A BUSINESSMAN, INVENTOR & MAN OF VISION

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

By the late 1800s, Otsego County grew and sold the most hops of any place in the United States. The climate and soil conditions of the area were favorable for this type of cultivation. They were harvested in late August to early September when the cones were fully dry and papery and the yellow resin, called lupulin, was visible. This resin added to the aroma and bitterness of the hops. The harvest should be when the cones are firm and slightly springy but before they start to brown or get excessively dry. It was all a matter of timing to get the best results.

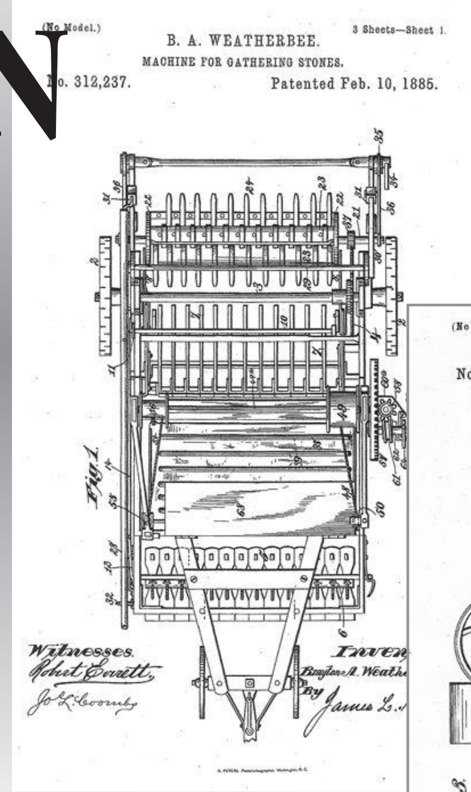
There were many inventions created to help ease the gathering and processing of the cones and one such invention was made locally by Brayton A. Weatherbee who patented a hop picking machine.

The Weatherbee family settled in Page's Corners - now known as Cullen - the family coming from Vermont. The father, Lucius, built a tannery business there which he carried on with his son Alvin who also purchased the grist mills of James Page. Alvin's son, Brayton, continued with the milling and tanning profession.

About 1858, the Weatherbee family bought out Freeman's Mills (later the location of the Garden of the Mills) about one-half mile north of the Village of Richfield Springs and moved all of their equipment to the new location where it was to become one of the most prosperous centers in Central New York for milling, sawing and tanning. Brayton (1820-1895) oversaw the milling operation. His son Willard was in charge of the grist mill and another son, Elias, was in charge of the tannery that flourished during the Civil War period, furnishing leather for shoes for the army.

The mechanics of his hop picking machine were noted in the MERCURY of September 1894: "Mr. B. A. Weatherbee was at work on his newly invented hop picking machine. A test was given the machine at which several hop growers were present. The hops were too ripe to make the test as satisfactory as desired. One of the main difficulties in perfecting such a machine is the short time in which to make the tests, as hops are in good condition for picking only two or three weeks. The picker worked to perfection, the only trouble being experienced with the separation. The machine is a very difficult one to describe and only an imperfect idea can be formed of it without illustrations.

Two rubber rollers carry the vine to the steel pickers, which strip the vines of all hops and leaves, the stems running off on an endless carrier. The hops drop onto a sleeve and are forced along by teeth on an endless belt, a blower removing the leaves. The single hops fall into an elevator and are carried into a sack. The clusters do not fall through the sieve but are carried to a set of wheels that look something like a sausage machine. These pick the hops from the clusters and they are returned to the sieve by elevators where they follow the same course as the single hops. Only a few leaves are left in the samples. The only difficulty was the smashing of some of the hops which might have come from their being over ripe. It requires a small power to run the picker and when some of the minor deficiencies are overcome, the machine will undoubtedly work successfully. It will be on exhibition at the fair and will be in operation there if available hops can be obtained."



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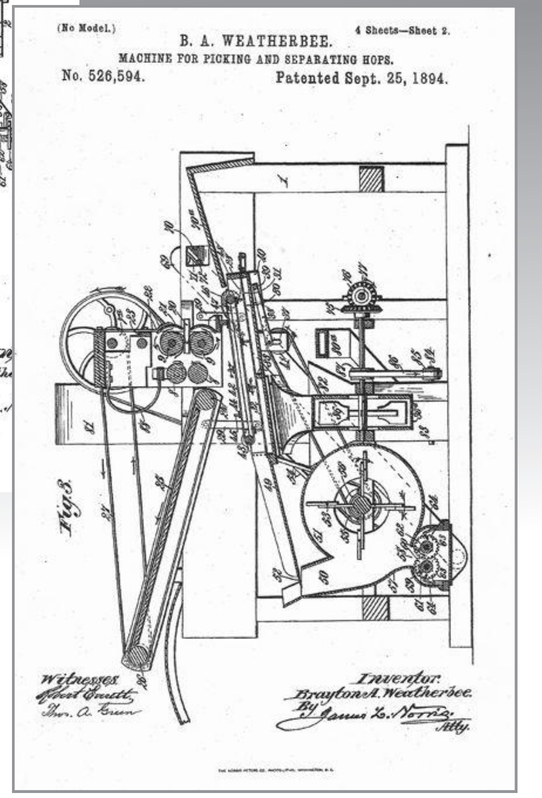

A hop picking machine was not the only invention that Brayton had patented. In 1885, he created a machine for gathering stones. In the fall of that year, there was a local exhibition showing the improved version. "The exhibition was a most satisfactory one and the machine did well in all that Mr. Weatherbee claimed for it. This is the second machine of this kind built and he has made improvements over the first one which was exhibited at the fair here a year or two ago.

The improvement consists of an addition for unloading the stone as is seen by the four standards immediately in the rear of the driver. The box at the bottom, after receiving the stone, is drawn up by chains and is self-dumping. The whole operation does not take more than a minute. The stones of any size, from that of a butternut to twenty pounds in weight, are thrown from the ground into the box by the revolving of the cylinder on which are spring teeth. This adapts itself to any ground and revolves at a rapid rate. Those at the exhibition witnessed a lot of cobbles weighing from five to fifteen pounds, each strung along on grass ground, and not one in range of the cylinder which is three and one-half feet long was skipped. To all appearances it was not harder work for a team than to draw a mowing machine and an ordinary field can be cleaned of stone at the rate of five acres per day.

It is the first invention of its kind that works satisfactorily and has shown itself entirely practical for the work for which it is intended by repeated trials, except for the dumping which was used for the first time this week and wants some little improvements before it will pass muster in the eyes of the critical inventor.

Mr. Weatherbee is entitled to the approbation of the 'rising generation', for picking up stone is looked upon as the most disagreeable work on a farm."

Brayton Weatherbee was not only a businessman and inventor but also very civic minded. He was director of the First National Bank of Richfield Springs and was very active in seeing to it that the railroad was built to service the town. A true man of vision.