

Tools for the Early 20th Century Boylston Farmer

by Carrie Crane



Iron Age No. 1 Double and Single Wheeled Hoe
wood and iron, c. 1910

“Every man who has or can get a bit of ground should have a garden because meats are high and we eat too much meat anyway. Not many of us want to be vegetarians but most of us should eat more vegetables.”

So begins the welcoming page of the *Iron Age Farm and Market Garden Tools Catalog* from 1916. That sentiment is alive and well a century later but we can now only imagine the manual labor involved in farming and gardening back then. Today we have the help of gas-powered machines but at the turn of the 19th century, that was still in the future. It was manpower and horsepower that fueled farming with the help of some well-designed tools, tools like those manufactured and sold under the Iron Age brand.

In the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum, there is a fine example of an Iron Age tool. The No. 1 Double and Single Wheel Hoe could be used for multiple purposes. By using the interchangeable attachments that were included with the main frame, the hoe could be used for



Bateman Manufacturing Co. catalog for Iron Age farm tools
featuring the No.1 Double and Single Wheel Hoe - 1916
This tool was made from 1897 through 1916 and cost about \$6.

various tasks including cultivation, (the preparation of the soil for planting, which we use a rototiller for today); ridging a crop, (covering the bases of the plants with soil to conserve moisture and protect from weeds); digging burrows for planting potatoes and other seeds, and for mixing fertilizer into the soil. The front wheel setup could be changed from single to double wheels, the single wheel was used while working between rows for weeding, and the double wheel was used for working along the row for hoeing or planting. While all these features were desirable, perhaps the greatest benefit to the No. 1 Wheel Hoe was that it allowed the farmer to stand while performing these tasks rather than spend the day bent over.

The improved comfort of working upright was not the only benefit of the tool. The catalog goes on, appealing to the farmer’s wallet and stomach, with this pitch,

“Every general farmer should have them [the hoe] for that important part of his farm, the garden, which helps his wife to prepare better meals for less money.”

Iron Age farm tools were manufactured by the Bateman Manufacturing Company in Grenloch, New Jersey. The company was started in 1836 and the Iron Age line of tools was introduced in 1890. In 1930 the company was purchased by A. B. Farquhar Company of York, Pennsylvania, and Farquhar was then bought out by the Oliver Corporation in 1952. Both companies continued to sell the Iron Age line until 1960 when the business was taken over by the White Motor Company.¹

In the early 1900s Boylston was a farming town. According to the 1905 Massachusetts Census, the value of agricultural products in Boylston totaled \$142,804 (about \$4,998,000 today). While farms produced some poultry, meat, fruits, vegetables, and wood products, the bulk of production was in dairy products (35%) and hay, straw, and fodder (25%). Given those statistics, it is not a surprise to find some farming tools in the collection.

¹ A Short History of Bateman Manufacturing Company, Sam Moore



Haying in Lancaster Ma. in the early 1900s

In addition to the hoe described above, the collection holds an early 20th-century hay fork. Similar to a pitchfork, the hayfork is designed specifically for tossing hay high onto a pile on a wagon. In the days before machine mowers, tedders and bailers, all the haying work was done by hand with the support of horses or oxen. It was laborious work that took place in the heat of the summer and often under the time pressure of an oncoming thunderstorm. Once hay is down, it is important it not get wet. If the hay is not thoroughly dry when stored, moisture in hay provides ideal growing conditions for certain bacteria which generate heat as they multiply. That heat may in some instances lead to spontaneous combustion and could result in the loss of not only the crop but the barn as well. Getting the job done before any raindrops fell was critical. This required a team of helpers with good hayforks and knowledge of how to use them.



Three-prong wooden hayfork
Made from a solid piece of wood with split prongs. Dated circa early 1900s

The hayfork in the BHSM collection is made from a solid piece of hardwood. Traditionally, the three prongs of the tool, often made from oak, were shaped by cutting or splitting two slits lengthwise down the shaft about a quarter of the length of the rake. The wood was steamed to make it pliable. The three sections were slowly spread apart and held in place with a form until the wood was dry. Dowels were inserted between the prongs to keep them apart over time. The three-prong fork was designed to hold just the right amount of hay to be efficient in moving material but not so heavy that the farmer would tire before the job was finished. While it was tough work, a barn full of fresh hay was a satisfying sight.



Last Load of Hay from the Brigham Farm
Ball Hill, Boylston, Massachusetts

Acknowledgments

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