

Annual Report of the State Chemist of Florida.

For the Year ending December, 31, 1919.

Part 11.

The Disston St. Cloud Sugar Plantation. Prof. D.C. Sutton's Report.
1888-99.

The Disston Sugar Plantation.
Its Success and Its Failure.

It is frequently asked why the Disston Sugar Co venture on reclaimed lands in Fla. failed and was abandoned. A short history of the St. Cloud sugar plantation on the muck or swamp lands reclaimed by the Disston Drainage Co. (The A and G.C. and O. Land Co.) in Osceola Co inserted here.

Drained Saw Grass Land.

The lands on which the plantation was located were prior to the cutting of the drainage canals in 1884-- a vast saw grass marsh, interspersed with cypress, gum, bay and willow swamps, with a muck or peat soil from four to ten feet deep. Before the drainage canals were cut the territory was constantly covered with water from one to three feet deep, in which the saw grass, flags, rushes, bonnets and other aquatic plants-- a territory identical in every respect, chemically and physically to the Everglades. The canals draining this territory were finished in 1884-5. The general level of the lakes (Tohopekaliga and East Lake) were lowered eight feet by these canals. During 1885, During 1885 the writer then in charge of the Disston Drainage Company's works purchased the original St. Cloud plantation, some 420 acres.

In Jan. 1886, the first agricultural development was begun by cutting the necessary lateral and sub-lateral ditches to drain the fields adjacent to the canal. Though the waters of the lake and canals were six

eight feet below the surface of the adjacent lands, the lands were still saturated with water, which could only be removed by field ditches, the lands having very little slope.

In the spring of 1886 a small field of cane, some twenty acres, was planted; also seventy-five acres of rice and fifty acres of corn. All these crops were unusually productive, an average of fifty bushels of both rice and corn being harvested per acre.

In the fall of 1886 and spring of 1887 the cane field was increased to ninety acres.

MR. DISSTON JOINS ENTERPRISE

In 1887 Mr. Hamilton Disston purchased one-half interest in the farm and furnished means to increase the acreage to 1,800 acres, all first-class muck, or reclaimed, land, and to erect the first sugar factory, as illustrated by cut No. 1. A small area of cane was harvested in 1887-8, yielding some 5,000 pounds of granulated sugar per acre. Most of the cane, however, was used for seed, there being 420 acres of cane on the farm in 1888-9, 100 acres Ratoon and 320 acres Plant cane. The illustrations Nos. 2 and 3 show this cane on the best drained (highest) land on the plantation taken where the muck is six to eight feet deep, this cane averaging sixty tons per acre, with 14 per cent. Sucrose.

THE ST. CLOUD SUGAR PLANTATION

A corporation, with a capital stock of one hundred thousand dollars, was formed, subscribed to equally by Hamilton Disston and R. E. Rose, only; and paid in in cash only by Hamilton Disston and R. E. Rose; there being no stock or bonds issued or offered to the public, or to any one else; the St. Cloud Sugar Plantation being owned exclusively by Hamilton Disston and R. E. Rose -- each of whom owned one-half of the entire capital stock

PHENOMENAL YIELDS

A sugar mill with a capacity of 200 tons of cane per day (24 hours) was built. Some 90 acres were harvested the first year; the second year some 400 acres. None but first-class sugar was made. The yield averaged 35 tons of cane per acre (the maximum yield being 60 tons off the oldest, best drained cuts); the average sucrose content was 14 per cent; the average available sugar was 8 per cent, or 160 pounds of granulated sugar per ton of cane, showing rather a poor result from the factory standpoint, the factory not having all the necessary modern economical devices. The yield, however, some 5,000 pounds of sugar per acre, was superior to any American record up to that time. During this time sugar sold at 3.25 to 3.75c per pound, at no time reaching 4 cents.

These photos were taken by O. Pierre Havens, of Jacksonville, in the winter of 1888-9.

SATISFACTORY RESULTS

Results were so satisfactory that Mr. Disston proposed largely to increase the capital stock, and the area of the cane fields (then 600 acres).

