



I

INTRODUCTION

According to what has been handed down, the farmers in the rocky sections of New York managed to get along fairly well for many years, after the trees were cleared from a section large enough to raise grain and garden truck, and also form a meadow and pasture section. The writer is quite familiar with what transpired on these farms back to the year 1876, and it is from that date on that mention will be made of these doings and things pertaining approximately to them—in my own way.

During a regular conversation, occasionally someone may say, “Let’s change the subject,” or, as is generally the case, it changes spontaneously. Then why should a book be expected to confine itself to one subject or line of thought until it becomes monotonous? If a variety of thoughts in a short space of time may come to your brain through your ears with agreeable effect, why can’t a similar variety come through your eyes, as in reading a book? Anyhow, there won’t be any chalk line walking in this.

Of course, there was no great quantity of grain raised, for the farmers were compelled to use oxen for plowing, and they were as slow as molasses. Horses were so speedy and jumpy that when the plow caught fast to an invisible rock, the plow was likely to break, or the plow handles might fly around and break the plowman’s ribs, if he did not watch himself. And then again, he had to harvest his hay and grain with hand tools—the cradle and sickle, or reaper, for

the grain, and the scythe for the hay. His threshing was all done by hand with the common staff and swingle (loosely tied together, and called a flail). Some, who had a semi-rocky farm, used a mowing machine drawn by horses on small patches, but in many cases the cutter bar had to be lifted over rocks so often that a large percentage of the grass was left on the ground. He depended as much, and sometimes more, for his cash income on other sources as on tilling the soil. Some took advantage of one thing, some another, as opportunity afforded, and didn't do badly at all. But all of a sudden, whatever the farmer turned his hand to that had a dollar in it was swept away from him, and with such regularity that it seemed as though a curse had been put on him.

Lost sales for many of his products, the coming of one pest after another that was unknown before—to eat up his garden truck and kill his trees, or give them a disease that made them worthless except for firewood—one machine after another, and chemical processes that supplanted his hand labor, and the quantity of natural food lost, and that was no small item; all this was the farmer's lot.

If history should repeat itself, and those old rocky farms get cleared off again, it will be about as much work as it was when the big primitive timber was on them. The trees are in greater number now, and in parts where the farms have been abandoned the longest, they are large also. On account of the cattle running on them, they became somewhat enriched, and this second growth grew faster.

They have a machine for pushing over and uprooting trees on the delta of the Rio Grande River. If there were one that would push the rocks and trees off together, it would be fine. If the rocks and trees would burn up together, it would be fine if another crop of rocks would not show up from below, but one always does. I guess the expansion of Hades forces them up. There are fields that have had the stones that could be lifted carted off every spring season, for as many years as the farm had been worked, generally several decades. If there were fewer of these backbreaking, scythe-dulling shin skimmers the last year than the first, nobody could notice it.

One old guy said that, when the devil went out to sow the rocks over the face of the earth, he had them about half sown when

he arrived in that section. His bag string broke and let the remainder all run out, and he went off and left them. Suppose there was war going on and the flying machines were dropping explosives on the cities and towns. Would not places like these backwoods farms be safest? The people would be so scattered that all they could kill at one time wouldn't pay for the ammunition.

Some say the "Hessians" drove the first settlers back in the rocky nooks, where they could elude their pursuers to better advantage. The fact remains, they went there for some reason, and it wasn't because of a shortage of good smooth land near the coast, for what few people there were at the time.

Perhaps they wanted seclusion. That seems to be the nature of some people. To this day, there are a few that prefer to live way back at the dead end of the road. Well, for that matter, we have some bon ton people in the city who like a penthouse! I can remember when some of my janitor friends were ashamed to say that they lived rent-free in a penthouse. My, how people do change! They used to want to live where they could see and hear all the hubbub of the street, and now they want to get away from it. Puts me in mind of that old saying, "It used to be the caper, but it don't go now." Those that like it can come as near to pulling the hole in after them in a penthouse as anywhere, though in some cases it might be well to keep a flying machine on the roof, in case of fire.

PEOPLE OF PUTNAM VALLEY

With regard to stock, they were mostly Holland Dutch, with a sprinkling of English, Irish, and Scotch, and practically no other races at all. I am of the four strains: Tompkins—English; Barger—Holland Dutch; Odell—Irish; Crawford—Scotch.

