Some Notes on Patterns of Farmwork in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Buildings, household furnishings, farm tools, and numerous other artifacts survive in relative abundance to give us impressions of life on the New England farm in the early nineteenth century. Many of these examples of "material culture" can be "read" to understand how they were used. Written and oral traditions can often augment our knowledge of these artifacts and their purposes. Comparisons among these objects and conjectural arrangements of some of them within an historical setting can further suggest aspects of New England's earlier rural culture. These interpretive efforts, however, are limited in that they produce static pictures of life. We must look to written records for the fabric of daily existence which gives meaning and context to these many artifacts and sharpens our view of the past.[1]

The intangible properties of New England farmlife are difficult to identify and to evaluate. They must be gleaned from diverse sources, then be pieced together into a composite whole. The survival of a diary written by an unidentified farmer living in Hampstead, New Hampshire, brings into focus some of this substance of daily life. The "Anonymous Farmer" (hereafter called Farmer) recorded many of the tasks that composed each day's work, including the time and number of "hands" needed to complete each job.[2] The diary, covering the period of April 25 to November 19, 1817, reveals daily work patterns and Farmer's implicit response to the problems and choices he faced.

The problem of arranging farmwork into an overall plan suggests an approach to the rich information in the diary. In general, farm tasks can be divided into two groups — those related to the natural growth cycles of crops (e.g., planting, crop maintenance, harvesting, and certain preserving and processing measures) and those which can be accomplished at any time of the year because they are independent of these cycles (building and equipment maintenance, some field maintenance, and many isolated duties such as making special purchases and sales, making credit arrangements, and travel). The timing of the first type of task is fixed by nature; the second reflects the farmer's management abilities. Careful planning can contribute to the success of the farm. An even distribution throughout the year minimizes periods of intense activity and idleness, and it allows better use of labor and assets.

Perusal of the diary quickly establishes that Farmer was among the more technically proficient farmers of his region. The simple fact that this careful record of farmwork was kept attests to his concern for the productivity of his farm. Various entries identify relatively innovative farming practices, such as making tree grafts and fertilizing fields with "plaster" (i.e., lime). Therefore, the profile generated from this farm diary probably represents one of the better resolutions of farmwork management in early nineteenth-century New England.

The descriptive entries in Farmer's diary allow natural growth related tasks to be

