

IOWA HISTORY

Iowa Farmers and Fence Posts

If Iowa's farmers would just practice a few economizing steps they could save time and money when it came to fence posts. In 1910 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released some statistics about the state's farmers' use of wooden fence posts. The information was gathered through "inquiries" sent to "several thousand" farmers. The replies were combined with statistics from the Iowa State Board of Agriculture.

The USDA estimated that farmers in the state used \$1.4 million worth of new fence posts each year. The agency advised that farmers could save money by considering the durability of various kinds of woods used for the posts. And they were encouraged to treat the wood with preservatives to prevent decay.

The USDA warned that when farmers used posts with "short life" they made extra work for themselves. Through the study the USDA learned that in 1909 most—70 per cent—of the posts used in Iowa were cut from farms or obtained from wood lot owners. Only 30 per cent were purchased from lumber dealers. The study indicated that 10 million posts were used yearly to build or repair fences. The average life expectancy of a fence post was 14 years; and the average cost was 13.7 cents per post.

The types of wood used by Iowa farmers for their fence posts varied greatly. The USDA claimed Osage orange lasted more than five times as long as willow. The longest lasting was red cedar, followed by locust, white oak, northern white cedar, catalpa, black walnut, butternut, red oak, and willow. Although red cedar posts were the longest lasting, they were expensive selling at an average of 26 cents each. The cheapest were willow at six cents each.

The study found that Iowa farmers used very little catalpa and butternut wood for posts. Combined the two types constituted only 1 per cent of all use. White oak usage exceeded 40 per cent. It also found that half of all fence posts in the state were round—indicating that most of the trees used were too small to split.

The USDA advised Iowa's farmers to practice the "well-known methods" of wood preservation. After all, it stated, "It costs much less to treat a post than to buy a new one and set it in the ground."

Sources

"Information About Fence Posts," *Bryan Daily Eagle and Pilot*, Sept 13, 1910.

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