



THE PASTORAL PERIOD OF WESTERN LONG ISLAND *

BERNICE SCHULZE

THE village of Garden City is situated on what was once a twenty-mile expanse of treeless plain. Early writers describe it as resembling a great sea of waving blue-green grass, surrounded by the darker green of the unbroken forest. Here the plover disported in incredible numbers, and quail were so plentiful that their nests were everywhere underfoot. At sunset herds of deer ventured out of the forests to graze. In spring the grass

* Read before the New York State Historical Association at its annual meeting at Garden City, Sept. 18, 1939. Miss Schultz teaches the social sciences in the Hempstead High school and is the author of *Colonial Hempstead* (Lynbrook, 1937). The prints used with this article are an linoleum by Mary Irish Oman. They are reprinted from *Colonial Hempstead* by the kind permission of Miss Schultz.

would be reddened by the wild strawberry or purpled in a solid carpet made up of acres of violets.

This 60,000 acres of natural pasture must have held an irresistible lure to John Carman and Robert Fordham, when they decided in 1643 to purchase the land from the Indians. At any rate, five years later Hempstead was already known for its richness in cattle, and one of the first large scale cattle industries in the country rapidly grew up around the local prairie. In forty years the few animals brought across the Sound had increased to well over a thousand head, and by the time of the Revolution there were 7,000 horned cattle and as many sheep in the combined towns of Hempstead and Oyster Bay.

Cattle, sheep, and hogs were taken to New York alive and sold there on the hoof. Cattle served as a common medium of exchange here, being used in payment for land, services, and all sorts of commodities. The Indians were paid for their land in cattle; the governor accepted cattle in payment for a new patent; and the quitrent of Oyster Bay was one good fat lamb per year. The cow was to the Hempstead planter what tobacco was to the Virginian.

In the first twenty years, before fences were adequate, the cattle were sent out daily to pasture under three common herdsmen employed by the town. During the summer months, just after sunrise, the crisp morning air was pierced by the boom of the herdsmen's horns as they collected their charges from door to door. The keepers signed detailed contracts making them responsible for watering the cattle twice a day and liable for any damages that might be caused. The owners took turns watching the herd on Sundays so that the regular herdsmen might attend services. Payment was made in butter and grain.

Fencing was at first undertaken by the town as a whole, the most ambitious project being a three-mile length of fence across the foot of Cow Neck (now Manhasset)

enclosing 8,000 acres of pasture. It was a three-rail fence, built in sections known as gates, every man's portion being marked by his initials cut into the wood. Each owner then had a right to pasture cattle within the enclosure in proportion to the number of gates of fence he had built. Rights of pasturage were known as gate rights and could be inherited, sold, or leased. Oyster Bay built a similar fence with identical provisions across Hog Island, which today is beautiful Center Island.

Even the painfully constructed fences did not always keep appreciative cows out of the succulent corn, so that it was finally provided that anyone who should not replace the bars which he had taken down should be fined. A strain was placed on the staunchest friendship when half the fine was awarded to the informant. Anyone who put a cow known to leap fences into the common enclosure was also fined. A pound was created for whatever stray cattle were found at large, and it was an unpopular but necessary institution for more than 250 years. Cattle which were empounded and not claimed were sold at outcry, but apparently most of the creatures were claimed with indignant vehemence, for an order was passed that anyone who should resist a person who was "driving swine to pound or any other cattle," or anyone who should attempt to break up the pound should be fined forty guilders. Even Peter Stuyvesant found himself in difficulties when he attempted to persuade Hempstead to set free a number of cattle which had wandered into local pastures from Jamaica, and he had to order the town magistrates to appear before him before the matter could be settled.

The smaller animals which were raised in the town and wandered about at will were also a grievous cross to everyone. A law provided that no tame geese should be permitted to "go on the commons . . . and that it shall be lawful for any Parson to shout any they shall find

there." At the same time the town meeting took into consideration "what liberty swine shall have to go in ye streets." It was finally concluded that they had none and should be empounded if found at large. Even the provincial assembly took action and passed a law that no swine should run on highways or meadow "upon any Pretense, Colour, or Excuse whatsoever," either in the city of New York or on Long Island. It also took action by the assembly to keep the local rams under control.

Livestock had constantly to be protected from the wild beasts. The assembly provided rewards for anyone who should "Destroy any Wild Cat or Wild Cats, their Catling or Catlings, any Fox or Foxes, their Puppy or Puppeys." During the first century each town paid for the killing of its own wolves and provided at least two wolf pits. Both Indians and whites brought in the heads of wolves they had killed and claimed the reward. Finally, however, it leaked out that the same head would make the rounds among all the neighboring towns, and the huntsman claim a reward from each. At last one impatient assembly ordered that the entire carcass be taken before the justice and there skinned, and that the claimant take "Oath upon the holy evangelists" that he had killed it in Queens County.

As the number of animals increased, a system of ear-marking came into use for their identification. These marks were handed down from father to son or even sold to another family. So many marks were necessary that about two thousand are recorded in Hempstead alone, and considerable ingenuity had to be used to devise a new one. Little was left of a beast's ears after they had been marked with holes, latches, nicks, swallow forks, and halfpennys.

