

# HAY

Webster says that hay is grass, alfalfa, clover, etc. cut and dried for use as fodder. This is the literal definition. But, hay was the only 'food' the early Weston farmers had to feed their cattle. The scientific feeding of livestock as we know it today was not known or practiced in the days of farming in Weston. But the farmer did know that he had to put aside a good quantity of hay in the barn for his cows to live on during the winter. The first farmers in Weston had to let the cows range on what ever they could find in the fields and brush. As soon as some land could be cleared and tilled, grass and clover were seeded for the hay crop. Since these plants were perennials, the farmer did not have to seed them every year. In fact, a properly managed hay field could survive for many years, especially if it was manured.

The first hay crops were probably straight timothy grass. Later, clover was mixed with the grasses to provide a more nutritious feed. A present day extension agent has said 'High quality hay is early cut, green, leafy, soft, free of foreign material, and has a pleasant odor. And quality hay can be considered satisfactory when animals consuming the hay give the desired performance.'

The quality of the hay obtained by the farmer was dependent on when he harvested. The stage of maturity when hay is harvested is the single most important factor affecting its quality. When the grass and/or clover is in seed head, the forage begins to become more fibrous and contains less protein. The early flowering stage is best, because the grass and clover is close to its maximum growth and is higher in total digestibility. Getting the hay in at its optimum stage of maturity depended on the weather as much, or more, than on the eye of the farmer. He might decide that the hay field is ready for cutting, and then have a week of rainy weather preventing cutting. Or, he might cut the hay and have rain spoil the hay in the field before he can get it in the barn.

Growing the hay crop was the easiest part of providing this feed. The physical work came in the cutting, loading, and putting the hay into the barn.

A good field of hay can usually be harvested twice in Connecticut. The second cutting does not yield as much as the first. However, up until the 1940's, getting in the hay was done in a way that had been used for many years.



Cradle scythe



Sickle-bar mower

The first hay harvesting tool was the scythe. The one in the picture shows a cradle attachment which was used more for grain that was harvested for the seed. The cradle allowed the farmer to lay the cut grain down gently to prevent the seed from shattering on the ground. In 1831, Cyrus McCormick invented the reaper which enabled a farmer to harvest his hay much faster. The picture shows a farmer using a sickle-bar mower (the bar is on the other side of the mower). This newer version of McCormick's reaper greatly speeded up the getting in of the hay. The Society has a horse-drawn mower parked along side the old post office. This came from a farm in Weston.

After the hay was cut, it was raked into windrows which helped dry the hay and put in a row so the hay loader could cover it as it was picked up. The picture shows one of these 'dump' rakes. The hay was collected by the long teeth as the rake was pulled thru the grass. A foot or rope-operated lever would trip the teeth which would quickly raise up and then lower to rake the next ten feet of hay. With skill and a lot of luck, the row of hay would be 'fairly straight.' Our dump rake came from the estate of Anson Morton, and could have been used by his family.