The Politics of Barbed Wire

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When Alphonso Dabb of Elizabethport, New Jersey submitted a patent for an improvement in pickets for walls and fences in 1867, he noted that his cast-iron pickets attached to a wrought-iron strip would provide security and would “effectually interfere with scaling or climbing over the wall or fence.”¹ What he didn’t know is that these new pickets would set off a spate of patents that contained enhancements of the common picket that ranged from projecting points, spur-wheels, sharp iron thorns, and eventually to steel barbs.² As barbs were perfected, their application to wire fencing changed a trickle of patents into a flood as competition for the best barbed wire fencing spread across the nation. In the end, three inventors and their patents reigned supreme: Jacob Haish, Isaac Ellwood, and Joseph Glidden; all from De Kalb, Illinois, the locus of invention.³

¹ Alphonso Dabb, Patent No. 63,482, April 2, 1867.
³ Isaac L. Ellwood, Patent No. 147,756, February 24, 1874; Joseph F. Glidden, Patent No. 157,124, November 24, 1874; and Jacob Haish, Patent No. 167,240, August 31, 1875. It was the Glidden and Haish patents (“The Winner” or “Glidden Coil” and “The S-Barb”) that eventually top the manufacturing output and outsold all other patents. Ellwood, after seeing the effectiveness of Glidden’s barbed wire fence, dropped his patent to join forces with Glidden, thus creating a combination of two of the three top competitors. This combination threatened Haish’s patents, which resulted in Haish’s filing of interference papers against Glidden at the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. on June 25, 1874. This legal act began a battle between Haish and this combination that quickly expanded into infringement suits that lasted until December of 1880. Before this time, Glidden sold his interest to the Massachusetts steel wire manufacturer, Washburn & Moen Company in 1876, who now partnered with Ellwood to mount a successful legal campaign. In the end, Washburn & Moen and Ellwood Company, “The Company”, outmaneuvered all other barbed wire fence manufacturers, including Haish, who were now either out of business or paying royalties on The Company’s patents. For an extensive examination of this legal battle, see Henry and Frances McCallum’s The Wire
The success of barbed wire fencing was due to several factors including its cost effectiveness, ability to withstand the elements, ease of transportation and installation, but most significantly, its ability to deter animals and humans from crossing over or pushing through any fences strung with steel barbs as stated in Issac Ellwood’s patent

Animals coming up to the fence will run against some of the points...thus preserving it [fence] from being broken...it also prevents animals from crawling through the fence.4

Ironically it was this optimal nature of barbed wire fencing, its viciousness, that would not only encourage its spread across the country but eventually lead to a challenge to its very existence and application. As Jacob Haish himself noted in 1880:

There seemed to arise about those times, agriculturalists and stockmen who were thoroughly antagonistic to barb wire. They called the fence inhuman, barbarous, cruelty to animals, etc. They raised the “bogey man” before state legislatures to have laws passed prohibiting its use. Threats of arrest were coming forward frequently.5

It was not only agriculturalists and stockmen who carried the anti-barbed wire standard, but the public at large. Stories relaying the cruel and inhuman nature of the fence circulated in the press rallying readers and politicians alike to resist this new technology. One of the more graphic accounts came from the Denver Daily News which called upon the Humane Society to “prevail upon the Legislature to pass a law prohibiting the erection of barbed wire fences.”6 The story began with the claim that scarcely a day passes but one can hear of the death or fatal injury of a

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4 Ellwood, Patent No. 147,756.
5 Haish, A Reminiscent Chapter, 12.
6 The Daily News: Denver, Tuesday, April 25, 1882.
cow, calf, horse or colt, which has run into the fence...and so cuts its head and body as to result seriously and often fatally...caught in the barbs of these terrible fences and cut literally to pieces.\textsuperscript{7}

It followed up with a vivid description of how train passengers enroute to Loveland witnessed a cow, frightened by the train whistle, running headlong into a barbed wire fence along the train tracks, getting its head and forelegs entangled:

and as the rear car passed by the passengers saw the brute hanging there on the sharp barbs kicking and bellowing, the piercing instruments sawing and cutting into her body, deeper and deeper as she struggled for liberty. \textsuperscript{8}

The moral of the story was that if the man responsible for the erection of the fence had witnessed the “terrible butchering” he no doubt would have “solemnly sworn never again to build a barbed wire fence.”\textsuperscript{9} It was stories like this one from Denver, and from across the nation, that fanned the flames of outrage among the public who next sought legislative intervention to restrict or prohibit the use of the “Devil Wire.”

