

MICHIGAN'S AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE: USING HISTORICAL DATA TO DEVELOP AUTHENTIC HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS

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Abstract: The *Michigan Agricultural Heritage Project*, a multi-disciplinary research effort at Michigan State University sponsored by the Michigan Department of Transportation, is currently completing a rural agricultural context document. While the main purpose of this project is to provide information, tools and resources for historic preservation consultants during the Section 106 review process (National Historic Preservation Act), its data can also be used for heritage tourism development. The data is particularly useful for identifying potential themes and historic resources for agricultural heritage attraction development. Using the data from the project, sample results are provided for potato farming in the Petoskey region and a specific historic dairy farm in Genesee County. These preliminary examples show exciting potential for future application of this historical data in agricultural heritage attraction development in Michigan.

Introduction: Why bother with agriculture?

Heritage tourism has emerged as an important segment of the U.S. travel market during the past decade. Heritage travelers in the U.S. have been shown to stay longer at their destinations and spend more money than other travelers (Travel Industry Association of America, 1998), with "visiting museums and/or historic sites" cited as the third most popular activity for U.S. domestic travelers (Travel Industry Association of America, 2002). At the same time, travelers visiting small towns and rural areas have shown a strong interest in experiencing history as part of their trip. In the U.S., 48% of these travelers reported visiting a historic site on their last trip (Gallop-Goodman, 2001), with that number jumping to 80% in Michigan (Herbowicz, 2001). Therefore, along with being one of the most diverse agricultural states in America, there is an established market in Michigan for heritage travel in rural or small town settings.

The *Michigan Agricultural Heritage Project (MAHP)*, currently being completed at Michigan State University, can provide historical information that helps target these heritage travelers. Sponsored by the Michigan Department of Transportation in conjunction with the State Historic Preservation Office, the main goals of the project are to characterize the broad patterns of agriculture in Michigan from 1840-1960 and to help identify historic resources that represent these patterns on the local landscape, such as buildings and field patterns associated with production of particular agricultural products. As mandated by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, this information will be used during new construction projects to evaluate any impacts to historic resources and to explore alternative strategies to minimize these impacts. Although the project is not complete and its main purpose is to aid historic preservation consultants in Section 106 site assessment, the information, tools and resources being gathered could also be useful in the context of heritage tourism development.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how historical information from the *MAHP* can aid tourism professionals, cultural resource managers and individual farm owners in developing historically authentic agricultural heritage attractions. The *MAHP* is particularly useful for identifying potential community and regional agricultural themes, along with identifying resources that represent these themes. This information can be used to identify and enhance existing thematic stories authentic to various regions in Michigan, however it is especially useful for discovering potential new attractions and developing local or regional themes for linking these attractions and stories.

What is an authentic heritage attraction?

Previous research dealing with historical authenticity has shown an important link between the use of historical information in the planning process, the heritage product that is developed and the visitor experience (Barthel-Bouchier, 2001; Tilley, 1997; Waitt, 2000). Authenticity has been recognized as an important component to consider during tourism development, adding uniqueness and drawing power to heritage attractions (Boniface, 1995; Green, 1993; Tourism Center, University of Minnesota, 1991; Vander Stoep, 1998). The use of historical data and information allows cultural resource managers, farm owners and tourism professionals to integrate authenticity into the heritage attraction development process. For purposes of this paper, an authentic heritage attraction refers to an attraction that is supported by the historical data provided by the *MAHP*.

Attractions have long been considered a cornerstone of tourism, representing the collection of resources that attract visitors to an area or region and a fundamental component of tourism development (Gartner, 1996; Gunn, 1994). Attractions can be divided into primary, secondary and tertiary categories of importance (McKercher and du Cros, 2002). Primary attractions are those that attract visitors as stand-alone destinations, either as individual sites or as a cluster of associated sites linked together by a common theme. Secondary and tertiary attractions tend to represent

collections of smaller attractions that complement a primary attraction. Currently, agricultural heritage attractions in Michigan do not typically serve mass audiences as primary attractions, but rather provide secondary attractions to service niche markets like rural or small town travelers who are visiting another primary attraction. The information from the MAHP is useful for developing and enhancing individual secondary attractions, as well as potential clusters of attractions linked together by a common thematic story that could become a primary attraction for visitors (such as the *Wisconsin Ethnic Settlement Trail*). Potential types of agricultural heritage attractions include the following:

- ♦ farmer's markets, u-pick farms and farm tours;
- ♦ bed & breakfasts and working farm experiences;
- ♦ scenic routes and heritage trails; and
- ♦ museums and historic districts.