SPECULATIVE INFLUENCE

He was largely influenced by the immense speculative interest in sugar production, aroused by the "bounty law" passed by Congress, paying 2c per pound to American sugars. Millions of dollars were invested in Louisiana cane sugar and Western beet sugar production. An era of extravagance was inaugurated in Louisiana and in the beet-producing regions of the West. The St. Cloud Plantation was reorganized as the "FLORIDA SUGAR MANUFACTURING COMPANY" and capitalized at \$1,000,000, an expensive factory erected at a cost of \$350,000, and a large area of lands purchased -- some 36,000 acres. While the cane fields were not increased materially -- at no time was there to exceed 1,000 acres in cane, while the factory had a capacity of not less than 3,5000 acres per season. When this reorganization occurred the writer declined to join it, but sold his stock, believing, and as subsequent events proved, that the "bounty law" would be repealed by the next Congress and the extravagant investments in cane and beet sugar would result in bankruptcy to the investors. This did occur, as anticipated. In the meantime, a bond issue of \$1,000,000 was made to pay for the lands purchased.

NEGLECT AND DESTRUCTION OF DRAINAGE SYSTEM

The managers of the FLORIDA SUGAR MANUFACTURING CO. being ignorant of the principals of drainage and irrigation, built restraining dams in the drainage canal for irrigation (?) purposes, backed the drainage water into the laterals and field ditches, reversed the drainage system (circulation of air and water) and destroyed the crops, including a magnificent peach orchard, which, up to that time, was one of the most profitable areas on the plantation.

The drainage canal, when delivered to the FLORIDA SUGAR MANUFACTURING COMPANY by the St. Cloud Sugar Plantation, owned exclusively by Hamilton Disston and R. E. Rose, was a navigable canal, constantly used by various steamers and canal boats, even in the lowest stage of water.

The materials and machinery for the sugar factory, as illustrated, were transported to the building site on barges, some parts of which weighed five or more tons.

The canal (?) at the present time (1919) is grown up and practically destroyed, choked with weeds and numerous sand bars across the same, and is not navigable for row boats; being a succession of peels and bars. Neglect and "siltng up" has destroyed its drainage capacity and the productiveness of many thousands of acres adjacent to the canal (?) and the shores of "East Lake", formerly when properly drained of phenomenal fertility and productiveness.

INFLATED CAPITAL

A capitalization of \$2,000,000 to be taken care of by a cane field of some 800 to 1,000 acres, extravagantly managed by inexperienced men, ignorant to a large extent of agriculture, and particularly of drainage and modern methods of cane culture and sugar manufacture. St. Cloud, however, was by no means an exception.

SIMILAR WRECKS IN LOUISIANA AND WEST

Hundreds of similar wrecks occurred in Louisiana and in the West. Wrecks of immense cane and beet sugar ventures were common throughout the country. During the bounty period granulated sugar sold for from 6.50 to 7.40 cents per pound, with an added 2 cents bounty (see the U. S. Agricultural Reports for these years). The extravagance of management, however, absorbed not only the market price, but the bounty also, and left a large deficit in addition. While economically managed, large dividends were made, with sugar selling at 3.75c per pound, with a factory by no means most modern and economical; with an up-to-date factory, provided with all modern economic devices, with the same quality of cane, with sugar selling at 6.50 and 7.40 cents per pound, and an additional bounty of 2c per pound paid by the Government, a disastrous failure resulted.

FAILURE NOT PECULIAR TO FLORIDA

This was not peculiar to Florida nor St. Cloud, as the same condition prevailed in Louisiana and in the West, where wrecks of similar ventures were numerous. The failure at St. Cloud was not caused by Climate, soil, or quality of cane, as no richer cane, nor larger tonnage is made in Cuba than was made at St. Cloud and South Port -- in the same county -- on reclaimed muck land, and is still being made on the same and similar lands in the same locality.

The following letter from Mr. Claus Spreckles, one of the most practical and successful sugar cane growers and manufacturers of sugar, whose experience in Hawaiian sugar fields and other cane-producing countries was probably greater than that of any other individual in America, after his visit to St. Cloud, accompanied by Henry M. Flager and other prominent gentlemen as guests of Mr. Disston and myself; together with that of Dr. W. C. Stubbs, then Director of the Louisiana Sugar Experiment Station, acknowledged to be the most eminent authority upon the production of sugar cane and the manufacture of sugar in the United States; together with the testimony of Dr. H. W. Wiley, should certainly establish the fact that Florida soils produce maximum crops of cane of the highest sugar content.

THE FAILURE WAS CAUSED

First -- By extravagance.

Second -- By ignorance of proper methods of culture and manufacture and neglect of drainage.

Third -- By want of proper business methods on the part of the company and its managers.

R. E. ROSE

Tallahassee, April, 1912.

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