

# Arkansas

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)**

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## ARKANSAS

The recorded history of European presence in Arkansas dates to the Spanish expedition of Hernando de Soto, who crossed the Mississippi River and entered what is now Arkansas in 1541. Reports by the commanders at Arkansas Post, one of the earliest settlements in Arkansas, indicate that there was never a substantial agricultural class in the region, even in what might be loosely defined as the more populous areas. Morris S. Arnold, in his social and cultural history of the state, entitled *Colonial Arkansas, 1686-1804*, states: "It is safe to conclude that there were never more than eight or ten real farmers at any one time at the Post in the colonial period.... Although the state of the agricultural art, and the number of people engaged in it, certainly increased during the last decade of the eighteenth century, John Treat, writing from the Post in 1805, notes even at that late date that 'agriculture here is yet in its infancy....'"

In 1803 Arkansas became a part of the territory of the United States as the "District of Arkansas" within the territory of Louisiana. In 1812 the District became part of the Missouri Territory, where it remained until 1819 when Arkansas became a separate Territory. Military roads were among the important projects undertaken by the territorial government. The road from Memphis to Little Rock opened in 1828. By 1836, the year that Arkansas became a state, military roads crossed from north to south and east to west. Coupled with waterways that included the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers, these thoroughfares enabled early settlers -- primarily from Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia -- to pour into Arkansas in search of new homes.

Governor Archibald Yell, well aware of the importance of agricultural development, requested the state legislature to appropriate funds for scientific agricultural research in 1842. However, it was not until 1871 that a formal educational institution was established to actively promote agricultural research. In that year Arkansas Industrial University, which became the University of Arkansas in 1899, was created under the auspices of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862. Agricultural science was among the courses first offered by the University. However, the course was eventually abandoned because the campus at Fayetteville, in the far northwest corner of the state, was too removed from the eastern and southern parts of the state where cotton, the principal cash crop, was cultivated.

The geographic area of Arkansas is roughly rectangular in form -- 250 miles from north to south and 225 miles from east to west. With a total surface area of 53,335 square miles, it is the smallest state west of the Mississippi, but is roughly the size of Pennsylvania and New Jersey combined. A line drawn from the northeast corner to the southwest corner diagonally across Arkansas would divide the state into nearly equal parts. Roughly, the half of the state to the north and west is highlands, including the Ozark and Ouachita mountain ranges. Early farmers in the highlands eked out a living on eroded hill tracts, raising corn, hogs, and cattle, while supplementing their incomes by working in coal mines or sawmills. The half of the state to the south and east consists of river bottoms and low-lying plains. It includes a broad belt of bottom lands, from 50 to 100 miles wide, along the Mississippi River from the Missouri state line to Louisiana. This land, where cotton was king, contains some of the richest soil in the country. Agricultural society publications, such as proceedings, newspapers, constitutions, and by-laws, demonstrate that interest in agriculture became intense during the latter half of the nineteenth

century, due primarily to the economy and falling cotton prices. Farm protest movements such as the Farmers Alliance and the Arkansas Agricultural Wheel, founded in Des Arc, Arkansas, looked to political remedies for economic woes. By 1884 there was a Grand State Wheel with nearly five thousand members in 114 subordinate Wheels. The Arkansas Grange was much larger, with over twenty thousand members in its peak year of 1875. The *Proceedings of the Quarterly Session of the Independence County Union, Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, of Independence County, Arkansas*; the *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the Arkansas State Farmers Union*; and *Constitution of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry and By-laws of the National Grange and of the Arkansas State Grange* are just a few examples of the rich literature that documents agricultural society interests and activities.

The state legislature responded by enacting the Barker Act in 1887 which created the position of superintendent of agriculture at the University. Albert E. Menke, a young chemistry professor, became the first superintendent. Among his early accomplishments was the creation of a University agricultural farm. Legislation at the national level, namely the Hatch Act of 1887, also had an impact. The Arkansas legislature officially accepted the \$15,000 provided by the Hatch Act, and the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station was created, with Mr. Menke as its first superintendent. The first *Bulletin*, by F.M. Bordeaux, was entitled *Experiments on Cotton and Corn in Drew County*. Subsequent issues of the *Bulletin* dealt with a multitude of problems that beset Arkansas farmers, including hog cholera, fertilizers, and erosion. The Station also produced studies on cotton, corn, sorghum, and tree diseases. Materials in need of preservation include extant circulars, special reports, and annual reports that document the programs and activities of the Experiment Station.

The establishment of the Agricultural Extension Service in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act, and the Arkansas State Plant Board in 1917 by the state legislature, were major steps in the promotion of scientific agriculture. The *Arkansas Gazette*, the state's leading newspaper, had long complained about Experiment Station bulletins being too difficult for the large number of illiterate farmers. The newspaper suggested that demonstration projects could provide tangible results from research that would benefit farmers. Thus, the Extension Service became a conduit for the application of basic work that was done at the University. One of its early successes was in the eradication of ticks in western and northwestern Arkansas, supported in part by an allocation of \$50,000 from the state legislature.

In 1808 Fortescue Cuming suggested in a letter that a small lake near present-day Helena, Arkansas, would make "a fine situation for rice grounds." It took nearly 100 years, however, for a successful crop of rice to be grown for commercial purposes. In 1904 William H. Fuller grew a stand near Carlisle, Arkansas. Five years later the rice harvest passed the 1,000,000-bushel mark. Until 1940 Arkansas was one of the four leading states in the production of rice, growing about twenty percent of the country's crop, but today the state is the number one producer of rice. *Arkansas Rice: Its Growth and Possibilities along the Cotton Belt Route* (1908); *Rice, the White Cereal of Arkansas* (1910); and *The History of Rice Development in Arkansas*, published in Carlisle, Arkansas, in 1920, provide us with valuable insight to the beginnings of the rice industry in Arkansas.

