Picking Hops in Nineteenth-Century Wisconsin

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Series,The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

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From 1873 to 1879, in Dellona, Wisconsin, Ella Seymour kept a sporadic record of her life. Her careful handwriting curled across the blue and red lines of the little ledger she used as a diary. She recounted the weather, illness, chores, and visits like so many of her fellow diarists of the nineteenth century. She reports: “We arranged beds, cleaned windows, and Ida mopped some. Ma and I took care of Arthur [presumably a little brother] by turns in the night.” On 31 August, she washed, ironed, and churned. On 1 September, she ironed and baked. And on 3 September, she picked 1 ½ boxes of hops.

Last June, I snuck away from the conference I was attending in Madison, Wisconsin, in order to dig into the research for the book I’m currently writing about hops. I crossed the street from our conference building to the imposing Wisconsin Historical Society and climbed up several flights of wide marble stairs to the state archives. On the sage advice of an archivist, I ordered up the massive tomes of the US Census Agricultural Schedules from 1850–1880, huge books with preprinted pages making clear which crops, livestock, and land uses interested the federal government at the time.

Page after page lists the farmer's name and carefully records the quantity of crops he (almost always he) had harvested. I focused on the listings for hops.

At the same time, I also ordered the collection of Ella's family papers, which came up in a search for hop-related records. Here, I found transcripts of her father's recollections and carefully kept ledgers. But the box also contained his daughter's sparse diary, which offered an unexpected glimpse into the women's labor so fundamental to the growing of hops. The diary opened up a whole world of lived experience masked by the tidy entries in the census.

Ella's farm was just 40 miles southwest of the **spot where John Muir's family settled** in 1849—the same year Ella's father, Silas J. Seymour, registered his claim—and 15 miles west of the **plot of land that Aldo Leopold would make his own** in the twentieth century. White settlers like Muir and Seymour entered and radically altered the existing ecology of a landscape shaped by Ho-Chunk and other Native American communities engaged in agriculture, controlled burning, and the active tending of plant and animal habitats. Hops followed earlier eras of white settler planting that used wheat and other annuals to turn the oak savannahs and alder swamps of the place currently known as Wisconsin into land producing both subsistence and cash crops. Wisconsin hops boomed in the 1860s, and busted in 1868, but some farmers weathered the crash and continued farming considerable quantities. In 1869, Wisconsin grew 4.6 million pounds of hops—second only in the US to New York State.

At this time, every hop blossom in the global beer trade was picked by hand, as mechanized harvesting didn't take off until the early twentieth century. From Bohemia to Bavaria, Kent to upstate New York, California to Oregon, labor conditions varied dramatically, but this all-important brewing ingredient was available only because legions of pickers stripped the hop bines of their blossoms one by one, grasping the sticky, pungent bloom and stuffing it into a sack. The botanical qualities of the hop plant pose unique labor problems. Brewers and their customers are most interested in the perishable yellow lupulin in the heart of the hop flower, the source of alpha acids, beta acids, and essential oils. But lupulin is highly susceptible to spoiling, and the harvest must be swift. Countless women in Wisconsin made their homes and barns and larders ready for the onslaught of pickers who were needed to rush the perishable hops from the bines to the hop kiln in late August and early September.

Ella herself picked hops, but the bulk of the harvest labor was performed by young women brought in to the farm for a few days or weeks. In Wisconsin, pickers were generally housed by the farmer's family. Belle Cushman Bohn, who was a contemporary of Ella's living about 15 miles west in Ironton, recounted her own hop-picking days: "Men and boys slept wrapped in blankets on the hay in the barn but that was like camping. Women and girls were given all the beds in the house, and big, plump ticks filled with straw that made nice, soft beds when spread on the floor of the sleeping quarters. Great preparations had to be made to house and feed from twenty to forty or more people, the number depending on the size of the yard. Bedding and dishes were loaned by the neighbors to the housewife needing them at the time, then passed on as the crews moved from place to place. For many days before the arrival of the pickers, the women folk were busy preparing edibles of all kinds, for the best was none too good for hop

pickers; for if meals were poor, there might be a shortage of help on that particular farm the next year."

The labor of the hop harvest for Ella and her mother and sister thus went far beyond picking hops. Their chores ramped up in anticipation of the arrival of the hop pickers, readying the house for the arrival of lots of young women in need of sustenance and a clean and comfortable place to sleep. One account suggests that this onslaught may have been less than welcome to many: "Long confinement in a crowded house in the country often led to irritability, however, and the strain was especially severe for the materfamilias, who had fewer opportunities to get out during the day. In warmer seasons there was the company of neighbors who came to assist with picking hops, husking corn, or harvesting or threshing wheat. But to the mother of the family, with extra mouths to feed, these occasions generally meant more work than recreation." These women, both as pickers and as housekeepers, cheered by the seasonal company or exhausted by the extra work, were caught up in global tastes and trade routes, gender roles, and botanical, horticultural, and agricultural processes.

Ella's diary offers important details about the centrality of women's work for the cultivation of hops, and thus for filling the growing demand for beer in towns and cities across the US and around the world. Ella's labor, the work of her body (which, as the finding aid notes, was shaped by the spinal disorder kyphosis), was crucial to the successful hop harvest. Variants of her story were repeated over and over across these census rolls and across the landscape. The hops she and the others picked traveled first to the drying house, then to a nearby railroad depot like the one at Kilbourn City (today's Wisconsin Dells), then usually eastward to Milwaukee, and sometimes beyond. Every nineteenth-century beer drinker ultimately relied on the hand-picked hops grown across temperate regions of the globe. Ella's life, her daily and seasonal routines, and the landscape she inhabited and shaped were all guided by the faraway tastes of beer drinkers and brewers she likely never met.

The departure of the pickers brought some final chores to Ella and her relatives, but also relief. When the picking was finally done for the year, "the pickers started for home early, and so the hurry and bustle is ended for this season. P.M. The beds are down the floors are mopped, & we can breathe more freely. Windows cleaned also." Just days after the pickers left, the first frost descended on the September countryside.