Heritage attraction development often starts with identification or inventory of existing resources, particularly those that have drawing power because they are listed, or are eligible for listing, on the *National Register of Historic Places* (Boniface, 1995, Green, 1993). Historic resources (districts, sites, buildings and objects) are considered eligible for the *National Register* if they are over 50 years old and meet the following criteria: are associated with significant events in our history, are associated with the lives of significant people, represent significant qualities of architectural design or engineering, or if they are important to our understanding of pre-history (National Park Service, 2002). Significance can be defined at the national, state or local level, and while association with nationally significant trends can be determined from the MAHP data, it is especially useful for developing agricultural heritage resources and thematic stories at the state and local level of significance. Furthermore, combined with diaries, oral history and other personal accounts, the data can provide stories and information about the more typical experiences of everyday life, regardless of their significance or eligibility for the *National Register*. These more typical experiences are easier for visitors to relate to, and ultimately, tell the unique stories of a community that become the basis for its authentic agricultural heritage appeal.

Methods: Understanding broad patterns and identifying local resources

A variety of sources are being used to identify broad characteristics of agricultural production in Michigan and how these characteristics are represented on the local landscape by buildings and field patterns. Township level agricultural census data for the years 1854, 1894 and 1935 has been entered into a database, and is currently being used to create GIS maps of the entire state of Michigan. The maps represent the geographic distribution of over thirty variables, such as the number of various types of livestock, the number of farms producing particular products, acreage devoted to these products, as well as levels of production for these products. Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrates how this visual representation allows for

efficient identification of local and regional characteristics that could be used to develop themes for attraction development. While the data is incomplete, clear patterns are already evident in the production of sugar beets and potatoes in mid-Michigan.

Figure 1. Sugar Beet Production in Mid-Michigan.

