

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE TOBACCO REGION OF SOUTHERN WISCONSIN

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Tobacco as a commercial crop in Wisconsin is a surprise to most people because the production of tobacco is usually associated with warm climates and long growing seasons. The southern Wisconsin tobacco region is an island of tobacco situated in the midst of middle latitude grains, which, in turn, are supplementary and basic to the dairy industry. The region is a small area of 500 to 600 square miles. In no part of the area is a major portion of the land in tobacco, 8 to 10 per cent being the maximum devoted to it.

Tobacco production and dairying are the primary interests of the farming population of the region. The two interests appear to work well together in their division of labor. The greatest demand for labor in the tobacco fields is in the middle of the day while the dairy industry requires most attention in the morning and late afternoon. In many ways tobacco and dairying are supplementary to each other rather than competitive.

The topography of the region varies considerably in detail in different parts. The northeast portion is characterized by low, scattered, ovoid drumlins, between which lie extensive peat bogs and marshlands. Drumlins are an inconspicuous element of the landscape in the southwestern part of the area. Much of this portion is gently rolling except that portion which extends across the hilly terminal moraine of the Green Bay Glacier. Large areas of original prairie lands are conspicuous by their dark colored soils. The gentle slopes of these prairie soils are the best tobacco lands. About 84 per cent of the land is in crops or rotation pasture. Most of the remainder is in permanent pasture and there is little idle land.

The attention of the farmer is occupied by tobacco from the building and planting of the seed beds in early spring until the tobacco is finally marketed the following winter or spring. Most of the tobacco is of special quality and is produced for cigar binders. Thin tough leaves of uniform quality and color are demanded for this purpose. Such quality tobacco is produced only when careful attention is given to the soil and topography upon which the crop is grown and to the methods of harvesting, curing, and processing the tobacco.

Labor, more than any other one factor, appears to be responsible for the present importance of tobacco in this region. The large amount of hand labor necessary in the production of tobacco and the expert knowledge and skill required to supervise the work appear to be the chief factors which fasten tobacco production on this region. At an early date numerous Norwegian immigrants settled in the region. These people were ignorant of tobacco culture. They had little money, however, to start farming for themselves. Hence, they were employed as laborers or share-men on the tobacco farms which were already in existence. In this way they learned the industry. They have been willing to do the hard, exacting, patient work required by tobacco culture in order to obtain the large returns which it gives. Today, tobacco culture is largely co-extensive with the area occupied by people of Norwegian ancestry.