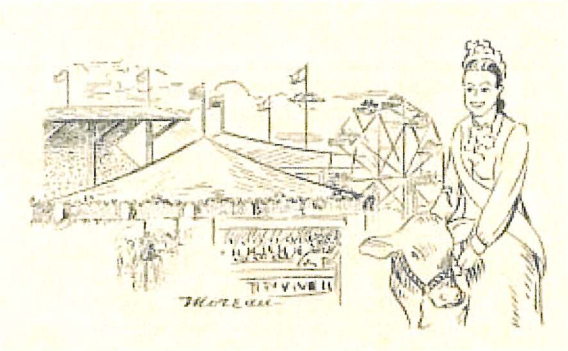

The Farmer

Farming begins with settlement, since food is a necessity, and some fields were in production in Delta County before settlers occupied Sand Point. There were pioneer farms at Flat Rock, Masonville and on the Garden Peninsula before Escanaba was settled. The Peter Groos farm on the banks of the Escanaba River at Flat Rock was one of the earliest and largest of these.

J. L. Heirman, Delta County extension director for Michigan State University, and son of an agricultural "pioneer" of the Belgian settlement at St. Nicholas, notes that the value of a prosperous farming industry was quickly recognized by the people of the community.

An Agricultural Society was organized in 1877 and a fair was held on the grounds of the Tilden House the following year. This was the first community-wide effort in the Upper Peninsula to promote the agricultural possibilities, according to the Iron Port, Escanaba weekly newspaper. The executive committee of the Agricultural Society included men from Brampton, Flat Rock and Escanaba.

"The newspaper report of more than 80 years ago describes the usual sight when wagonloads of farm produce rolled into town on their way to the Tilden House grounds. Particular mention was made of Frank Provo, Flat Rock farmer, who brought in a wagon piled high with watermelons, squash, pumpkins, beets and potatoes. P. B. West, who operated a farm in the Bark River area, brought in a pumpkin that measured '54 inches around the chest' and turnips that were '27 inches around the shoulder.' Potatoes were brought in from the eastern part of the county weighing up to two pounds 11 ounces,' Heirman writes. "We are quite certain no one dreamed at that time that Delta County farmers might produce state championship yields of more than 1,000 bushels of potatoes to the acre."

That first Agricultural Society fair in Escanaba included exhibits not unlike those displayed at the U. P. State Fair in this year of 1963: Livestock, vegetables, hay, and grain, quilts, paintings, house plants, and commercial displays ranging from coats and pants to "best parlor stove." Not unusual for 1878 were a pair of game fowls, a live deer, and exhibits of products from the woods and marshes – venison and wild cranberries. For supplies of game and fish and wild fruits were important to the family larder.

Most farming in the early days was a part-time vocation. Men worked in the woods in the wintertime. Farm produce not consumed by the family was sold at local stores – but often there was little money changed hands, for the farmer would bring in a side of beef and take

home a few bags of flour in exchange.

James H. Anthony brought a gift of grapes to the editor of the Iron Port in 1881. The vines had been planted seven years before. Enjoying his grapes, the editor wrote: "the truth is, a garden or farm properly attended to in Delta County, is as good a property as an iron mine, and we must have more of them."

The U. P. State Fair: Show window for agriculture.

Farms grew in size with the passing years and produce in increasing amounts was shipped to outside markets. Farmers of the area got together in the early 1920's and organized a cooperative cheese plant in Escanaba, located on North 15th Street. B. P. Patterson was the first "Delta Made" manager.

Patterson was Delta County's first agricultural agent, hired in 1918 to assist farmers with production and marketing.

Relationship of the farmer and the Escanaba businessman is traditionally one of understanding and cooperation. Herman Gessner, merchant and civic leader, encouraged farmers to bring their produce to town once a week in the summertime and display it for sale. Today the Farmers Market is an institution that is popular with both the producer and the consumer. The Market area is maintained by the city.

The U. P. State Fair, established by the Michigan legislature to serve the agricultural, educational and commercial interests of the region, was first held in 1927. The list of premiums is reminiscent of the exhibits at the first fair in Escanaba back in 1878 – but the premium offerings of about $25,000 a year would have brought gasps of astonishment from pioneer farmers.

Farmers and businessmen of Escanaba got together in the early 1940's to push toward higher income from potato growing in the county. They organized the Delta County Potato Growers Association and offered prizes and trophies to encourage improvement in potato yield and quality. The results astonished even the most optimistic. A yield of more than

1,000 bushels an acre was reached in 1951 and a record 1,081 bushels an acre was raised by Frank Falkeis of Cornell still stands as the state record.

There have been many advancements in agriculture within the past decade, says Heirman. Two-thirds of the dairy cows in the area are now bred artificially to some of the best sires obtainable in the nation and milk production per cow has increased in some cases as much as 50 per cent. There are fewer but larger farms today and the income of the farm family is higher.

The Hansen Canning Co. plant in Gladstone has brought farmers new cash crop possibilities. About 1,000 acres of peas and beans are now grown for canning.

The beef industry has grown tremendously and in some cases has replaced dairying because fluid milk markets were not available. Some beef farmers have more than 100 brood cows. The marketing problem was solved when the farmers got together in selling their feeder calves in October each year. In 1962 more than 1,200 calves were sold in one sale for a total in excess of $150,000.

An enterprise allied to agriculture which has advanced rapidly is the raising of mink. There is a greater concentration of mink ranchers within a 15-mile radius of Escanaba than will be found in any other part of Michigan.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture maintains a laboratory in the State Office Building in Escanaba and two veterinarians are stationed here to carry out public responsibilities in the promotion of agriculture and the protection of health.

"The people of Escanaba have never lost sight of the importance of agriculture to their total economy," Heirman concludes. "This was evident in the sponsorship of the first agricultural fair back in 1878. The trading area of Escanaba can look at a five million dollar agricultural economy at present, with the prospect of an even brighter future."