

2015 January Newsletter

The Chichester Agricultural Commission, Heritage Commission and Grange have partnered to offer an insightful program about the accomplishments of New Hampshire's Grange. Through a New Hampshire Humanities Council grant the Chichester Agricultural Commission is honored to present "NH'S GRANGE MOVEMENT: It's Rise, Triumphs and Decline" by Steve Taylor at 7pm, January 21, Grange Hall, 54 Main Street, Chichester, NH. This program is free and open to the public.

Agriculture played an essential part of this country's history, as well as New Hampshire's. Two hundred years ago, this state was part of America's fleece production heartland. For 30 years, it was the epicenter of the great sheep boom heard around the world. In 1835, there were 465,000 sheep in New Hampshire alone. Flocks of 500-1,000 sheep were common throughout the state; and most of New England's 250,000 miles of stone walls had been constructed to corral sheep. This massive agricultural movement brought farmers and their families together in business and socially.

Its proper name is The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry founded after the Civil War in 1867; yet it is commonly called "The Grange." The Grange is a fraternal organization that encourages families to band together to promote the economic and political well-being of the community and agriculture; and is the oldest American agricultural advocacy group with a national scope. Chichester Grange No. 132 was formed in April, 1888; and still meets in the Grange Hall on Main Street.

In 2005, the Grange had a membership of 160,000, with organizations in 2,100 communities in 36 states. In 2005, the Grange had a membership of 160,000, with organizations in 2,100 communities in 36 states. The Grange has always been involved in education and to date still provides elementary students with dictionaries. Major accomplishments credited to Grange advocacy include passage of the Granger Laws, precursor of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, and the establishment of rural free mail delivery.

Much of rural NH in the late 19th century was locked in a downward spiral of population decline, abandonment of farms, reversion of cleared land to forest and widespread feelings of melancholy and loss. The development of the Grange movement in the 1880s and 1890s was aided greatly by hunger for social interaction, entertainment and mutual support. As membership surged it became a major force in policymaking in Concord, and its agenda aligned closely with the Progressive politics that swept the state in early 20th century. It also helped organize the State Police.

Many Grange initiatives became law, placing the state at the leading edge in several areas of reform. Steve Taylor analyzes the rapid social and economic changes that would eventually force the steep decline of the once-powerful movement.

Steve Taylor is an independent scholar, farmer, journalist and longtime public official. He has been a newspaper reporter and editor, and served for 25 years as NH's commissioner of agriculture.

With his sons, Taylor operates a dairy, maple syrup and cheese making enterprise in Meriden Village. He was the founding executive director of the NH Humanities Council and is a lifelong student of the state's rural culture.

Through the NH Humanities Council, Taylor offers three other programs: "Cows and Communities: How the Lowly Bovine Has Nurtured NH Through Four Centuries," NH's One-Room Rural Schools: The Romance and the Reality," and "The Great Sheep Boom and Its Enduring Legacy on the NH Landscape."

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