

Russian Thistle in North America

Allyn Brosz, e-mail message to Michael Miller, February 2010

What a great story! I've been collecting information on the Russian thistle for some time and have an article lurking in the back of my mind.

The GRs are credited/blamed in most accounts for introducing the Russian thistle to North America. Most botanical sources think that it came over in contaminated flax seed and took root on the prairies of Dakota. However, one contemporaneous account in the Chicago Daily Tribune (CDT) alleges that the GRs used straw for packing material in their trunks. When they arrived in the U.S., being the thrifty souls that they were, they saved the straw to feed to their cattle, rather than burning it. The CDT goes on to say that the thistle was propagated when the Dakota farmers began to sell beef cattle on the Chicago market. The railroads bought straw from the local farmers and used it as fodder for cattle in the rail cars. When the cars were cleaned at the Chicago stockyards, the thistle seed took root again. By the 1890s this had become a major problem in the Chicago area, and the papers were calling for government intervention. Just before the end of the 19th century there was actually a Russian Thistle Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture. One of the senators from Minnesota introduced a bill to appropriate \$1 million dollars for the eradication of the Russian thistle and resistance to this proposal caused the entire appropriation for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be blocked for a brief time.

As Jim says, the Russian thistle became a valued commodity in the Dirty Thirties. A gentleman from southwestern Minnesota (the Luverne or Pipestone area) modified a baler so that farmers could package the weed for cattle fodder.

Best Wishes

Allyn

Besser a Glatze als gar kein Hoor!

Jim Gessele, e-mail message to Michael Miller, February 2010

I can't help but respond to John Gross' recollection of using Russian thistle as cattle feed during the Great Depression's Dirty Thirties. It was also a time of American resourcefulness at its best and the stories of that genre handed down by my grandparents are the most compelling.

Russian thistle was used to feed cattle, but first its thorns had to be signed off in fire. All the same, its consumption by the animals was problematic because the bovine digestive system couldn't handle the noxious weed very well. Cows would bloat and if the farmer didn't get out his trusty oil can with spiked spigot to stab the animal's belly and release the gas, the animal would die. Along came the federal government with a surplus commodity of molasses at no charge. It seems an additional healthy dose of the syrup added to the feed by Grandpa John Berg sent the entire concoction through the cow in a most expeditious manner.

People had no money and store-bought food items were practically out of the question. Irrepressible Grandma Lydia saw other uses for the free molasses. It made an excellent substitute for non-affordable sugar and she used it in canning the wild plums, cherries and June berries found on the prairie. What laxative effect it may have had on family members was never discussed.

And that reminds me of the time the visiting Watkins Product Man's Model T was stalled in the Berg farmyard overnight.