

The Commercial

WINNIPEG, JUNE 25, 1894.

THE CONDITION OF THE WEST

Though there were some predictions by pessimistically inclined persons that the crop area in Manitoba would show a decline this year, owing to the low price of grain, the general belief was that there would be an increase in the acreage. The latter view has proved correct, as shown by the first official crop bulletin issued this season, which was circulated last week. This shows the total area under all crops to be 1,592,391 acres, being an increase of nearly 40,000 acres over last year or any previous year. This increase is very gratifying at the present time, indicating as it does, that the country is going ahead, regardless of close times, and showing that the farmers are not discouraged on account of the low prices which have prevailed of late.

The increased crop area is especially satisfactory when it is considered that excessive rains greatly delayed seeding in the spring, making this season a late one. Under these unfavorable weather conditions it would not have been a surprise if the crop area had shown a reduction, and the increase would certainly have been larger if the spring had been as early as usual. As it is, it is probable that the increased area actually sown will be greater than is shown by the bulletin, as owing to the late season many farmers were not through with their seeding and planting when the return was made. A considerable area has been put to crop, principally in potatoes and roots, since the first of June, at which date returns were made to the government.

The increase in the crop area this year shows that Manitoba is making good progress, in spite of the depression which is being felt in agriculture the world over, owing to the general prevalence of low prices. This increase in the crop area means more than is shown on the surface, so far as the general advancement and development of the country is concerned. The farmers of this country have during the past year or two been giving more attention to stock-raising, dairying, etc., and the progress made in this direction, which is not shown by the crop area returns, has been more rapid than in cultivating the soil. In raising hogs particularly, the exports this season show that the farmers have made a great advance in this industry. Other branches of stock-raising, as well as dairying, have made good progress during the last year, and the farmers are much less dependent than formerly upon the grain crops.

The advancement of the country is therefore greater than is shown by the crop returns. In fact, considering the increased attention directed to stock-raising and dairying, a decrease in the crop area, instead of a fair increase, would not have indicated that the farmers were making progress backward. It would simply have indicated that the increased attention given to dairying and stock had detracted from grain

growing. As it is, however, we have an increase all around, in grain and general crops as well as in other branches of agriculture.

The country is all right, in spite of low prices and depression in agriculture. Low prices may possibly continue for another year, and added to this our crop this year may be a poor one, in which case we will feel the depression more keenly than we yet have done. But even should such unfavorable conditions prevail, it would not stop the advancement of this country, though progress would be retarded. Indeed, the present depression may be regarded to some extent as a blessing in disguise. It has already had a good effect upon the country. The increased attention given to stock raising, dairying, etc., will be beneficial. Many farmers have been cured of the idea that they can get rich in a few years growing wheat alone, and with this idea displaced they are in a better way to succeed than they were before. The country will certainly be more prosperous with the dairying and stock interests well developed, than it was under the old system of giving almost entire attention to wheat.

Another very valuable lesson has been learned regarding the basis upon which business has been done in this country. A decided check has been given to the loose system of promiscuous and almost unrestricted credit business which has prevailed here. Our farmers have been encouraged—even enticed to go into debt freely on future prospects. As a result of this condition, there has been a great deal of over purchasing, which has affected all classes, and this is largely the cause of the troubles of many at the present time.

Of course it must be taken into consideration that this is a new country, and that most of our farmers have come here with limited means. At the outset they required building and fencing material, implements, stock, provisions, etc., to enable them to make a start upon their farms and sustain themselves until they could obtain a return from the land. Very few new settlers have had sufficient means on their arrival here to enable them to make a fair start free of debt. The consequence is, that as credit was generally easily obtainable, most settlers have gone into debt to enable them to make a start on their farms. There was consequently the temptation in the past to purchase things which were not actually necessary to farmers who were just making a start. While the free credit system has therefore enabled many persons to make a start in farming who were not in a position to make a start without assistance, it has at the same time encouraged over buying all around. This tendency has now received a decided check, and business hereafter will be conducted on a more restricted but safer basis, as regards credit transactions.

In a new country like Manitoba, where so many of our farmers have hardly yet had time to establish themselves, and where the majority have made a start with very limited means, it is but natural that the low prices for produce should be felt to some extent. As regards the free extension of credit to new settlers, as has been the case in Manitoba, it is simply a sign of confidence in the future of the country.

Credit in itself is all right. The system has enabled many to start in farming here, who would not otherwise have been able to begin farming. Carried out, however, as it has been, it has worked evil to the farmers themselves as well as to traders. It has increased the cost of goods, induced over-buying, and has a good deal to do with the financially close condition of many people at the present time.

There is every evidence that the farmers are now practicing the strictest economy. Country merchants report that their sales have fallen off as much as 50 to 75 per cent. A great decline in sales of all classes of goods, especially in agricultural implements, has been experienced all over the country. While this contraction is going to prove the salvation of the farmers, it is in the meantime hard upon the commercial community. It is, however, the only right course to pursue under the circumstances, and under ordinary circumstances will speedily restore the farmers of the country to a sound and healthy basis.

Combined with this general movement to practice economy, there is the fact, worthy of note, that the prices of about all kinds of goods have declined very materially. Therefore, while the price of wheat is low, the purchasing power of wheat, bushel for bushel, is almost as great as it was some years ago, when the grain was worth nearly double the present ruling prices.

All things considered, there is nothing in the present situation to make the future of the country appear gloomy, any more than there has been at any time since the country was opened for settlement. Rather the contrary. Important occurrences have transpired which have rather improved the outlook within the last ten or a dozen years. Freight rates are much lower; the cost of living has been very greatly reduced; towns have grown up and railways have been extended all over the country, thus greatly reducing the distance travelled in hauling grain and produce to market; diversified farming has given place to a considerable extent to wheat-growing only. In fact, there has been a decided improvement for the better in many ways within the last few years.

Economy is the road to prosperity. The economy which is now evidently being so generally practiced, will certainly bring the farmers out of any financial troubles which may now affect a number of them, and the recovery will be more rapid than many suppose possible. Of course much will depend upon crops and prices of farm produce during the next few years. There may be further drawbacks to overcome in the immediate future as regards crops and prices; but that they will be duly overcome, there is no reason to doubt for an instant.

EDITORIAL NOTES.

The study of agriculture, which is likely to be undertaken in the public schools of Manitoba, should prove both useful and interesting. It is hard to imagine any more interesting study than agriculture. It is the study of nature itself, while as for usefulness, agriculture we may say is the basis of civilization, commerce and industry. No reasonable objection can be