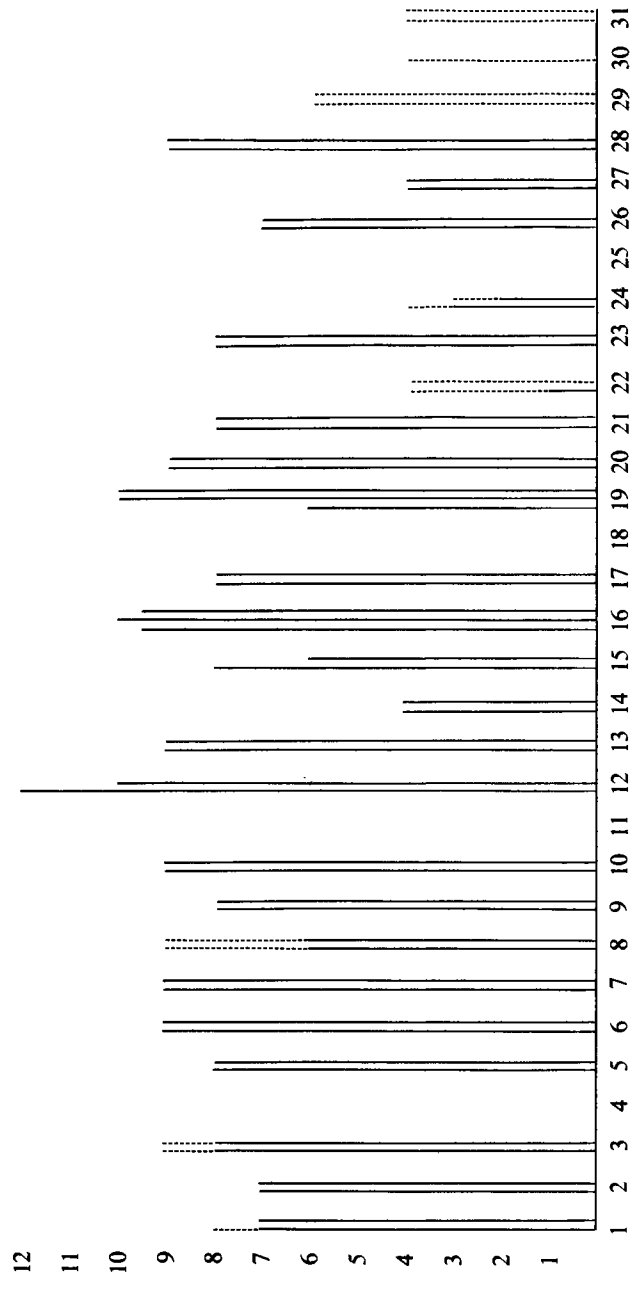

FIG. 1. TOTAL WORK IN HOURS RECORDED FOR THE MONTH OF MAY. Data from "Anonymous Farmer's Diary." Each line represents one worker. Solid lines indicate work related to natural growth cycles; dotted lines show all other recorded work.

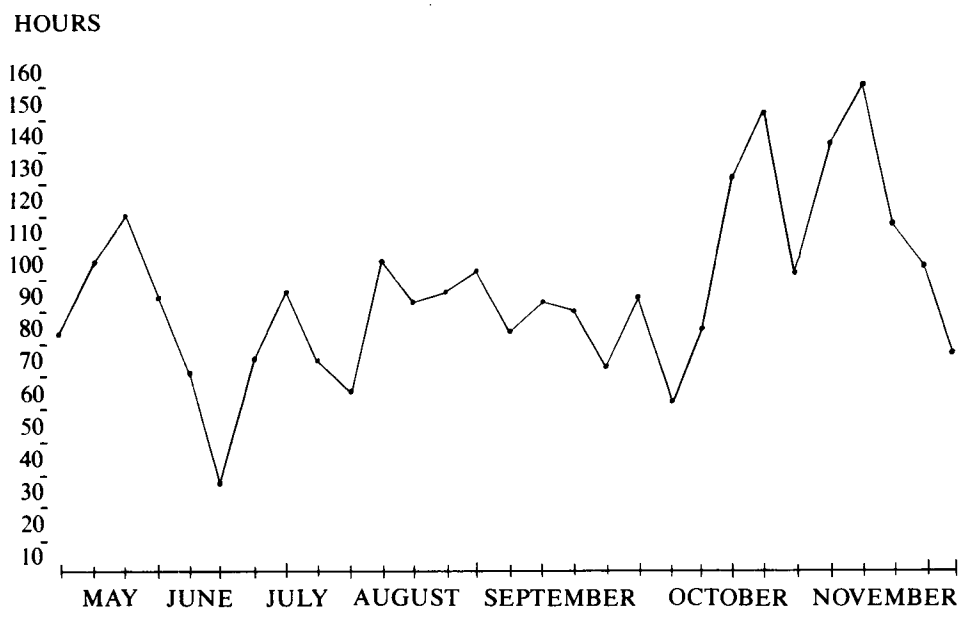

FIG. 2. TOTAL NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED EACH WEEK FROM APRIL 28 TO NOVEMBER 15, 1817. Data from "Anonymous Farmer's Diary."

separated from those that can be performed at any time of the year. On May 12, for example, Farmer recorded manuring, harrowing, and planting. In contrast, the last three days of May were spent picking stones out of fields, carrying grain to the mill, clearing a water course, piling boards at the saw mill, and laying a wall. A minimum number of people needed to complete all of the recorded tasks for each day can also be determined from these entries.[3] On May 15 two hands furrowed a corn field for two hours, two hands manured a corn field for four hours, and one hand worked in the garden for two hours. The accounts identify at least two people working on the farm that day. By distributing the individual work assignments among the workers so that no one worked more than ten or twelve hours per day, the assumption can be made that on the fifteenth of May one person worked six hours and the other worked eight.

A tabulation of the tasks and times for each day recorded in the diary yields a profile of the type and amount of work performed on this Hampstead farm in 1817.[4] The work profile for the month of May (Fig. 1) is representative of the entire period in question, though it is not quite as erratic as some months. Two observations are immediately apparent. First, no work is done on Sundays. Second, work days are approximately equal in length throughout the month. The average work day for May was 7.6 hours against an average for the entire period of about 7.8 hours per day. A third observation can be interpreted from the profile. Those tasks not governed by natural cycles are distributed so as to fill in the slack days, thus keeping the tempo of work as even as possible. Again, this distribution pattern is representative of the other months.

