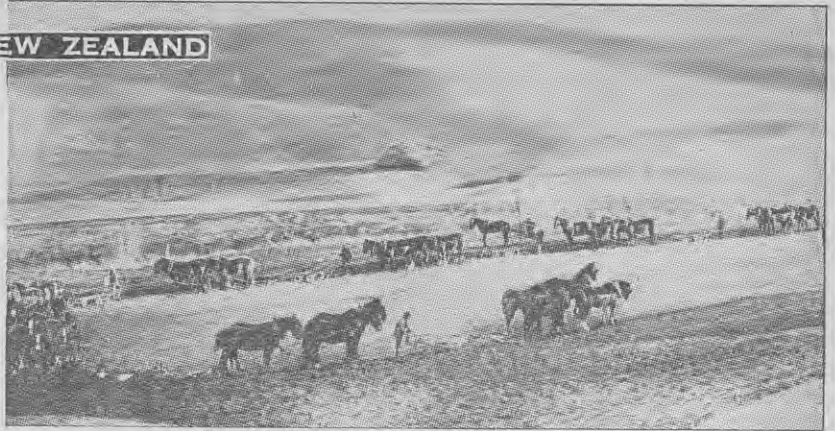


Cereal Production

By

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FOR a period in the 70's and 80's of last century it appeared that large-scale wheat farming might form part of the farming pattern of Canterbury and portions of Otago. This article traces the rise of these bonanza wheat farms and their subsequent decline.

THE small communities of early settlers in New Zealand were cut off from one another by bush and natural barriers of mountain and river; in addition communication with Australia, the nearest overseas neighbour, was infrequent, and the Mother Country was several months away. It was thus inevitable that to live these pioneers had to concern themselves with subsistence farming; they had to produce and process the greater part of their requirements, and it is not surprising that to ensure the supply of their daily bread they made wheat their principal crop. From the North Auckland mission farms down to John Jones, whaler and farmer, at Waikouaiti, Otago, each small settlement had its wheat crops; in fact up to the 60's wheat was grown in parts where it has never since been attempted.

The first settlers in Canterbury, which was to become the granary of New Zealand, immediately turned their attention to wheat growing. All through the 1840's Mr. Hay, of Pigeon Bay, Banks Peninsula, "grew wheat, cut it with a reaping hook, threshed it with a flail, and ground it at night or on a wet day." The Deans Brothers at Riccarton grew their first grain crops in 1843-44, consisting of 2½ acres of wheat, 1 acre of oats, and 2½ acres of barley, but as the seed was sown too late the crops were light. However, the following season the wheat crop of 26 acres which followed a crop of potatoes yielded between 60 and 70 bushels an acre.

It was after the arrival of the first organised settlers in Otago and Canterbury in 1848 and 1850 respectively that the area sown in wheat increased rapidly. The fertile plains and rolling

downlands of Canterbury and Otago required little breaking in. There were few natural difficulties to contend with, such as bush to fell and large areas of swamp to drain, and the settlers were able immediately to set about the task of cultivating the soil.

In the second year of the Canterbury settlement's history there were 500 acres sown within a short radius of Christchurch, and by 1855 the total wheat area of the country was 10,000 acres. For example, in 1853 Mr. W. G. Brittain, Commissioner of the Canterbury Association's Lands, gave some details of a crop which he grew on a piece of land close to the present Barbadoes Street Bridge in Christchurch. "I had 13 acres laid down to wheat. The land, which was originally covered with tutu, fern, and grass, had been broken up the previous year and had borne a first crop partly of wheat and partly potatoes. The land was ploughed about the latter end of March and remained fallow until the last week in May, when, having been first lightly harrowed, it was sown with wheat, broadcast with 2 bushels to the acre. The soil being very light, the plough followed the sower and covered the seed to a depth of about 3in. In the spring, when the young wheat was about 2in. above the ground, it was well rolled with a heavy horse roller. The crop threshed at 70 bushels to the acre."

Effect of Gold Rushes

While the Otago gold rushes of the early 60's practically brought agricultural farming to a standstill for a time, they had the effect of bringing a valuable addition to the population. In 1860 the European population of New Zealand was at 80,000; five years later it reached 191,000, the greater

proportion of the increase going to the South Island, because parts of the North Island were hampered in their development by the insecurity caused by the Maori Wars.

The increased population affected the market for farm produce within New Zealand, and Canterbury benefited particularly, because it was from here that the flour, meat, and butter were obtained which brought such high prices on the Otago goldfields. In Dunedin flour rose to £52 a ton, butter to 2s 6d. a lb., and they were much higher at Tuapeka, on the actual "fields." It is said that here a pannikin of flour cost 5s.

The period of stagnation following the gold rushes was comparatively short lived; the decline in the wheat acreage in the 60's quickly recovered and in the 70's great progress and the rise of the bonanza wheat farms occurred.

AREA IN WHEAT, OATS, AND BARLEY IN CANTERBURY AND OTAGO

YEAR	(To the nearest thousand acres.)		
	WHEAT Acres (thousands)	OATS Acres (thousands)	BARLEY Acres (thousands)
1858	6	5	.8
1861	18	9	2
1864	19	41	3
1870	73	82	22
1875	98	145	13
1880	248	297	47
1885	247	325	30
1890	294	376	23
1895	139	312	25
1900	243	347	31

The table shows a large increase in the acreage in cereals in the 80's. This was during the first prolonged economic depression in New Zealand, when, as in subsequent depressions, some farmers turned their attention to the production of cash crops such as cereals and unfortunately, in a number of instances, to mining the soil. During the depression of the 1930's there was a repetition of this; the wheat acreage increased in spite of low prices because of farmers' endeavours to maintain their income to meet relatively-high fixed charges, and soil mining was again frequently resorted to.