Once cattle had been properly cared for, the control of the sheep became the leading town problem. If they were permitted to run at liberty, there were always those who would drive the flock to their own fields in order

that the land would be fertilized by the droppings. This was very bad for the poor beasts, which became frightened and even lost, or became overheated, or suffered evil results from being held in close quarters. The town tried letting out the flock each week to the highest bidder, but this device was always unpopular, so that a return was made to the old system of permitting the flock to run at large on the plain under the strictest regulation.

Regulated pasturing finally resulted in one of the town's major holidays, which was certainly not contemplated when the spring and fall parting were first systematized. When the flock was driven to the town pens in October and separated by the owners, a great crowd congregated. Sheep and horses were traded, creditors came looking for their debtors, and a splendid opportunity was afforded for betting, gambling, drinking, and fighting. Vendors of refreshments added their cries to the basing of thousands of frightened sheep. Gingerbread, watermelons, clams, and oysters were sold alike to the townsmen and to the rogues, crack athletes, and experts at three-card monte who came out from New York.

The greater the crowd, the greater the opportunity. There were no buildings permitted on the grounds other than the sheep pens, but as the parting developed into a great fair, a sprawling wilderness of tents, temporary booths, and covered wagons appeared suddenly on the big day. Tumblers, clowns, magicians, performers on the "stiff rope and slack wire scarcely perceptible," and all the usual paraphernalia of the fair or carnival appeared to coax the pennies from the sober inhabitants. One shilling admitted the credulous into the tent of the fat lady or the covered wagon of the human skeleton.

The most popular amusement of this unique Parting Fair consisted in the athletic events. Footracing, leaping, wrestling, and kindred sports were carried on with order

and decency by people who were real lovers of sports, and there was also horseracing on what is now Jericho Turnpike. Those who had come to part their sheep had often gone home long since, while the crowd was still cheering as the strong man from Hempstead threw the giant from Oyster Bay, or Huntington's fleetest sprinter outdistanced the marvel from Rockaway.

Daniel Tredwell's *Reminiscences* very wittily describe a scene around the sheep pens, the country men always seated upon the top rail of the fence although there were a dozen more lowly and comfortable seats in sight—a survival, he says, of arborescent man.

On one unforgettable occasion, Jonas Wood, of Hick's Neck, mounted such a rail in the time honored fashion, and, being a noted raconteur, held forth to an admiring audience. He did not realize that, in the pen behind him,



no time to be lost. Every available man was ordered out, and Woodhull promised important reinforcements. While the battle was raging on Brooklyn Heights, he was straining every energy to accomplish this gigantic roundup.

There was everywhere an air of dejection as more and more bewildered beasts were driven in from all directions to swell the ever growing herd. No purple mountains for a backdrop or cowboy's song around the evening campfire, but only the trampled grass of the plains and a motley group of militia-men encircling the cows, their minds on their own fields where their oats stood shocked, wet through from last night's thunderstorm. Woodhull reported 11,000 creatures collected, but there was no water for them, and his men were rapidly deserting.

But the Battle of Long Island was lost, and no help could be sent to Woodhull. Unwilling to move without orders and loath to see so much beef fall into British hands, he waited beyond the margin of safety and was taken by British outposts. His arm, injured during his capture, mortified in the unspeakable filth of a prison ship, and amputation came too late to save his life.

So the herd fell into the hands of the arriving British, and its owners were never compensated unless they could prove which regiment ate the beef. This great loss, coupled with constant exactions of cattle for the army during the seven long years of British occupation, did much to wreck the local cattle industry. Changing times and varied demands after the war brought an end to a pastoral interlude.

During the entire colonial period, life in these parts had centered about the wide plains and marshes. Not the ocean that lapped on both shores, but the great sea of waving grass was the guiding spirit of the community. The wandering flocks and herds which pastured there filled the quiet townsmen with a pleasing sense of security.

THE NASSAU COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL

published by

THE NASSAU COUNTY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Myron H. Luke, Ph.D.
Editor

Donald A. Wilson
Business Manager

All communications concerning the *Journal* should be addressed to the editor at 32 Stevens Avenue, West Hempstead, N.Y. 11552. All correspondence regarding the Society and orders for current or back issues should be sent to the Corresponding Secretary, P.O. Box 207, Garden City, N.Y. 11530.

The Nassau County Historical Society supplies the *Journal* to its members. A limited number of single copies are available for five dollars. The Society disclaims responsibility for statements, whether of fact or opinion, made by its contributors. Payment of dues should be sent directly to the Treasurer, P.O. Box 207, Garden City, N.Y. 11530.

The text of The Nassau County Historical Society Journal is printed on *Mohawk Vellum*, substance 70, manufactured by Mohawk Paper Mills, Inc., Cohoes, New York; the cover on *Pastelle*, a heavyweight antique-finish stock manufactured by the Strathmore Paper Company of West Springfield, Massachusetts.

Body type is 11-point Times Roman, 1 point leaded.

Printed by Sentinel Printing Company,
in Hempstead since 1858