By the end of World War I, the agricultural economy of Arkansas, like much of the South, was devastated. Records of the time show that many state legislators proposed sweeping changes to address the needs of farmers, going so far as to suggest that the University be relocated to Little Rock. How such a move would invigorate the economy was never fully outlined, but it reflected the desperate conditions of the time. However, in 1918 in a printed report entitled *Arkansas, Farming Conditions and Farm Loan Needs*, the Banking Committee of the Little Rock Board of Commerce expressed optimism when it stated that: "We have shown here that the spirit of progress has awakened in our state and that our farmers are taking advantage of the opportunities of learning better farm methods... We have pointed out our excellent system of co-operation of County Farm Demonstration Agents in place in 64 counties. These people work under the supervision of the United States and of the state and are teaching better farming methods and the diversification of crops and also developing the livestock industry." The report proved to be prophetic; by the mid-1920s the state's agricultural base showed improvement, largely due to a favorable turn in the national economy.

The economic upswing was short-lived. The flood of 1927 had a devastating effect on thousands of people along the Mississippi River. In 1930, the Arkansas banking system collapsed, as the American Exchange and Trust, headquartered in Little Rock with 72 branches throughout the state, closed its doors. Farmers were particularly hard hit, and by the end of 1930, sixty-three percent of all Arkansas farmers fell into tenancy. Farmers growing rice in Arkansas and Prairie counties, however, were fortunate, as their products could be sold. For those who planted cotton, it was an entirely different matter. The drought of 1930-1931, coupled with the drop in price of cotton, was crippling.

In July of 1934, in a run-down school house near Tyronza, Arkansas, H.L. Mitchell and Henry Clay East were among those who established the Southern Tenants Farmers' Union (STFU). The original membership consisted of eleven white and seven black members. Ironically, some of the founders reportedly were former members of the Ku Klux Klan, and one of the blacks was a survivor of the 1919 riot at Elaine, Arkansas. By the end of 1935 the STFU had a heavy concentration of members in northeast Arkansas and claimed approximately 30,000 members in neighboring states.

The deplorable conditions of farmers and sharecroppers drew national attention. Correspondents from afar traversed the Delta country and reported on what they saw. English writer Naomi Mitchinson stated: "I have traveled over most of Europe and part of Africa but I have never seen such terrible sights as I saw yesterday among the sharecroppers of Arkansas." Eleanor Roosevelt, in an April 4, 1936, letter to Senate majority leader Joe T. Robinson of Arkansas, stated: "Three sharecroppers, two of them from Arkansas, came to see me in New York the other day and I was deeply troubled by the stories they tell... I am very anxious about it and know you must feel the same way. I wonder if it would not be possible to send some one down to try to get a better understanding between the people than there seems to be at present."

The Dyess Colony was an attempt to reestablish impoverished farmers under circumstances giving them a reasonable chance for success. Named for W.R. Dyess, first

administrator of the Works Progress Administration in Arkansas, the colony was founded in 1934 in Mississippi County as an experiment that was assisted by the Federal government. Members of the colony, selected from state relief rolls, were housed in dwellings centered around a community hospital, bank, feed mill, cotton gin, canning building, library, and other service facilities. Farms were worked on an individual basis, but community tasks were often performed by members on a cooperative basis. The Colony received notice in the national press because of its large scale and the support of the Federal government. Shortly before 1940 the Farm Security Administration assumed control of the Dyess Colony. Some of the buildings still exist at Dyess, Arkansas. Students of the period credit the STFU for touching off a reaction that pushed the New Deal toward far bolder action on the farm front than otherwise might have been the case. In Arkansas, Governor J. Marion Futrell appointed a group of leading citizens to the Arkansas Tenancy Commission in 1936, charging them to review the plight of the sharecroppers. Most of their recommendations were incorporated in the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937. But the STFU wanted sweeping changes. In the June 1937 issue of *The Sharecropper's Voice*, the official organ of the STFU, the editor called for Arkansas Governor Carl E. Bailey to repeal the poll tax law: "There can be no democracy in Arkansas so long as thousands of sharecroppers -- probably a majority of the citizens of the state -- are denied the vote because they are too poor to pay the poll tax." As reflected in literature such as *Land Tenure in Arkansas*, a 1945 report issued by the Department of Rural Economics and Sociology of the University of Arkansas, the great majority of Arkansans were still on farms and dependent on them for a living at the beginning of World War II. H. Kester's *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (1936) provides views of the plight of sharecroppers from a broader perspective than just one area.

While politicians had an impact on the life of the farm community, those outside the political arena caused revolutionary changes that would have a tremendous impact on agriculture and rural life. There were engineers in Detroit who perfected the tractor to do more work than a mule; botanists, entomologists, and chemists who found new ways to eliminate the enemies of crops; those in the Agricultural Extension Service who spread the word across the state; soil conservationists who taught farmers how to terrace their land to prevent topsoil from running off; the rural electric cooperatives which brought cheap electricity; and John and Mack Rust, brothers near Pine Bluff who built an odd looking machine that could pick cotton. These developments combined to change the face of Arkansas forever.

The fruit industry in the state was a more vital industry to northwest Arkansas in the early twentieth century than its modern-day counterpart. *Arkansas, the Orchard of the World* (1904); *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the Arkansas Pecan Growers Association, 1927-1928*; and *Effect of Variations in Yield on Cost of Producing Grapes* (1931) attest to the economic power that the fruit industry held in the early part of the twentieth century.