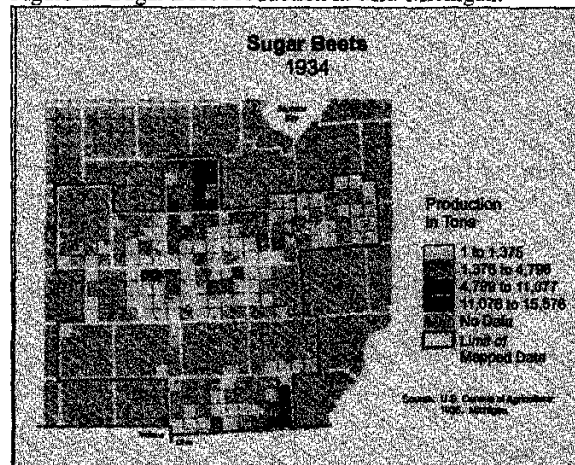
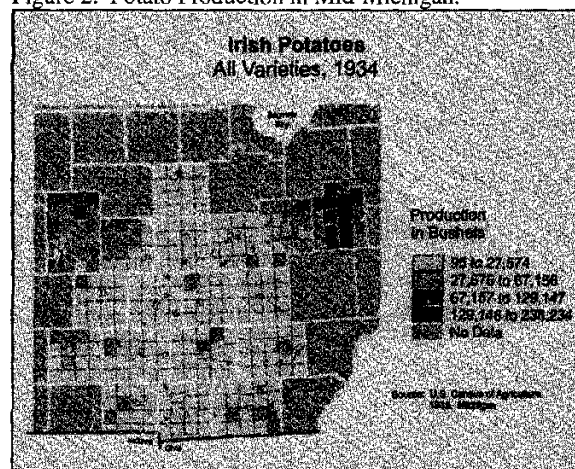
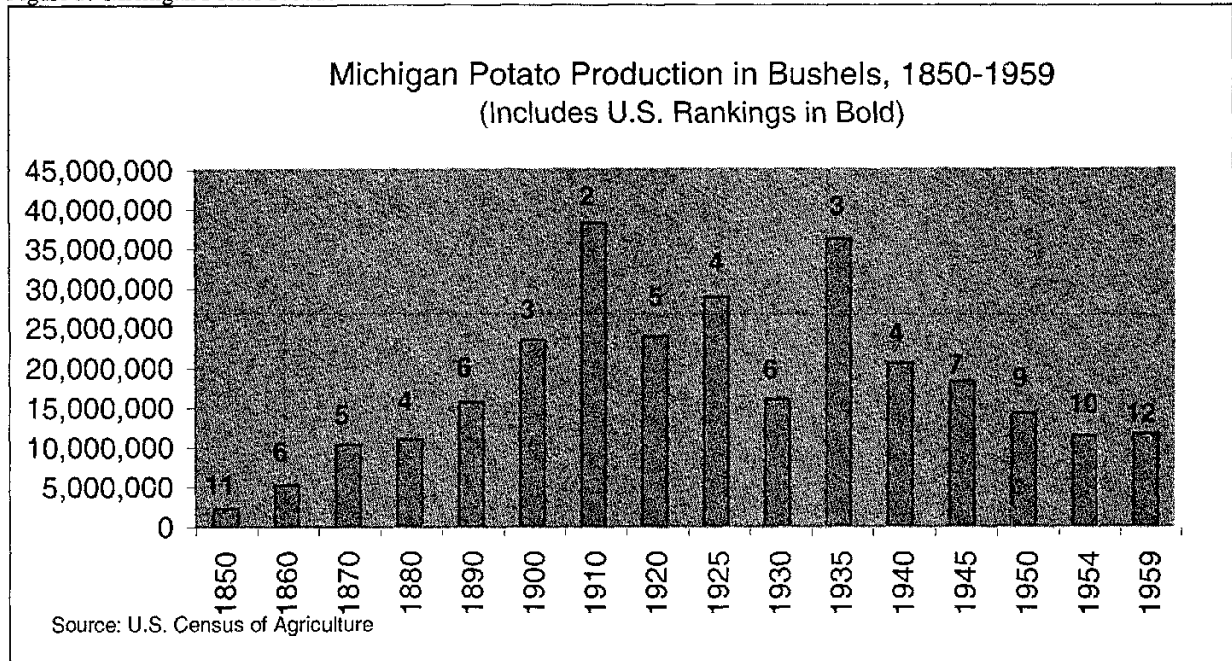


Figure 2. Potato Production in Mid-Michigan.



In addition to plotting township level census data using GIS, agricultural census data was also compiled for statewide production of agricultural commodities from 1850-1959 in order to determine Michigan's rank relative to other states. This information shows Michigan's production of agricultural products, while at the same time, determining the national significance of this production. In Figure 3, we see that Michigan has been a national leader in the production of potatoes, ranking consistently in the top five nationally and as high as second in 1910. Used together with the GIS maps of census variables, these sources can help to identify potential agricultural products or characteristics that could be used for thematic development.

Figure 3. Michigan Potato Production.



In addition to the census data, which provides a broad understanding of statewide and regional patterns of production, the following sources are being used to identify local historic resources on individual farms, such as the type and layout of specific buildings and field patterns associated with production of certain agricultural products:

- township plat maps (ca. 1870-present);
- lithographs of farmsteads (ca. 1880);
- Rural Property Inventories (ca. 1935);
- aerial photographs (1935-present);
- aerial oblique photographs (ca. 1950-present); and
- interviews with current farm owners.

This farm-specific information can be used to determine how farms representing the broad patterns and thematic stories would have looked at different points in time. This information could be used by cultural resource managers to restore or recreate these farmsteads, as well as to create historical narratives for use in interpretation of the sites.

Sample Results: Petoskey – sun, surf and potatoes?