The total number of hours worked which Farmer records in his diary can be sum-

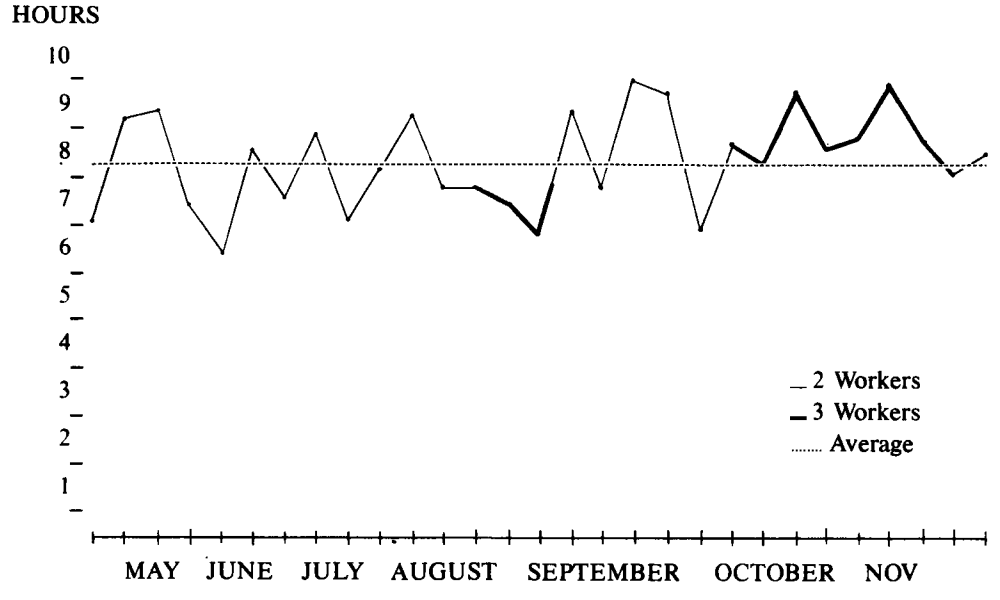

FIG. 3. AVERAGE WORK-DAY IN HOURS FOR EACH WORKER FROM APRIL 28 TO NOVEMBER 15, 1817. Data from "Anonymous Farmer's Diary."

marized in graph form (Fig. 2). By plotting the hours against the time of year, the busiest periods on this farm can be identified. The relatively level month of May is evident. The months of June and September are very uneven. The last week in September and the entire month of October are clearly the heaviest work periods of the year. This period represents an increase of more than sixty percent over the remainder of the year.[5]

The intense work period in the fall raises a number of questions. Foremost is why. If Farmer seemed to be able to control the daily work loads throughout the rest of the year, why did he experience a labor demand of this magnitude? His diary shows that harvesting was the direct cause of this increase. With the exception of "working on the road" on September 26 and 27, the first half of this six-week period was occupied digging potatoes. Likewise, most of the second half was spent picking apples. The concentration of so much work in these weeks may indicate concern for harvesting crops at the proper time, rather than mismanagement. The entries do not show the variety of tasks typical of earlier weeks and months, but exhibit a uniformity of purpose. The mention of snow on the first of November calls to mind the urgency of harvesting before the first frost.

The increased labor demand in the fall could only be satisfied by the same number of workers working longer hours or working more efficiently, or by hiring additional workers. Data from Farmer's diary establish that the length of the working day remained constant and that temporary help was added (Fig. 3). Robert Boyes and Samuel Atwood "came this morning to work" on September 22 and 23, respectively. Each was paid for working one and one-third months, though their final working days were two weeks apart (Atwood on November 3 and Boyes on the 15th). Be-

cause Farmer noted absenteeism among his workers, they were probably contracted to work a specific number of days to complete their term, thus accounting for the discrepancy in the termination date.

A final point to be considered regarding the fall labor demand concerns the identity of the temporary workers. Atwood can be identified as the twenty-one-year-old son of Moses Atwood, a member of an old farming family in Hampstead.[6] Though Boyes's identity remains unknown, he was probably about the same age and hailed from similar circumstances. Among the day-laborers Farmer had hired at various times in July, August, and September was Jesse Emerson, the twelve-year-old son of a prominent member of the community.[7] Apparently, Farmer also hired older workers on a daily basis. These workers were distinguished in the diary by being identified as "Mister." Mr. Irving, for example, was probably David Irving, married in 1798 and most likely in his early forties by 1817.

