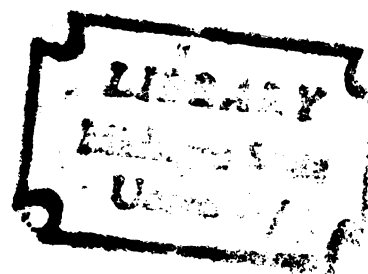




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Elements of Successful Farming.

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A THESIS by

(*Author*)  
1894

A. C. Bird, Highland, Mich.

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I. A. C.

Class of 1883.

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THESIS

Scientists have generally agreed that every man should have a specialty. That he should be a master in that specialty, and that his whole life work should be so arranged as to bear directly or indirectly upon its development.

To the educated farmer, with his mind filled with scientific truths, and skilled in scientific investigation, this idea is a most fascinating one. No man has a broader field from which to choose nor greater opportunities for original work than has he. To feel that in the great agricultural world, with its millions of farmers making a practical failure of their profession, that the great number of these failures are due to a lack of concentration to some particular line of work, and that he may not only achieve his own success but by his example that he may set right others who have not yet learned this lesson of concentration, is to him almost success in itself.

These and kindred thoughts fill the mind of the young farmer as he leaves his college life behind him to work out for himself the problem of success upon the farm. And well they may. No man can do better than to fix for himself a practical ideal, and bend every energy to the accomplishment of that one purpose.

But does this concentration of purpose of necessity mean

specialty of farming? Is the only success worth attaining the ideal success of the specialist? Can we do more for ourselves and for our fellow farmers by devoting our energies to the highest possible development of one branch of agriculture, or by using those same energies in developing a less perfect but a more harmonious system of general farming?

These too, are fit questions for the young farmer to ask himself as he enters upon his active life with the blessings of his Alma Mater resting upon him.

With the experience of but a single decade to draw upon, I may not hope to have solved this problem with the certainty which science requires of its students. But right or wrong as my conclusions may be, they at least possess the merit of being based upon personal experience and observation, accompanied by a conscientious and intense desire to make the most of my own small resources. Nor should the fact escape observation, that these same conclusions to which I have been led are in a great measure directly opposed to any preconcieved ideas on the subject which I may have had.

In order to further make clear at the beginning that any success which has been mine upon the farm has not been due to any unusual surroundings, I may be pardoned for stating directly that a farmer's life meant to me the same as it means to the great number of graduates from our Colloge, namely, to

sink or to swim from my own energies alone. To buy a farm and to stock it meant to me a heavy indebtedness which must be paid from the farm itself. And it is from the experience gained in the accomplishment of this very thing that I shall draw upon in the preparation of this thesis.

The first and greatest question demanding immediate solution was whether I should give my best thought and labor to the development of an ideal specialty or devote my energies to what is commonly termed general farming. Three things induced me to choose the latter. First, the poor general outlook for fashionably bred stock. Second, the prospect of a long continued tariff agitation rendering future calculations upon the prosperity or adversity of any single line of business uncertain. And last and emphatically the most important to me, the firm belief that nine out of every ten of the failures among the farmers of every class were attributable to poor business management, that the prevalent idea that a college education in a measure unfits a man for a successful business career was an erroneous one, and that the intensely practical course of training which I had received from my Alma Mater had quickened, rather than deadened my natural inclination toward an active business life.

After an experience of ten years upon the farm, embracing as it does the period generally accepted as that of the



greatest depression in agriculture experienced by this generation, I am a firm believer in the general truth of the first two of these propositions, and an emphatic believer in the absolute truth of the third. To make a success of farming today means no harder work than to establish ones self in any profession or business known to man. To achieve that success means only to grasp every opportunity and give attention to every detail in its development. In spite of the continuous and sometimes pathetic cry of agricultural depression, not one year has passed in the last ten but that more than three fourths of the ventures of the average general farmer have proved a financial success if properly managed. Some of these ventures have paid handsomely, others fairly, and the fourth not included, of necessity have entailed some losses. But if the general average has not proved satisfactory, the fault has usually been attributable to the farmer himself.

In proof of this statement I respectfully submit a summary of my farm accounts for the past ten years. These accounts, kept carefully and accurately, showing every detail of expenditure and income during that period, when summarized at the close of each business year exhibit the following facts: That every year my farm has paid all running expenses of every name and nature including a reasonable compensation for my own labor; it has, aside from this, furnished supplies

of everything needed on the table, of which no account has ever been kept; and it has paid me over and above all these expenses a net profit of never less than seven per cent per annum on every dollar invested. Not that I would maintain for a moment that money can be made as easily upon the farm today as it could twenty or thirty years ago. But it is an open question if the fact that the only essentials for making a farm pay are no longer to hold a plow or drive a horse may not be of lasting benefit to the profession of the agriculturist. The successful farmer of today must learn lessons which were unnecessary a quarter of a century ago. But his success when achieved means more to the great world of business and gives him a higher position among his fellow men than ever before.

He must learn first of all to think for himself in planning his season's work. To follow in the footsteps of others is almost invariably to be just in time to share their failures, but a little too late to share their successes. The farmer who is slow to embark in the new pursuits into which all his neighbors are plunging and who has the temerity to lead in a new venture now and then after considering carefully every prospective feature connected with it is usually the one who makes a success of his profession. And it is right here in these new ventures that a man's scientific training

is indispensable to him. How many foolish and expensive experiments his knowledge of agricultural chemistry and kindred sciences saves him. How many of the uncertainties it eliminates, and how many of the exigencies which might otherwise prove disastrous it enables him to avoid, or to turn to good account.

