OVER THE YEARS AT TARBELL FARMS

Mae L. Smith (1923 – 2011)

Mae Smith was the Chenango County Historian when she interviewed Alice K. Wightman in April 1968. The manuscript was drawn from the files of the Smithville Historical Society.

Busy years at Tarbell Farms in Smithville are proudly recalled by Mrs. Alice K. Wightman. She arrived there from New York in 1913, a young woman in poor health. Long walks and pure air did their job, and few women have had a more active or interesting life than Mrs. Wightman. Her aunt was private secretary to Gage E. Tarbell, Vice President of Equitable Life Insurance Company. He also owned Tarbell Farms, and like his grandfather Eli, “was a man of enterprise and energy.”

After he bought the farm from his parents in 1899, many of the buildings were put up, and the holdings increased from 500 acres to 2,200. Surrounding land was rented to add to the acreage. Vern Bates was the superintendent of the farm when the big barns were built. Gage lived in the big house on the farm summers and in New York City winters. His parents, Charles P. and Mabel (Mabelle) Tillotson Tarbell died there in the new house and are buried in the Upper Cemetery at Smithville Flats.

Mrs. Wightman, speaking of Gage Tarbell’s life, says he was born September 20, 1856, died September 5, 1936, and is buried in Greene As a young man, he studied law in Greene and practiced in Marathon, New York. He began to sell insurance, and the insurance company transferred him to Milwaukee in 1886, where he also had a farm until 1892. He was later transferred to Chicago and then back to New York City, where he was elected Vice President. It was at this time he bought the home farm. After his death in 1936, his son Swift Tarbell continued development with the same inherited enthusiasm.

In 1913, when Mrs. Wightman arrived, things were well established. The cluster of buildings that was the heart of the enterprise made up a small village in itself. There were three milking barns, six calf and heifer barns, the main house, an office and pasteurizing plant at the end of a big barn, and other buildings. A high water tank stood in the center of the group; this is still standing [1968] beside the nearly demolished big house.

The Tarbell Farms had its own fire protection system. In the fall of 1934, a fire destroyed the barns across the road from the house. New barns were rebuilt right away. A Tarbell barn owned in Smithville Flats burned in 1961. It was not rebuilt, and the cattle there were moved to the farm. This was at Whitehall, where the artist Ralph H. Houston lives now [1968].

Gage Tarbell started the Guernsey breed on the farm in 1906. In 1961, there were 540 purebred Guernseys, including young stock. Certified milk was produced under strict requirements of the American Association of Medical Milk

Commission. Much milk was pasteurized and bottled at the plant on the farm. It was sold in Binghamton, Greene, and Whitney Point. For thirty-five years, until train service ended in 1960, milk was bottled and shipped to New York. There the Waldorf Astoria, the Commodore, other hotels, and the Exchange Club served Tarbell Farms certified milk to their guests and members Thirty-five employees did farm work, handled the herd, and bottled and distributed milk.

Mrs. Wightman was manager during those many years of progress. With keen interest, she kept track of the dairying and diversified operations: the orchards; ice cutting; logging; a large boarding house; sheep raising, which were Dorset and Shropshire; Chester White, Ohio Improved, and Berkshire swine; and White Leghorn and Rhode Island Red chickens.

Changing times, high costs, and high wages preceded the sale of the land and the auction. In March of 1963, the cattle brought $144,580 at the largest purebred sale in the history of the Guernsey breed.

Forests of the future will once again swallow the horizons northwest of Smithville Flats, where history was made during an interval in the circle of time.