The first were Dutch weavers that went back in "the brush," and that is six generations ago. All of my forefathers from that day down were born in Putnam County (formerly Dutchess, and then Hoop-pole County). But I dare not let that out, for if you mention Putnam County, I may get my hair pulled out or get in jail.

Everybody is related that is of the old-time stock, be they Adamses, Lounsburrys, Duzenberrys, Nicholse, Christians, Currys, Baxters, Rundles, Travises, Purdys, Lees, Armstrongs, or a lot of others. They are like a lot of scabby sheep, all run out. So I don't see why they should expect much of me. I guess I better say nothing about the stock, for fear that I may put my foot in it.

EXODUS OF YOUTH
AS A CAUSE OF ABANDONED FARMS

Getting back to the rocky farm, the general procedure used to be that when the children came to the age of reason, they saw they were in wrong, and at the first opportunity dusted out into the outside world, and took what they could get, leaving the old folks to mourn, and scabble along as best they could, with sometimes a little help and sometimes none, until they "passed out of the picture," and then there was another abandoned farm!

One of the fellows that made his escape from one of these farms and became rather prosperous, after being away twenty-five years, went back to look his old birthplace over. He could hardly recognize it. The forest trees were growing along with the apple trees in what used to be the orchard, and some of the forest trees were taller than the apple trees. And there were white birch trees some thirty feet high with the underbrush so thick that a rabbit couldn't get through without losing a lot of fur, growing where the corn and potatoes were growing when he went away. In the dooryard, the old lilac bush was alive yet, and trying to have some flowers on it, although fighting for its life in a jungle of young forest trees. The house had rotted beyond repair, as well as the barn and the granary. The old natural spring had so many alders and other small trees growing around it that he had trouble getting a drink. He said it made him feel sad.

He went from there to find some farmer that was still sticking it out to have a talk. He found out that at last something had turned up to help out a little. The farmers can now make a few dollars working on the roads and also by working for city people that

bought some of the later abandoned farms, and fixed the buildings up before they were too far gone, so as to have a place to spend the summer. Now that the ice is broken, maybe something else will turn up to help out. When he got back to the city, in making fun of the place, he said he saw a chipmunk sitting on a rock trying to eat a gravel stone, and the tears were running down his cheeks. There isn't one chipmunk now where there used to be a dozen, so I don't believe they got much nutrient from gravel stones. When Darwin said, "the survival of the fittest," he should have said the survival of the well fed.

There was one of these farms within fifty miles of New York City as the crow flies that (before the cards were stacked against this rough country) raised seven boys to manhood. It consisted of 365 acres, with forty acres cleared of forest trees. It bordered the whole eastern shore of a lake that was an eighth of a mile long. It had a house that was plenty large for two small families, in fair repair, all ordinary outbuildings, a brook running through the yard, a natural spring, a good orchard—in fact, a place as good as any of the rocky farms, except that it was "back in." It sold "underneath the hammer" for nine hundred dollars around 1889. It cost more than twice that to put up the buildings. It was bought by a fellow that tried to get along by selling cordwood. And now the place, with a lot of adjoining farms, is a hunting and fishing preserve. And under the existing conditions that is all it is good for, and judging from the number of Indian arrow points that are found, they used it for that purpose aplenty.

And the rocks were a handicap to them as well as to the whites, for nearly all the arrow points found are broken, showing that about every time they shot an animal and missed, the point would strike a rock and break.

SUCCESSFUL FARMER ON SMOOTH FARM IN ROCKY COUNTRY

There was a farmer that got him a little level pocket of about twenty acres in a valley with a brook running through it with

lots of rocky territory around it. There are very few of these level places in these sections. And he paid, or agreed to pay, what was considered a very stiff price at that time.

He raised all the hay and grain he could on the level and stoneless part, and fed it in the wintertime to young stock that he had turned out in the summertime on the rocky part to shift for themselves.

Every spring he had a “vandue” (auction, to you) and sold off the older ones. He kept bringing them up from calves, and did this for some twenty years. He sent his boys to college, and retired with fifty thousand dollars. By wintering the stock in his barn, he had all the fertilizer for where he raised his grain and hay. A smooth farm in a rough country is worth much more than a smooth farm where everybody else has got one.