Complaints like these of harm, damage, and even death as the result of the usage of this new fence, made their way into the public discourse. Thus, as the public learned about barbed wire fencing’s ability to secure property from ingress or egress, it also quickly became familiar with the vicious nature of this new technology, the very characteristic that made it such an effective solution to fencing problems. The use of new technology has frequently been met with resistance from the general public. This public resistance often swells into calls for legislative changes. The new technology of barbed wire was no exception.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{The Daily News: Denver} \\
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Daily News: Denver} \\
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{The Daily News: Denver}
Within six years of barbed wire’s invention, states from New England to the Great Plains began to take sharp interest in the impact of this new technology. At the core of this interest was a growing concern about how barbed wire fencing adversely affected humans and animals. Growing public outrage brought legislative responses. States like Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Colorado and Texas moved to pass laws that restricted or outlawed the use of barbed wire. Even as states began to debate the use of barbed wire, the nation’s largest barbed wire manufacturer, Washburn & Moen Manufacturing Company, fired back with appearances before state legislatures contemplating anti-barbed wire legislation, and through lengthy printed statements submitted to state legislatures, barbed wire distributors, and public media. The Company’s impressive defense was a well-honed argument against all opposition to the use of barbed wire. An examination of three New England states’ experiences (Connecticut, Vermont, and New Hampshire) reveal the amount of pressure one corporate entity could bring to bear upon state legislatures and the American public in its crusade against what it would deem an attack on industry.11

10 Although specific discussions about Colorado and Texas are beyond the scope of this paper, The Colorado Cattle Growers Association declared it was opposed to barbed fencing on the open range in 1884, and the Texas legislature eventually introduced three bills, two which went into effect, to make the use of barbed wire illegal or required that all barbed fencing be modified with the fastening of a four inch wide board between the top two strands of barbed wire. See Earl W. Hayter, “Barbed Wire Fencing: A Prairie Invention: Its Rise and Influence in the Western States,” Agricultural History, v.13, no. 4 (October 1939), pp. 193-94 and Henry D. and Frances T. McCallum, The Wire That Fenced The West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp 66-67. For the wording of two Texas laws that required the modification of barbed wire fences, see H.P.N. Gammel, compiler, The Laws of Texas 1822-1897, The Gammel Book Company, 1898, p.107.

11 Washburn & Moen Company tailored each of its statements to the individual states, whose legislatures were considering restrictive or prohibitive legislation against the application of barbed wire. The three statements examined in this paper Barb Fencing.
In February 1880, the Connecticut Legislature’s Joint Committee on Agriculture convened a session in Hartford to hear public testimony on a bill to prohibit the use of barbed wire along highways and railroads. The bill had been proposed out of concern that the New York and New England Railroad Company would use barbed wire fencing to fence a new right-of-way. In attendance were several representatives from the leading barbed wire manufacturer, the Washburn & Moen Company, other opponents of the bill, and proponents of the bill led by Representative Sanford and including farmers from Fairfield County.\(^{12}\)

If the Hartford Daily Courant’s account is accurate, eleven witnesses called to testify by the opposition denied knowledge of any significant harm resulting from the use of barbed wire. One of the more interesting of the statements was given by D.W. Brooks, a florist, who directly responded to a recent report that one of his employees had his ear torn off in an encounter with a barbed wire fence. Brooks testified that the accident was in fact “a mere trivial one, the man running into the fence at headlong speed in the night. His face and ear were only slightly scratched.”\(^{13}\) The audience no doubt quickly gleaned that this report of serious injury had been grossly blown out of proportion. The majority of testimony given by opponents of the bill was interspersed

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\(^{12}\) Hartford Daily Courant, February 27, 1880.

