

Planting Potatoes

By Eliza W. Farnham

The great labor of seed-time, in which Geordie and I had yet to bear our part, was the potato planting, which was in itself less disagreeable than the preparatory step of cutting the seed. In the old shanty, which we had all abandoned except Miss Kilmansegg and her eight golden-legged little chickens, there lay, when we began, about nine hundred arobas of potatoes. Day after day we sat in the dark, dirty place, over this disagreeable pile, with hands muffled in old gloves or new gloves, white rags or colored ones, just as chance permitted, but always the same hands. How wearily they spun out! How dirty and distasteful the handling! When a day came for planting, we rejoiced to rush out into the open fields, and, with basket on arm, or sack suspended by a strap over the shoulder, march up and down the furrows, laborious though it was.

Geordie and I always made a procession in getting off to any distance - she invariably falling some six or eight steps behind with her spade, hoe, or whatever it might be, swinging as a walking-stick; and there was always about her, in these walks, a plodding, matter-of-fact air that irresistibly amused me, when, as it often happened, I was compelled to turn back to address her. In her air, look, and manner, there was something that seemed to suggest that it was a very old business with her, and that she was mentally comparing the prospects of this year with those of some cold, or hot, or wet, or dry season, of years ago, or estimating the comparative expense and durability of modes of fencing, the utility of improved plows, harrows, scarecrows, etc.

Our planting, began in April, and continued till the third of May, the day on which we commenced the previous year; and as, beside this advantage, we have better fences, no grasshoppers and not a tithe of the cattle that then consumed our potatoes and patience, we are greatly encouraged in our labors. We reckon ten acres each of our own planting—we putting the seed in the drill, while Joe followed with the wonderful plow, which, in every succeeding step of the process, took a new shape. In this one it had become a broad, wedge-like implement, which, dragged along the middle of the ridge between the drills, turned the soil both ways into them. Occasionally the boards, which were nailed on either side to give it this form, would split away, and then, when we looked for Joe, we saw him at the end of the furrows, hammer, axe, or saw in hand, repairing.

The rapidity of this mode recommended it greatly to us, who were so impatient to see it over, but did not meet the approbation of some ease-loving neighbors of ours—gentlemen from Arkansas, who took a gentle undisturbing interest in our affairs, and discussed them, while reposing in the sunshine, in heavy red flannel shirts, outside boots, worn up to the knee, and with commodious pipes in their mouths. In those days they "allowed" that California was no better than other countries, and the proof of it was, that they could only get twenty dollars a week and board offered them for driving an ox-team. They wanted thirty, and this being refused, spent the days reclining, for the most part, in the sun against their house, or the mill, or a fence, their feet elevated to the height most conducive to that perfect ease which such gentlemen of leisure court.

The scarcity of labor, and the indifferent quality of those who seek employment, are, at most seasons of the year, among the chief difficulties of farming in this country. If your hired man go off any evening to get drunk for two or three days, or any morning with a gun, to spend half the day in pursuit of a deer which he never overtakes, or a flock of migrating geese which always fly a little too high for a shot, you are to be very complaisant on his return, and receive him as if he had done you the best service.

The dryness of the winter had induced many of our neighboring farmers to plant early. Some large crops were put in in February and March, while others determined, according to the Spanish custom, not to plant till the rains were over. The result proved the wisdom of the latter plan; for each rain, on this fruitful soil, brings a rank crop of weeds which it is extremely laborious and tedious to remove. This year, several early crops have been plowed in, and the ground has been replanted in preference to attempting to keep it free from weeds.

It is found, also, that the rains harden or crust the surface of plowed land, so that it requires to be afterward broken up and mellowed.

Sources

- *Eliza W. Farnham, who promoted social reform, became matron of the women's section of Sing Sing Prison in 1844. Despite the improvements she made, her liberal views brought her into conflict with other staff members and she was forced to resign in 1848. That same year, her husband (Thomas Jefferson Farnham), who practiced law and had a freight business in California, died suddenly in San Francisco. In 1849, at the age of 34, Eliza Farnham sailed to California to settle her husband's estate and start a farm, or as she called it, a rancho. El Rancho La Libertad was located in Santa Cruz County. She farmed there with her children and her friend Miss Sampson (Miss S.) for more than five years. Sometime during that period, she was joined by her former assistant matron at Sing Sing, Georgiana Bruce Kirby (Geordie). In 1856, Eliza Farnham wrote a book of her experiences called California, In-doors and Out, which was published by Dix, Edwards & Co. in 1856. The following is an excerpt from her book, pp.205–209. RAP ed.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.