



Uncovering the Stories of Farming Ancestors

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The Grange Visitor, the official newspaper of the Michigan State Grange, is online as a Michigan State University Digital Collection (<http://www.lib.msu.edu/branches/dmc/collectionbrowse/?coll=423&par=421>). Organized in 1867 as a national fraternal organization for farmers, the Grange was the first fraternal organization to include women with full benefits of membership.

Many Americans have ancestors whose livelihood was farming. That's not surprising since it wasn't until 1870 that farmers dipped to less than half of the wage earners in the nation, at 47.7 percent.¹ Before that—going back to the earliest colonial days—farmers were in the majority.

What was everyday life like for farming forebears? Starting with the facts uncovered by research, genealogists can find resources that will help in reconstructing their stories.

A Michigan farm family

Here is what records reveal about a particular farm family in Michigan.

Albert E. Woodward married Helen Hays on 7 September 1869 in Plainwell, Allegan County, Michigan, and in 1870 they were farming in Allegan County.² By 1880 they moved to a farm in Arcada Township, Gratiot County, Michigan, and by 1900 they were farming in Pine River

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Websites cited in this article were viewed on 25 April 2017.

1. Superintendent of the Census, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States, Embracing the Tables of Race, Nationality, Sex, Selected Ages, and Occupations... Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census, (June 1, 1870)...* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 670–671; digital images, United States Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>).

2. "Michigan, Marriage Records, 186–1952," database with images, Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), record for Albert E Woodward and Helen Hays marriage, 7 September 1869, Allegan County; citing Michigan Department of Community Health, Division for Vital Records and Health Statistics. 1870 U S census, Allegan County, Michigan, population schedule, Wayland, p. 26 (handwritten), dwelling 201, family 203, Albert A Woodward; digital image, Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication M593 roll 660.

Township, Gratiot County.³ They owned their farm with a mortgage.

How can a family historian get at the stories behind the facts?

County histories

A good place to start is a county history. A Google search for “Gratiot County history” turns up an 1884 publication, *Portrait and Biographical Album of Gratiot County, Michigan*, which has a biography for Bert Woodward.⁴

Among other things, the biography states that after their marriage, Albert and Helen farmed in Allegan County for six years before moving to Gratiot County about 1875. “After buying and selling several times, he purchased in July, 1882, his present farm of 40 acres, then all timber. He now has under cultivation nine acres and has erected a comfortable dwelling and stables.”

The entry ends, “Mr. Woodward is a member of Alma Lodge No. 244, F. & A. M. He has held the offices of Overseer and School Director, and is now Justice of the Peace in Arcada Township. Politically he is a Republican.” A more rounded picture begins to emerge of Albert and Helen, but more importantly, following some of the information in the biography can fill in even more details.

Topic search

A search for “Michigan agriculture” turns up an article from the University of Michigan on the early history of agriculture in Michigan.⁵ This website provides insight into what Albert would have had to do to clear nine acres of land for cultivation in the space of two years.

Clearing timber to create usable farmland was back-breaking work. The luckier Michigan farmer bought land from timber companies where trees had already been removed. Albert would have had to cut

down the trees himself. Either farmer, though, was left with a sea of stumps in his fields. Farmers planted their crops between the stumps for the first few years until the stumps and roots became rotten enough to be removed by teams of horses, using a tripod and pulleys to pull the stumps out of the ground. The stumps were then burned or used to make fences.

Diaries

Diaries left by farming ancestors are rare, but a diary found for a farmer in the same time and area can be used to help envision an ancestor’s life. This excerpt from the diary of Charles Estep, a farmer in neighboring Ionia County, sheds light on life as a Michigan farmer in the 1880s:

Friday August 1st, 1884. Perry cut some oats yesterday. He came over this morning. I went out and found they were too green and got him to wait until next week. I worked in the corn a little and bound up some oats.

Tuesday, 5th. A little showery this forenoon. I handled over some manure. Perry helped me part of the forenoon. Afternoon he cut and I bound oats.

Friday, 8th. Perry finished cradling the oats today. I went to Portland to take my teeth to have them fixed over. They are worse than ever they were. He is going to reset them again. Ella Estep rode out to Father’s with me.

Tuesday, 19th. Today I plowed and picked up stone. I am plowing my oat stubble. The weather is very warm and dry.⁶

These diary entries show how farmers worked cooperatively with their neighbors. They also made time to go into town to see the dentist and to visit family. For farmers in central lower Michigan, picking

3. 1880 US census, Gratiot County, Michigan, population schedule, Arcada Township, Enumeration District (ED) 90, pp. 438-A and -B (stamped), dwelling 203, family 208, Adelbert E Woodward; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication T9, roll 579. 1900 US census, Gratiot County, Michigan, population schedule, Pine River Township, Enumeration District (ED) 57, sheet 13-B, p. 8538 (handwritten), dwelling 297, family 297, Albert Woodward; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication T623 roll 713.

