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OUR PRE-HISTORIC ALFALFA

PUBLIC interest in the growing of alfalfa in Western Canada has of late become so intensified we have thought that a few facts which are not generally known as to the history and distribution of the plant might not be unacceptable. Still more interesting may the reading of this brief article prove when we state at the outset that there are few things within the range of field husbandry that have a more remote ancestry, that carry a more dependable record, or that can be more successfully wooed by what often seems the most forbidding circumstances of soil and climate.

As a matter of fact, there appears to be no time in the world's history at which this wonderful legume was not known, used and esteemed as one of the most valuable of all field crops. Since men were able to live and leave a record behind them, alfalfa has been as commonly used in the feeding of all herbivorous animal life as wheat and oats are in sustaining human flesh today.

Its native soil (so far as it can be traced) was Central Asia where, as Mr. Coburn says: "it possibly afforded the herbage which sustained Nebuchadnezzar in his humiliating exile and eventually restored him to sanity and manhood." However that may be, we know that it was carried by the Persians into Greece with the invasion of Xerxes in 490 B. C., utilized by the Romans in their conquest of Greece and carried to Rome in 146 B. C. Pliny and other writers praise it as a forage plant, and it has been in cultivation in parts of Italy con-

tinuously from its introduction. The name "alfalfa" is an Arabic term meaning "the best fodder," and if the ancients of the Old World realized its value to the extent this indicates, it is an amazing circumstance that with all our development in Western Canada, the plant is only of recent date in our midst and only yet is being seriously "tried" as a crop that can be depended upon

to Belgium and England, and one of our English writers of the Plantagenet period speaks of it in glowing terms as a food plant for cattle. But to the Spaniards is due the gratitude of the Western Hemisphere for the circumstance that it now is what it is all over North and South America. Not in the interests of "intensive farming" but in one of the most bloody

1853 or the following year was it introduced into Northern California (from Chili, it is said), but it had been grown by the Spaniards and Indians in Southern California for probably a hundred years, having had a gradual migration from Mexico.

While it is even now discussed as a new plant on the Atlantic Coast, it has been in cultivation on a small scale in the Carolinas, New York and Pennsylvania for probably a century and a half. There are, of course, small fields in those States that have been producing for over sixty years, and there are records of it showing that it had been known and duly attested before that. In a book written in 1793 by one named Spurrier and dedicated to Thomas Jefferson, the writer enthusiastically speaks of it as "lucerne," tells how it should be cultivated, and gives the information that three crops of valuable hay could be cut from it annually.

From time to time since then it crops up in the "transactions" of one Agricultural Society or another, and in one case the statement is made as to its yielding six to nine tons of hay per acre "under the best cultivation and plentiful manuring." Yet its cultivation did not spread. The indifference of the real "old timers" of the early days to any new idea in crop cultivation must have been more pronounced than even the sluggishness and hidebound incredulity of these days.

According to this Spurrier, the difficulties of propagation were not considered greater than we estimate them now. He said one planting would survive many



A Few Thousand Dollars Worth of Perfectly Cured Alfalfa Hay

and that can be profitably grown. It is known in France and England as lucerne, why, we cannot say. Some writers assume that it is thus named from the Swiss Canton, Lucerne, but this cannot be the case as it was not known there until long after it was cultivated in France and England.

It is generally believed that the Moors introduced it into Spain from northern Africa at the time of the Moorish Conquest of Spain about 711 A.D. At all events it was imported into France, later

raids recorded in history did Cortes bring it with his company of cut-throats to Mexico in 1519 and in less than twenty years afterwards (also in the train of ruthless warfare) was it imported by the Spaniards into Peru and Chili where it has ever since luxuriantly flourished.

If it was planted on the United States Atlantic seaboard in that century, it does not appear to have been appreciated by the Indian aborigines nor even by the early European settlers. Not till