished butter was subjected to the action of the veined roller, which performed the same operation as did the wooden paddle in the smaller bowl.

After all the residual buttermilk had been worked out, and marketable butter remained, it was weighed out into one-pound units exactly as those found on store shelves today and taken to market.

Today, with the purchasing power of the dollar so greatly reduced, we tend to forget that within the memory of many older people, a dollar was a reasonable wage for a ten-hour workday. With that in mind, know that local farms producing relatively small yields of butter used to sell every pound that they could produce and purchase butter for their own use at a store selling commercially produced butter simply because their farm butter commanded five cents more per pound than did “store bought”. Those nickels contributed to the overall income of the farm, and might very well have marked the difference between success and failure.

Barley. This grain used to be extensively grown in these parts, but, like flax and almost all the grains except corn, have ceased to be grown here in the east.

Barley was a hardy crop that did well in this climate. The crop is cut when it is quite ripe with the ears bending over. It is often allowed to lie loose for a day or two, the belief being that sunshine and dews or even showers mellow it and improve its color. It was not considered wise to tie the sheaves tightly, as it would then be impossible to achieve uniformity of color in the grain.

In the tool room we have a barley fork which is used in the following manner: by running the fork ahead of him, the farmer was able to create a uniformly sized bundle, or sheave, which could then be set upright on the ground to finish curing.

Barley is used in the manufacture of beer and whiskey as well as one of the grains used in the kitchen (barley soup, for example). Years ago around here, barley was used as fodder for livestock, and was an important crop for sheep. As sheep fodder, the crop was sown in the fall, with the sheep eating the immature crop along with the root system.

Historic Bytes

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