\(^{13}\) Hartford Daily Courant, February 27, 1880.
with ringing endorsements and emphatic praise for the value and success of barbed fencing; as Samuel Nather proclaimed, barbed fences were a “great boon to farmers.”¹⁴

The committee next called the representatives of the Washburn & Moen Company who read from a 28-page prepared manuscript that began with the statement

> It is by these [hearings] your committee will weigh their duty in the matter, that no oppressive legislation or measure against any industry be allowed to spring from clamor or prejudice, and find its place on the statute books of a State, among all her sisters the most largely associated with the mechanical industries, and most largely interested in the expansion of all the legitimate interests of the manufacturer.¹⁵

The Washburn & Moen statement included an impressive compilation of agricultural authorities’ views on fencing over a sixty-year period, collected from state agricultural reports, agricultural societies, and farm publications. The company’s point: to emphasize the state’s growing reliance upon barbed wire fencing while building a case for its continued use. The Washburn & Moen statement laid out a brief but thorough examination of New England fence law that dated back to 1643, a history in which Connecticut legislation had favored fences decade after decade. Intertwined in this legislative history was the history of fencing, in particular the increasing popular demand for effective, cost efficient, and readily available fencing materials that would enable farmers and land owners to build and maintain fences across the region.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Hartford Daily Courant.
¹⁶ Part 2, pp. 3-20.
The Washburn & Moen statement reminded the audience that the bill currently under consideration suggested no reasons for the ban proposed. In fact, barbed wire fencing was put upon its public trial without open charges....what is the worst that can be urged against Barb Fence?...No adverse fact or hostile impression or prejudice, would be likely withheld. One thing is noticeable on the testimony of all dealers and agents. Barb Fence is most popular and sells most readily in neighborhoods where it is in most familiar use and best known....Barb Fence has grown to represent a very extended industry...it has to do with a very wide and long confessed demand of the farmers and the people at large.17

The Company men continued by addressing the question of the day: is barbed wire fencing a cruel fence? So cruel that legislation is needed to protect the public? They argued that it was the farmers who continued to use barbed wire fencing, and in fact, wouldn’t they be the first to oppose such use if in fact it was vicious in nature?

It is his own horses and herds that would be pricked, and maimed, and impaled, were such the inevitable or the customary sequences of Barb Fence. He would be sure to let it alone in future farm experiments. His observing neighbors would not need a state statute to keep Barb Fence from their own farms.18

The Company witnesses followed this up by pointing out that they had made “careful inquiries” of their local agents and dealers throughout Connecticut, as to “accidents and injuries resulting from the use of Barb Fencing.” What they found was “No case of substantial injury.” Instead they heard “unreserved endorsement of Barb Fence.” Would this be possible if the farmers and stockmen of Connecticut found barbed wire fencing “cruel and barbarous?” Essentially, the Washburn & Moen witnesses argued that the

17 Part 2, p. 25.
18 Ibid.
legislature should ignore unsubstantiated public outcry and allow manufacturers and users of barbed fencing to determine its use.\textsuperscript{19}

The committee then moved to an examination of the proponents of the bill, of which only two were noted in the \textit{Hartford Courant}'s article. One of the proponents called to testify was a Mr. Ganung, a farmer from Danbury, who claimed the impetus for his opposition to barbed wire was that he had been \textit{told} that “in the west cattle and horses had been greatly injured” by barbed wire although he himself had no “personal knowledge of any injury resulting from barbed fence.” The second proponent, Representative Sanford, said he himself knew of “no positive injury from barbed fence” but that he had heard that “farmers having it in use found it injured their cattle.”\textsuperscript{20}

With no direct testimony confirming the injurious and vicious nature of barbed wire fencing, the committee as well as both legislative houses, would eventually vote to reject the bill. It seemed that corporate intervention pacified the outraged public and produced ringing endorsements of barbed wire that put to shame the most blatant advertising strategy. But a more serious challenge loomed when the state of Vermont drafted not one but three bills in opposition to the use of barbed fences within its borders. And again Washburn & Moen Manufacturing Company marshaled its forces.