Since the late 19th century, when railroads and steamboats offered service to the coastal community of Petoskey and its lakeside resorts, the community has been an important northern Michigan tourist destination. Located between Traverse City and Mackinac, Petoskey is traditionally known for its natural resources and Lake Michigan shoreline, but it also has agricultural resources eligible for the *National Register of Historic Places*. As seen above, the agricultural census data for potato production in Figure 3 shows that Michigan was a leading potato producer in the U.S. from 1900-1959. Potatoes, therefore, are a historically significant product in Michigan agriculture, and have long

been associated with the Petoskey region, offering one potential agricultural product for thematic development. Records of MSU Extension's "300 Bushel Club," for example, indicate that farmers around Petoskey were significant producers of certified seed potatoes, supplying seed potatoes such as *Chief Petoskey Brand* to 19 other states.

A collection of farms in this region was nominated for the *National Register of Historic Places* as the Resort Township Potato Farming Rural Historic District. This collection of farmsteads could become the basis for an agricultural heritage attraction focusing on potatoes and certified seed potato production. In this example, the natural resources and associated coastal climate is the primary attraction, while the collection of farms could provide a supporting secondary attraction for visitors. Attractions could be developed using a scenic trail or heritage route, complemented by wayside exhibits, festivals and perhaps a small museum representing the local potato industry.

Sample Results: Mid-Michigan and dairying

The mid-Michigan area offers another example of how data from the *MAHP* can be used to develop thematic stories for attraction development. In part because of its central location among large urban areas and early transportation routes, mid-Michigan has been one of the most diverse agricultural regions in the state. Access to urban markets, and their demand for fresh milk and other dairy products, also led to the rise of dairying in this region during the twentieth century. Using GIS maps for dairy production, historically productive townships and regions in Michigan can quickly be identified. From these areas, existing

resources can be inventoried to develop a collection of associated "dairying" attractions. Using pre-1900 farm-level agricultural census information, the Rural Property Inventory (ca.1936), and interviews with local farm owners, a historical narrative could be developed about these farmsteads.

A specific Michigan Centennial Farm in mid-Michigan provides an example of an existing agricultural resource that could be developed around a theme highlighting the importance of dairy farms to mid-Michigan's urban population centers. Completed by the WPA during the Great Depression for tax purposes, the Rural Property Inventory is a particularly useful source for discovering what was on a farm's landscape in the 1930s, including field patterns, and the age, size and type of existing buildings and other farm implements. According to the Rural Property Inventory, this farm had two barns, one with an attached milk-house dating to 1900 and a concrete silo that are still visible in a contemporary aerial oblique photograph of the farm. In fact, many of the structures listed on the Rural Property Inventory still exist on the landscape today. Complementing this information, interviews conducted with the farm owners also helped to determine that the farm was involved in the dairy industry from about 1900 to 1980, when it converted to beef cattle and cash crops. The interview also brought out the story of a catastrophic fire that destroyed one of the barns and several other structures, which were subsequently rebuilt in 1925. Using this combination of local sources, the story of the farm can be pieced together spanning well over a century. This story helps reinforce the dairying focus of the region, while at the same time, offering a glimpse into the historical development, evolution and change of this individual farm. Stories such as these could potentially be used for on-site interpretation, or for use in brochures and audio tours as part of a heritage route with other farms in the area.

Conclusion

The *Michigan Agricultural Heritage Project* has exciting potential for providing tools and resources for authentic agricultural heritage attraction development in Michigan. By providing both broad patterns of agricultural production through the use of census data, as well as tools and information for discovering local resources, the authentic themes and individual stories of Michigan's agricultural heritage can be developed for tourism.

While the above examples demonstrate how historical information can be used to aid tourism development, this information must become part of the tourism development process to prove useful. Future research and effort needs to focus on the relationships between tourism development professionals, cultural resource managers, historians, community members, farm owners and other stakeholders. There is a need to better understand how to create links between these groups during the heritage tourism development process, and ultimately to find an appropriate place in the process to present, explore and utilize this historical information.

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