The next great element of success upon the farm lies in giving the closest possible attention to details. It is a commonly accepted maxim among business men that the success or failure of any one of their number may usually be accurately measured by his attention to the details of his business. Yet, this seems to be one of the most difficult lessons for the average farmer to learn. Small repairs upon machinery are neglected, resulting in an expensive break of a dependent part. Small repairs upon tools are neglected, depreciating by half the amount of work accomplished with them day after day. Minutes are allowed to be wasted in an apparently slack portion of the day which might be well utilized in preparing for the busier portion. Several men are compelled to stand idle, from one man's neglect. The horse not shod at the proper time becomes lame and his value largely departs. Wheat is left uncut a few days too long and wastes all through the harvest. Tools which five minutes time would place under shelter are allowed to be ruined by exposure.

Every loss thus entailed reduces the net profits just that much; the other expenses being never less but frequently greater from this neglect of small details. Not a day passes upon the farm but that a loss of this kind either great or small occurs, unless the utmost vigilance is continuously maintained to prevent it. And yet, important as the matter is, not one farmer in a hundred properly attends to it.

An almost equally important factor in successful farming is the exceedingly difficult one of always keeping one's work well in hand. One day's work cultivating at the right time will destroy more weeds than three day's equally hard work will destroy a few days later. Cultivating properly done at the right time serves the double purpose of destroying weeds and invigorating plant growth. If left a few days later, while it may in a measure accomplish the first, in so doing it injures the plant growth by breaking ~~of~~ cutting the surface roots at a time when the plant is unable to withstand so severe a pruning at its base. To know the proper time for doing this work, the farmer must study not only the nature of the weeds to be destroyed and the effect of the cultivation upon the outward plant growth, but he must also be perfectly familiar with the root structure and growth of every cultivated plant upon his farm. In these days of more and more frequency of protracted drouths, this question of a properly

prepared seed bed and scientific cultivation is becoming supreme. And yet, not ten farmers in one hundred have changed their methods to correspond with the changed conditions; and of these ten not more than one plans his work with sufficient care to be able to follow out the method which he knows to be the right one. He who solves this problem deserves the success which he invariably achieves.

Another element of success which I believe to be indispensable is to be quick to see opportunities of profitable buying and selling, and to always be prepared to grasp such opportunities when they occur. A ruinous amount of half fattened live stock is always being placed upon the market, particularly when prices are discouragingly low. The farmer who is in a position to buy at such times can always feed at a profit. This involves a working capital of ready money, in which most farmers are woefully lacking. Conducting as they do business running into the thousands each year, yet with seldom sufficient ready money at their command to pay the daily running expenses of the farm, can we wonder that they do not succeed. Better by far, if necessary, borrow at a reasonable rate of interest a sufficient sum to enable them to do business on a cash basis and to take advantage of the opportunities which the possession of ready money insures. The limit of one's expansion in this direction should be

marked by the degree in which he possesses that peculiar kind of judgment known as business sagacity.

One more element, the most important of them all the successful farmer cannot do without, and that is an active, well disciplined and healthy mind. I would not ignore the fact that magnificent successes have been achieved in agriculture and in almost every other profession or business known to man by men of little education, and comparatively small general information. But he who has the mind training which a college scientific course can give, and who reads carefully and regularly the best reviews and scientific magazines of the day, other things being equal, has a wonderful advantage over his fellow worker who has not received this training. But he who drops his books when he leaves his Alma Mater profits but little from his college course. Looked at from any standpoint the educated farmer can ill afford to be without the best current literature of the day; and his library should be to him a never failing source of inspiration to more successful work.

Nor am I claiming immunity from failures or discouragements for the farmer who thus lives. Each season, and I might almost say each day, he experiences both. But in this he is not unlike the successful man in any line of work.

Such are in brief the lines upon which I am working out

a financial success in my chosen profession. I am not insensible, however, that there is a success in farming not to be measured by dollars and cents. That the specialist may develop a type of perfection, or make a discovery which means more for progressive agriculture than figures can express. Yet I firmly believe, that the great thing most needed by the American farmers of today is to learn how to make farming pay a dividend in plain dollars and cents, and at the same time to maintain or increase the fertility of their farms; and that he who has accomplished that result and can teach others to do the same has made no unworthy use of his energies.

That the specialist by exercising the same judgment and care in the management of his affairs may be equally certain of success is to me not clear. We are living in an age in which conditions change so rapidly that the dangerous element of uncertainty envelopes every line of business. That which is great today may tomorrow be forgotten. He who has the best of everything he possesses absorbed in the development of one branch of agriculture is illy prepared to cope with these ever changing conditions. I believe we have reached a stage in agricultural development when the best work of the specialist, the discovery and development of new and improved types, can be done and is being done by the Agricultural Colleges and the Experiment Stations. In other words, that

the general farmer of today, if possessed of sufficient ability and proper training, can do better and more successful work in every branch of his profession than could have been done in any one branch by the specialist of a decade ago.

All honor to such men as Dr. Kedzie and Dr. Beal who have made this thing possible, and to the younger men who are following in their footsteps. All honor to our College to which history will ever point as the leader in this great work.



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