In Fall of 1880, the Vermont state Senate introduced a bill (no.67) entitled “An Act for the Protection of Domestic Animals”; in the very same session, the state House introduced two of its own bills (nos. 214 and 259) entitled respectively, “An Act for the Protection of Domestic Animals” and “An Act prohibiting the use of barbed wire fences

\textsuperscript{19} Part 2, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Hartford Daily Courant}. 
in certain cases.”21 The bills themselves would “practically do away with the use of
barbed fences in the state.” As proposed, Senate bill 67 and House bill 214, required that
all stretches of barbed wire erected along a highway or between properties, have a 4-
inch board fastened to the top wire, between all posts, to prevent domestic animals from
injury should they run into the fence. Both bills included penalties for violations.22

House bill 214 was introduced on November 6th by Mr. Giddings of Bakersfield,
read the first and second times, sent to the House General Committee for review but
recalled and sent to the House Committee on Agriculture. By the December 11th session,
the Committee on Town Lines had refused to hear a third reading of the bill. House bill
259 met a similar fate, as the Committee on Town Lines would dismiss the bill at its
December 13th session.23

The Senate’s version of H.214 (S.67), was introduced, read the first and second
times, and then referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture in its October 28th
session. By December 20th, this bill, like the two House bills, was a dead letter.24 What
accounted for the rapid dissipation of support for restriction and prohibition of barbed
fencing in the Vermont legislature? Perhaps the answer lay in a public hearing that once
again included the Washburn & Moen Company.

Between the introduction of these Senate and House bills in late October and
their subsequent demise by late December of 1880, Vermont’s general public had an

21 Vermont Watchman & State Journal, Wednesday, November 24, 1880.
22 Ibid. The second House bill 259, required that any barbed wire fencing constructed
along a highway or between properties required any adjoining land owner’s written
consent.
Montpelier, VT: Freeman Steam Printing House and Bindery, 1881; pp.140-41, 169, 341,
and 365.
24 Journal of the Senate of the State of Vermont, October and December Sessions, 1880.
opportunity to weigh in on this legislative debate. The chairmen of the Senate committee on Agriculture and the House committee on Town Lines organized a public hearing in Montpelier about the three pending bills. The Vermont Watchman & State Journal, in attendance at this November 24th hearing, noted that a large number of legislators and interested parties were present at the proceedings.25

Mr. Palmer, who had introduced House bill 259, started the hearing by stating that his constituents did not object to wire fencing, just to barbed wire fencing. He spoke specifically of the Burlington & Lamoille railroad’s use of barbed wire fencing along its line through Jericho, Vermont, in lieu of board fencing, as a way to prevent snow drifting. Palmer stated that neighboring farmers “complained greatly of injuries to their horses and cattle in the pastures” from the use of this type of fencing. He continued by stating that in his town most people viewed barbed wire fencing as dangerous for stock and that it should be prohibited. Palmer’s testimony was echoed by a Senator Dana from Addison, who remarked that he had constituents whose valuable horses were seriously injured by the employment of barbed wire along highways.26

Despite these opening remarks, the rest of the hearing produced a lengthy litany by farmers and their advocates who claimed that barbed fencing was “one of the greatest inventions of the age.” Witness after witness, 22 in total, testified to not only the effectiveness of the fence, but that they had no knowledge of an “authenticated case of injury” to animals or humans. Mr. Goddard, speaking on behalf of his Ludlow farming constituency in opposition to the bills, argued that barbed fencing was “a good deal softer thing to be thrown against than a stone wall.” He continued by stating that if

26 Vermont Watchman & State Journal.
perhaps “occasionally a horse or a cow...got pricked by it [barbed fence], there were hundreds that were prevented by it from straying away and being killed.” So strongly held were his convictions that

He [Goddard] was prepared to prove that if the whole town was fenced with this fence, there would be far less accidents than with the old board and stump fences. Its use would save the State thousands of dollars in breaking roads, building fences, saving crops, and in the extirpation of vermin. It was one of the greatest inventions of the age....