The identification of these individuals shows that they came from various levels of the community. However, a likely common denominator among them is that they were leaving farm-duties or other interests of their own (or of their immediate family) to work for Farmer. The instances of an isolated day spent working here and there probably represented an exchange of a day's labor for the use of a team of oxen, to repay a debt, or perhaps to secure additional help in return at a future date. But the prolonged term of employment of Boyes and Atwood presents a problem. Their labor contribution to Farmer's operation represents a net increase of about fifty percent over the level of work on the farm for the rest of the year.[8] If other farmers in this region encountered similar increases in the demand for farm labor, where did these extra hands come from?

No single resolution of the labor squeeze emerges from Farmer's diary, though several possibilities can be advanced. Perhaps Farmer's work patterns and needs were not representative of the region. Varying selections of crops among farmers within the region might have staggered harvesting times sufficiently to spread the demand for additional labor more evenly over time and among the various farms. However, since relatively adverse farming conditions in northern New England limited the choice of crops, high labor demands in the fall were probably characteristic of most southern New Hampshire farms. The possibility that a group of migrant farm workers filled these temporary needs can be fairly discounted because the laborers employed by Farmer can be identified as local inhabitants.

A more likely solution to the labor problem lies within the structure of the local economy. Individual workers could easily shift from non-agricultural sectors (local industry and craft) to farming to fill this need. The common knowledge that crops *had* to be brought in to ensure the economic health of the entire community may well have caused the interests and efforts of all concerned to be directed toward that end. Consequently, most commercial activities, and certainly school, probably ceased functioning or at least continued at a reduced rate.

In some isolated cases, though notably not in Farmer's, the extra labor demand may have been satisfied simply by the same number of individuals working harder or by the addition of other family members to the work force. While the productivity of Farmer's farm increased by adding workers to the operation, productivity could also be raised by increasing the output of each worker (or the family considered as a single unit). Thus, some farmers who had worked at a relatively leisurely pace throughout the year might have worked

more efficiently during this critical period.

In conclusion, we have outlined a pattern of farmwork in early nineteenth-century New England and have mentioned some of the circumstances which affected its structure. We have identified a critical time of the year for securing adequate labor and have suggested a mechanism by which this need could have been satisfied. But through Farmer's actions we have only sampled the web of forces that shaped and motivated people. It is this focus on daily life, with its problems, choices, and uncertainties, that animates historical names and things.

NOTES

[1] "Living history" museums, like Plimouth Plantation and Old Sturbridge Village, represent an additional technique used by some historians in this area of study. By recreating as accurately as possible the conditions of an earlier age, and then living (or observing those living) subject to the historical circumstances, these historians attempt to rediscover this lost dimension of earlier cultures through empirical experiences.

[2] "Anonymous Farmer's Diary, Hampstead, New Hampshire, 1817," Old Sturbridge Village Library, accession no. 1968.39. A typescript of the diary is available through the Education Department, Old Sturbridge Village. The typescript includes valuable background material for interpreting the manuscript. Efforts to identify this particular farmer have proved fruitless to date. The diary also records the use of horses and teams of oxen, both of which are ignored in this study. Also ignored are the detailed cost accounts for individual fields that are recorded in the back of the diary.

[3] The largest number of hands employed for one task determined the minimum number of workers employed on the farm for that day. All of the work assignments for each day were allocated among the workers so that none worked more than about ten or twelve hours per day.

[4] Some tasks, especially those not related to natural cycles, are listed, but do not include figures for time spent or for the number of workers involved. Thus the aggregate amount of work recorded on this farm is below the real amount. Daily chores are also not included.

[5] The average weekly total in hours for the six-week period beginning September 22 and ending November 1 was 130.25 hours per week. The weekly totals averaged 81.87 for the remaining twenty-three weeks.

[6] Harriette Eliza Noyes, *A Memorial of the Town of Hampstead, New Hampshire* (Boston: George B. Reed, 1899), pp. 404, 115-16.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 368. Jesse Emerson was born on 29 October 1805 of John and Mary Emerson.

[8] The magnitude of this increase is determined from references in the diary to specific tasks, hours, and the number of hands involved. The fact that two additional hands were hired and contributed to a fifty percent increase in work does not imply that they joined an existing work force of four workers. Because names are not associated with individual work assignments, it is not possible to determine how long individuals remained in Farmer's employ. Thus, either Boyes or Atwood may have replaced a worker.