4. *Portrait and Biographical Album of Gratiot County, Michigan* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1884), 237; *Internet Archive* (<https://archive.org/details/portraitbio00chic>).

5. “Agriculture: Early Beginnings,” *Michigan State University* (http://geo.msu.edu/extra/geogmich/agriculture_in_mi.html).

6. “Farming in Michigan in the 1880s,” *Michigan in Pictures* blog, 5 August 2009 (<https://michpics.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/farming-in-michigan-in-the-1880s/>), para. 5.

stones heaved up by the frost out of their fields was a constant chore.⁷

Agricultural census schedules

Agricultural census schedules, taken in the census years from 1850 through 1880, can provide year-to-year snapshots of a farm family's prosperity and a method of comparing their farm with those of their neighbors. Schedules for nineteen states are available on Ancestry.⁸ Others are held by the National Archives and state libraries.

For example, Albert's father, John Woodward, appears on the 1850, 1860, and 1870 agricultural schedules for Allegan County, Michigan.⁹

In 1850 John had 13 improved acres and 107 unimproved acres. The cash value of his farm was \$500, with \$30 worth of farm machinery and implements. He owned two milch cows, two working oxen, two other cows, and two swine, for a value of \$125. He had produced 150 bushels of Indian corn during the previous year.

By 1860 John's situation had improved. He now had forty acres of improved farmland, and his farm was worth \$2,000. He had \$100 worth of machinery and implements. He still had two milch cows and three swine, but the oxen and other cows were gone. The value of his livestock was \$60. Crop production was up considerably: five hundred bushels of Indian corn and sixty bushels of wheat.

Another ten years brought more prosperity. In 1870 John's improved acreage was up to seventy acres, with ten acres of woodland. Forty acres had been disposed of in some way, prompting the need to search for a deed between 1860 and 1870. His eighty-acre farm was worth \$3,000, and he owned \$150 worth of implements and machinery. His livestock had increased to three milch cows, six sheep, and twelve swine, for a value of \$285. He was producing three hundred bushels of wheat, two hundred

bushels of Indian corn, and one hundred bushels of buckwheat.

Of the forty farmers listed on the same page as John in 1870, eighteen had farms larger than John's. Six had smaller farms. Fifteen other farms were the same size as John's eighty acres.

County directories

Like city directories for urban areas, county directories exist for rural areas. In 1917 John's grandson Earl Woodward appeared in a county directory published by *Farm Journal* magazine.¹⁰ Earl's entry indicates that his wife's name was Sylvia, and that they had two children. Earl was a farmer who owned his eighty-acre farm. He had five horses and twenty-four cattle. The family lived in Seville Township and their address was Route 1, Elwell. Their phone number was 91 B.

Many of these county directories have been digitized and can be found through a search for the name of the county and "directory." Others can be found in local libraries.

Wills and probate records

Wills can provide not only names and relationships of family members, but also legal descriptions of farmers' land and lists of personal property and livestock if the testator makes specific bequests. Probate packets can give insight into family issues if someone decides to contest the will.

Probate packets for those who died without a will usually include an inventory and valuation of their possessions, which shows the level of prosperity enjoyed by farming ancestors. Both FamilySearch and Ancestry have collections of wills and probate records.

7. "Agriculture: Early Beginnings," *Michigan State University*, para. 12.

8. "U.S., Selected Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880," digital images, *Ancestry* (<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1276>).

9. 1850 US census, Allegan County, Michigan, agricultural schedule, Leighton township, p. 25 (handwritten), John Woodward; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication T1164, roll 1. Also, 1860 US census, Allegan County, Michigan, agricultural schedule, Leighton township, p. 67 (handwritten), John Woodward; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication T1164, roll 7. Also, 1870 US census, Allegan County, Michigan, agricultural schedule, Wayland township, p. 3 (handwritten), John Woodward; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>), citing National Archives microfilm publication T1164, roll 16.

10. *The Farm Journal Illustrated Directory of Gratiot County Michigan (With a Complete Road Map of the County)* (Philadelphia: Wilmer Atkinson Co., 1917); e-book, *Archive.org* (<https://archive.org/details/gratiotcountymic00unse>), 178.

Further searching

These sources skim the surface with possibilities for filling in the stories of farming ancestors. The bibliography provides other resources, such as farming newspapers, life histories, and Century Farm applications.

First ask, "What do I want to know about this person?" and then experiment with search terms to bring up relevant information about their crops, what kind of implements they used, how they built their houses, what they ate and wore, how they trained a team of horses, and so on. The possibilities are endless for finding information to make farming ancestors live and breathe. 🌳

For further study

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