

## Agriculture

“Agriculture has been very important in Otsego County both from an economic standpoint and as a way of life. Before the turn of the century (1900), large numbers of county residents lived on farms.

Agricultural activities were closely associated with lumbering and lumbering activities. Many residents worked in lumbering camps during the winter and put up hay and other crops during the summer months. With the decline of lumbering, families turned to their farms as a sole source of income. With the loss of the ready market provided by the lumbering camps, many farms in the county were abandoned.”



Seventeen types of farming were recommended for various areas of Michigan. Otsego County was split between #12 “Northern potato and dairy” and #13 “General, Self-Sufficiency and Part-Time”.

Soil type, climate, length of growing season, and topography are the main factors for determining agriculture potential. Basically, farm products fall into two categories: plants and animals. For Otsego County, the main plants (crops) are potatoes, alfalfa/hay pasture, and corn for silage. Specialty crops such as sunflowers, onions, artichoke, and raspberries were experimented with on a limited basis. The animals (livestock) have been primarily dairy cows and beef steers with hogs, sheep and chickens being less popular.

In the 1970s reports, farm operations were divided into four types: 1) absent owner – manager, 2) family, 3) part time, and 4) subsistence. Farm management and marketing programs concentrated on farm buildings, soil improvement, pest and weed control, and improving farm profitability. During this decade, the average farm size (by acres) in Otsego County was the largest in the state.

This laminated rafter barn built in 1940 by Harold Bailey was the first of its kind in the county. The construction of this barn gave local contractors valuable experience.



1938 appears to be a period of transition for farming in the county. Both horses and tractors are used as shown in the photos taken from the 1938 annual report.



Of the total land area of Otsego County 24% is in farms. Of the total farm acreage 40.6% or 32,932 acres are available for crops.

The acreage of potatoes exceeds the acreage of any other annual crop, and the farming program on most farms in the county is based around potato production. The more successful farms as a general rule have developed some form of livestock enterprise. Dairy cattle are the most common type of livestock; but during the past few years the production of dual-purpose and beef types has increased. A few farmers have developed a successful sheep enterprise and have demonstrated that this type of livestock is adapted to the county.

## Potato Farming



**1940:** The fertilizer demonstration on the Albert Burzynski farm in Chester Township produced outstanding results. The two crates at the right were taken from rows fertilized with 2-12-6. The other two were “filled” from an equal area of unfertilized plants.

Dr. John Muncie, Extension Plant Pathologist, was called to Otsego County to assist in controlling Bacterial Ring Rot which was one of the most serious diseases for potatoes.

It was noted that substandard potatoes could be used for canning; however they were of no market value.

### 1936 Potato Show

“Due to the lack of financial support it wasn’t possible to hold the Top O’ Michigan Potato, Apple and Seed Show that had been held at Gaylord for 12 years. Instead, a combined show with northwest Michigan was held in Kalkaska. The Otsego County Farm Festival and Potato Show was held at Gaylord on October 26, 1936. It provided an educational demonstration for farmers of this county. “

Various types of potatoes were grown in Otsego County over the years. Here is a summary from the 1944 annual report:

**Chippewa** – good yielder, subject to scab and blight rotting in bin. Popular due to its good cooking quality.

**Menominee** – holds type (shape) well, yields good and has a very good scab resistance. Very late, cooking quality not so good.

**Katadhin** – Does not yield as well as Chippewa. Set shallow and few in a hill. Holds type very well.

**Sebago** – Reported to be blight resistant. Very good yielder. First year it has been grown in the county.

**Pontiac** – Red skin, some objection to color. No resistance to scab. Good cooking quality. Acreage has increased greatly during the past 3 years.

**Erie** – A new white skin variety. Has scab resistance, yields good, holds type well, cooks well.

**Russet Rural** – The most common variety grown in county. Acreage greater than all other varieties combined.

**1952:** Recommendation that growers plant only those varieties which the consumer wants, such as Sebago, Kathadin, and Chippewa.



Tom Milbocker’s potato digger is equipped with a canvas which reduces mechanical injury  
1939 p. 23



### 1939 Otsego County Potato Growers Contest

	Total Yield Per Acre	Total Yield U.S. No. 1 Per Acre	No. acres Grown	Variety
* Geo. MacKenzie	388	233	6.4	R.R.
* Chester Greenman	306	192	10	R.R.
Herb Gingell	283	190	9	R.R.
Lloyd Skilton	275	175	5	R.R.
* Carl Griswold	274	248	8.2	R.R.
* William Hansen	269	135	6	R.R.
* Tom Milbocker	256	236	5	Chip
Wayne Townsend	265	211	8.7	Kat
* William Campbell	235	138	7	R.R.
Ray Moorehead	232	151	6	R.R.
Pat Bryson	220	163	10	R.R.
* Harold Bailey	214	184	7.5	Chip
Estelle & Son	199	120	11.4	R.R.
Darrell Fleming	196	140	5.6	R.R.