One of Goddard’s witnesses, Judge Crosby Miller of Pomfret began his testimony by claiming he had personally examined the “question of barbed fence.” In doing so, he had never heard of one “authenticated case of injury.” He continued with a story about his son-in-law who put up a barbed fence along his property line. At some point a neighbor’s horse ran away and into the barbed fence with such force that it took down one of the fence posts on impact. The horse was “scratched but not badly” and it recovered to “be just as good as he ever was.” This episode “satisfied” Judge Miller that “all this talk about wire fencing being cruel was moonshine.” For this witness and many others giving testimony in the hearing, the question of barbed fencing was “not a debatable question; that it was much safer and more efficacious than any fence known.”

In addition to direct testimony, ten written depositions were added to the hearing’s minutes, all which registered opposition to the pending legislation. At the end of the reading of these depositions, Mr. Goddard summed up the opposition’s position:

...its use [barbed wire] would save the consumption of wood, already growing scarce; that is was cheaper, safer and more

27 Vermont Watchman & State Journal.
28 Vermont Watchman & State Journal.
durable than wood. It would soon be the fence of the country. The objection was that it was cruel. This was a prejudice and not a fact. The use of this fence would save many animals from being killed on railroads, and would do nothing more than scratch any stock. All these objections were based on hearsay.29

When the proponents of the bills had nothing further to add, the hearing was adjourned. By December 13th, The Vermont House Committee on Town Lines dismissed H. 259, submitted its report to the Vermont legislature, which overwhelmingly rejected the proposed measures, citing that barbed fencing was “not harmful” and “less productive of accident to animals” than other fencing materials.30

With each succeeding battle against legislative bans on barbed wire, the Washburn and Moen Company unfurled more evidence to challenge the allegations that their technology perpetrated more harm than good. Following their testimony before the Connecticut and Vermont legislatures, in their July 1881 statement to the New Hampshire legislature, in a section entitled “Is it a Cruel Fence?” the Washburn and Moen Company answered its own question

Not unless a multitude of American Farmers who are using Barb Fence are blind to their interests and unmerciful to their beasts. 'Have not accidents happened from its use? Do they not happen from all fences?.31

The company reminded the New Hampshire legislature that it would “weigh rare and isolated cases of accidents against average and widely common benefits,” and still come

29 Vermont Watchman & State Journal.
up with no strong rationale for the prohibition of barbed wire fencing. The statement continued with a brief account of how state legislatures in both Connecticut and Vermont had earlier attempted to outlaw the use of barbed wire but ultimately failed. Failures, the company reminded New Hampshire’s statesmen, that occurred as a result of “exhaustive” hearings which included testimony from the “best farmers in the State” whose own words established “more strongly than ever the merits of Barb Fence, and the unwisdom of adapting legislation to sparse accidents, which in nowise affect its universal utility.”

The Washburn and Moen Company introduced in its New Hampshire statement another recognizable source to reinforce the company’s position that barbed fencing was not a “cruel fence.” The company claimed that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals surely would have spoken out on behalf of “dumb brutes” and publicly censured barbed fencing if there was merit to any of the allegations against barbed wire. Yet no such response was forthcoming, proof according to Washburn and Moen that the humane society’s own investigations into the alleged vicious nature of barbed wire turned up no substantial supporting evidence. Although there was merit to their allegations opponents of barbed wire did little in the way of gathering concrete evidence with which to take on the corporate giant. There was in fact growing evidence

of the vicious and cruel nature of barbed fencing rising from the Great Plains where barbed wire use had taken off like a prairie wildfire. In Texas even a glancing encounter with barbs could result in the rapid decline of cattle herds. Pricks and scratches became the nesting ground of *cochliomyia hominivorax*, the screwworm fly, a native to the tropical Americas which began to appear in the southwestern region of the United States as early as the 1840s. Screwworm flies embedded their eggs in the flesh of warm-blooded animals resulting in tissue damage and even death. This problem was epidemic in scale well into the 20th century.

