A Century of Alfalfa Culture in America

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ALFALFA had no claim to recognition or bid for fame in the beginning of American agriculture. It was indeed a humble immigrant among the alien crops brought over from the Old World.

Unlike gold, it did not make history by motivating men to conquer and to exploit or to search and to seize. It was and is a crop for the peaceful pursuits of man. Its part in human affairs was not meant for the adventurer or the buccaneer, yet it followed in their wake to become one of the greatest forages of the new hemisphere and also one of its principal sources of renewable wealth.

Gold, the metal that measures wealth, was the lure that led to alfalfa culture in the New World. The Spaniards brought alfalfa to South America but their early migrations were motivated by the fabulous tales of the precious ore to be mined and of native homes, resplendent with the luster of gold to be seized. But, in due course, all these adventures were followed by peaceful migrations and settlements of people who built an empire of alfalfa culture in Chile, in Peru, in Uruguay, and particularly in Argentina. This empire has grown during the past century to claim some 40% of the total acreage of alfalfa in the world.

In North America, gold was also the forerunner of alfalfa culture. Only a few years after Sutter's stirring discovery in 1848, seekers of the yellow metal brought alfalfa seed from Chile to California. That introduction, along with the continuing migrations of people from the eastern states, led to another expanding empire of alfalfa culture that evolved in western North America during the past century. It also grew to claim some 40% of the total world acreage and output of alfalfa.

World Acreage Pre-eminent in the Americas

And thus the humble herb of the Caucasus which had ascended from its primeval habitat to the refinements of the ancient cultures in the valleys of the Euphrates, of the Po, and of the Nile, was to become the major forage of the Americas.

Recognized as the oldest plant grown solely for forage, alfalfa has had a long and noble history. In the Old World, by the Medes and the Persians, by the Arab Moors, and by the Romans and their subjects for the length and breadth of the great Roman Empire, alfalfa had no claim to recognition or bid for fame in the beginning of American agriculture. Nonetheless, alfalfa culture never attained any noteworthy degree of momentum in the eastern states. It responded poorly to the leached and acid fields of this region—few favored spots like those in the vicinity of N. Y., and in the limestone areas of the Virginias. There the continuity and antiquity of alfalfa culture exceeds by far the limitation of a century. But, neither by the accidents or the incidents of history did its limited culture there lead to any major developments in the acreage and output of alfalfa on the American continent. Instead, it remained for the introduction of Spanish alfalfa seed from California about 1851 to initiate the great empire of alfalfa culture in North America.

Alfalfa found a friendly environment in the western states. In fact it was one that was not only suited to alfalfa culture, but also, and with no less importance, for the production of forage but also, and with no less importance, for the production of seed. The soils of the western states were not acid. They were leached of the basic minerals which are requirements of the alfalfa diet. They did not have the over-accruing of the eastern states. They did not have the over-accumulation of the eastern states. They did not have the over-accumulation of the eastern states. They did not have the over-accumulation of the eastern states. They did not have the over-accumulation of the eastern states.

Escapes Drought

Not only was the western environment suited to alfalfa culture, but fortunately alfalfa had a remarkable fitness for the western environment. As a result of its primeval habitat in the mountainous regions of the west, the alfalfa plant has developed a remarkable fitness for that environment. The root system is well adapted for the quick penetration of the primary root is an important attribute which helps the alfalfa plant to meet the challenge of the leached and acid fields of the western states.