\* Certified Seed Growers

## Beef and Dairy

Beef and dairy cattle production in Otsego County was a logical choice due to the growing season, abundance of pasture lands, and access to major transportation routes.

**1926:** Dairy program resulted in a series of well attended meetings throughout the county. A local bank established a \$10,000 revolving fund at 5% interest with which to purchase high grade or pure bred cows. Fifty-two farmers were approved by the bank and the county agent this year.



Courtesy OCHS

**1926:** “Assisted local creamery to instill business principles”

**1946:** Extension played a key role in the formation of the Northern Michigan Beef Breeders Association (NMBBA). Originally the annual feeder sale was held at the stockyards provided by the Otsego County Chamber of Commerce at the fairgrounds.

### Did You Know?

The pens were built from materials that were obtained by tearing down the grand stand.

**1962:** Mass change over to bulk cooling resulted in larger and fewer dairy farms.

**October 10, 1963:** The largest beef sale east of the Mississippi River was held at the NMBBA auction in Gaylord.

**1966:** “Commercial beef cattle production continues to grow and become more important as an enterprise throughout northern Michigan. Marketing programs such as the Feeder Cattle Sale have been educational tools that assisted in promoting this industry and utilize a great natural resource of this region, grass.”

**1967:** “The D. H. Fleming herd which was increased from 30 cows to 85 cows two years ago along with construction of an 80’ x 120’ free stall barn, this year for the first time will reach if not exceed a herd average of 500 pounds of butter fat per cow.”

**1968:** Now 2500 head of cattle are processed with about the same number of man hours as was required 20 years ago for 500-600 head

**1984:** The Gaylord Livestock Auction closed so the NMBBA leased the facility on South Otsego Avenue to continue the weekly sales. Eventually, the entire operation relocated to the facility on North Townline Road. The volume of business had to increase in order to keep the sale going. It is the only weekly livestock auction north of Clare and draws from the thumb of Michigan and the upper peninsula.



*Photo courtesy of A. J. Townsend*

*First Annual*  
**4-H CLUB FEEDER SHOW**  
*October 24, 1946*  
**Feeder Cattle Sale**  
*October 25, 1946*  
 Sponsored by  
 NORTHERN MICHIGAN BEEF BREEDERS ASSOCIATION



Norris Horrocks,  
 Ray McMullen, and  
 Marge Tolman  
 adding up the sales  
 from the 1967  
 livestock sale

## Natural Resources

### Forestry

Approximately 75% of land in Otsego County is forest. Various forestry and wood industry programs have been conducted by Extension over the years. Here are some examples:

**School forests and 4-H:** The school forest program in Otsego County was started in 1934 when the Gaylord High School secured a fractional 40 acre parcel in section 6 of Bagley Township. The second school forest was established at Vanderbilt in 1937. The Johannesburg School forest was established in 1938 in section 33 of Charlton Township. Two thousand Norway pine trees were planted by the Johannesburg students. The survival rate of all three locations was approximately 90%. The cost to the school was \$1.00 for each description and the cost of recording the deed. 4-H Forestry Club projects were conducted in connection with the school forests.

### Sawmill clinics and wood lot management:

Workshops and individual consultations were provided by local staff, regional forestry agent Russ Kidd, and campus specialists like Hank Huber.

Pulpwood workshop and Sawmill Operators Clinic were conducted throughout the 1960s.

Reforestation, Christmas Tree farm management, and controlling gypsy moth are other forest related services offered by Extension.



1940 Annual Report: “An example where forestry and soil conservation meet. The barn which appears in both pictures is the same building. Wayne Townsend who owns the land shown in the bottom picture has planted pine trees in contour furrows, while his neighbor who owns the land in the top picture continues to crop the hill-side. Which land will remain productive the longest?”

### Water Quality

The vast majority of residents use groundwater for drinking water. Preventing groundwater contamination is necessary to sustain our health and quality of life. For the past several years, Extension has offered free well water testing at MSU’s Ag Expo in conjunction with the Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program.

### Soil

“Does my soil need lime?” and “What kind of fertilizer should I use?” are typical questions asked by local farmers and homeowners. Soil tests are conducted by Extension to answer those questions with proper recommendations.

### Oil and Gas

During the 1970s and 80s, there was a surge in oil and gas exploration. Otsego County was a prime market. Educational assistance was provided to help landowners understand the leasing process, what questions to ask, and how to avoid common pitfalls. Extension bulletins such as E-2121 “Oil & Gas Royalties: Look Before You Lease” helped people deal with this significant opportunity.

“Although the water resources provide the basis for the resort and recreational developments, the value of timber growth in providing game cover and the aesthetic background for the natural playground should not be over looked.”

-- 1940 land use pamphlet