Opponents of barbed fencing could also cite the lethal combination of barbed technology and severe blizzards and storms that hit the Plains in the 1880s, which recorded some of the highest percentages of herd loss in the 19th century. In the Texas Panhandle, cattlemen erected barbed wire drift fences to keep their cattle from drifting across the open range during winter storms. These stretches of barbed fences often overlapped creating what seemed like an impassable barrier to cattle. When the high

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35 Range animal encounters with barbs whether a prick or a laceration, often resulted in the puncturing of the skin, which allowed screwworm flies to embed their eggs in animal tissue. One lone female fly could lay 3,000 eggs in her two-month life span. These eggs hatched in twelve to 24 hours, and the screwworms begin to burrow into and eat the host animal’s flesh causing tissue damage and sometimes death. In five to seven days, the worms reached maturity and left the wound, dropped to the ground and burrowed into the soil. When the adults hatched (moved from pupae to fly) they began the cycle again, embedding themselves in animals, who had contact, no matter how slight, with barbed fencing. See James E. Novy, “Screwworm control and eradication in the southern United States of America,” http://www.fao.org/docrep/U4220T/u4220T0a.htm

winds of blizzards arose, cattle turned tail into the wind and drifted along until reaching
the barbed drift fences, which stopped them in their tracks. No one anticipated how the
cattle would react to such an obstacle, until too late. In his memoirs of range riding, Don
Hampton Biggers added to the violent image of the fence with his stark account of the
toll of one Texas winter:

When the blizzards came the cattle would drift south until they came to the
southern line of fence. Unable to go further they would move back and forth,
pressing close to the fence or stand in clusters, suffering from cold, hunger and
thirst and trampling out every vestige of grass. One would fall or lie down and
others would tumble over it, and soon there would be a heap of dead along the
line of fence. I saw one instance and heard of many others, where, for a distance
of two and three hundred yards, the heaps of dead bodies were higher than the
fence. Over these bodies the snow drifted and sifted between them soon forming
a solid, frozen mass, over which hundreds of living cattle walked, tumbled over
the fence and drifted away.\(^{37}\)

Estimated death tolls from the Panhandle blizzard die-ups reached as high as 65-75
percent of many herds, much higher than typical losses due to the nature of the open
range. But winter was not the only deadly season for cattle surrounded by barbed wire.
In early 1880s The Colorado Cattle Growers Association declared their opposition to
barbed wire denouncing it as a cruel and vicious fence in any season

During the past season the fences destroyed a great many cattle....
fences...are likely to prove veritable instruments of death. And even
in the summer time they [fences] are not entirely, free from danger,
for we notice that very recently a herd was stampeded by a hail-
storm and came in contact with a wire fence, along the line of which
the older and heavier cattle trampled to death 300 of the younger
and weaker ones.\(^{38}\)

\(^{37}\) \textit{Buffalo Guns and Barbed Wire Two Frontier Accounts by Don Hampton Biggers; A
Combined Reissue of Pictures of the Past and History That Will Never Be Repeated}, Don
Hampton Bigger, Texas Tech University, 1991; 124-125.

\(^{38}\) \textit{The Breeder's Gazette}, v.6, September 25, 1884, p.456.
Cattlemen from across the Great Plains responded to growing death tolls by tearing down many of the barbed wire fences that they had set up in previous years. Barbed wire was effective in slowing the drift or stampede of cattle; but perhaps it was too effective. The increasing death tolls of cattle in the 1880s gave weight to arguments that circulated nationally about the dangerous nature of barbed wire.39

But evidence of the viciousness of barbed fencing didn’t solely arise from the Plains, in fact substantial evidence was readily available to all farmers and ranchers in the form of a new industry that arose in the wake of barbed fencing, an industry that centered on barbed wire liniment and antiseptic. The rise of medicines designed specifically for barbed wire injuries clearly indicated that animal and even human contact with this fence was not only injurious but on the rise. One of the most graphic depictions of barbed wire’s vicious nature can be found in an advertisement for Silver Pine Healing Oil. Although the manufacturer claimed it was a “wonderful cure for barb-wire cuts,” it was the image in the ad, not the words that drew customers’ attention. At the forefront of the ad stood a white horse with a large pool of blood forming at its feet from the parallel cuts that mirrored the barbed wire strands it stood next to, indicative of a recent encounter with the cruel fence. Although a shocking sight and no doubt painful, the horse itself does not appear to be in a panic. Instead it waits patiently as a man rushes towards it with the “cure” in hand. The very appearance of such

advertisements indicated not only the public’s familiarity with the injurious nature of barbed fencing but also how clever entrepreneurs profited from the growing problem.\textsuperscript{40}

It is not clear why opponents did not draw upon the creation of this new curative industry or the escalating death tolls of cattle encountering barbed drift fences, or the devastation caused by screwworms embedded in barbed wire injuries, as physical evidence of the cruel nature of barbed fencing. What is clear is that the Washburn & Moen Company never had to respond to actual contemporary evidence that would have confirmed the real, not alleged, vicious nature of the “Devil’s Rope.” And despite the real harm caused by the use of barbed wire, from the first year of mass production of barbed wire (1874) through the years of legislative debate and public outcry there was a sharp increase in the pounds of barbed wire made and sold across the nation:

\begin{itemize}
  \item 1874 – 10,000 lbs
  \item 1875 – 600,000 lbs
  \item 1876 – 2,840,000 lbs
  \item 1877 – 12,863,000 lbs
  \item 1878 – 26,655,000 lbs
  \item 1879 – 50,377,000 lbs
  \item 1880 – 80,500,000 lbs
  \item 1881 – 120,000,000 lbs\textsuperscript{41}
\end{itemize}

By 1881, Washburn & Moen claimed that the American public employed in fields, ranges, and along railroads over 250,000 miles of barbed wire.\textsuperscript{42} Based on the sheer amount of

\textsuperscript{40} Silver Pine Healing Oil advertisement, Ellwood House Museum, DeKalb, IL. The museum has an interesting display of bottles of various brands of barbed wire liniment manufactured in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century.


barbed wire, Washburn & Moen argued that the users found no objections to its use. In fact

They [users] would be sure to take alarm were it found an injury and peril to their own farm beasts, and with such an amount of Barb Fencing in use in all part of the United States, and in contact with all forms of husbandry, had evils attached to the use of Barb Fencing, the public would have been sure to hear of it, and this in loud and unmistakable terms. The objection to Barb Fencing comes in every instance from those who have had no experience in its use. Some of these are simply mistaken and uninformed.43

Clearly the public hearings, legislative debates, and even the passage of laws restricting or prohibiting the use of barbed wire had little effect on the ongoing total production of this particular fence. Perhaps this is testimony to the impact of Washburn and Moen’s concerted attack on proposed legislation wherever it occurred. Perhaps it is simply a statement of the facts presented by proponents of barbed wire that is, that a barbed wire fence is

The cheapest and best of fences. The strongest and most imperishable of fences. The safest fence for the protection of crops. The least harmful fence to all kinds of stock. Secure and safe alike for horses and cattle.44

In the midst of these public hearings and legislative actions, a 1881 Chicago Tribune editorial best summed it up

Perhaps no device discovered or utilized since those of the reaping machine and the cotton gin has been of such value to the American people as the production of wire adapted to fences, and so provided with barbs, thorns and prickers, as to successfully exclude livestock.

from fields, or when in to keep them in. The cotton gin was applicable only to a single crop, and the reaper was also limited to grain, but barb wire fences are useful to every foot of the enclosed land of the United States, and to every man inhabiting a region where a horse, cow, sheep or hog, or other animal is produced or grown. It is useful where livestock roam, to keep them out of the cultivated fields, and as useful when they are herded to keep them in the allotted range.\(^{45}\)

\(^{45}\) *The Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, April 6, 1881 (cited in *The Fence Problem in the U.S...1882 pp. 45-46*). Ironically during the previous summer the City Council of Chicago attempted to pass a city ordinance that would forbid the use of barbed wire. After the 27-3 vote to ban barbed wire within the city limits, the Mayor announced without explanation, that he would veto the ordinance. See *The Chicago Tribune*, “The Council,” Tuesday, June 29, 1880.