

New Mexico

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

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When Spaniards arrived in New Mexico in the 1540s they found the indigenous people already practicing irrigated agriculture and growing corn, beans, and squash. Archaeologists later discovered that native cultures had been growing crops with harvested water or irrigation from streams for hundreds of years. One of the great mysteries of southwestern anthropology involves the reason for the decline of these cultures.

Today, when one thinks of agriculture in New Mexico, chile and cattle come to mind. Alfalfa, cotton, pecans, and grain crops are also very important. Cows have been a way of life in New Mexico for a long time, and there has been a great expansion in production of milk products recently. In the past, many more horticulture crops were produced than are grown today. As settlers established towns around the Rio Grande Valley, the fertile soil, abundant sunshine, and good water made it possible to grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Further, the romantic tradition of acequias permeates the literature of rural life. These small irrigation ditches were often the center of rural communities. Even small rivulets were channeled so that their water could be used for crops. The work of cleaning the ditches, leveling the fields, and apportioning the water was shared, and became a central focus of rural life in northern New Mexico.

Sheep dominated the livestock trade in the early years of New Mexican history, and by 1883 there were an estimated 5 million head in the territory. Although the state known for its cattle herds, the number of cattle did not surpass sheep until the 1950s. By the 1880s the construction of railroad lines in New Mexico made the shipping of cattle much easier. Cattle numbers peaked around 1920 at about 1,500,000 head. Approximately 90% of the land in the state today is used for livestock grazing. Much of this land is public land, such as that of the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. Because of the sparse rainfall, overgrazing and damage to sensitive riparian areas are crucial issues for livestock management.

In the early 1900s dam construction permitted irrigated agriculture on a grand scale and by 1930 more than 500,000 acres were irrigated. Irrigated land accounts for 1% of the state land area and dryland crops about 2%. The Rio Grande, Pecos, and San Juan are the primary waters from which surface irrigation is used. Many communities in the northern part of the state irrigate from smaller streams.

The agriculture college was begun in 1889. Today, New Mexico State University, the land-grant college in Las Cruces, enrolls about 15,000 students. The College of Agriculture and Home Economics contains Departments of Agricultural Economics; Agronomy and Horticulture; Animal and Range Science; Entomology, Plant Pathology and Weed Science; Agriculture and Extension Education; Wildlife Science; and Family and Consumer Services. Recently, the college developed the Center for Sustainable

Development of Arid Lands. The Chile Institute is located on the NMSU campus. Chile scientist Fabian Garcia published the first work on chile cultivation in 1908. While at NMSU in 1921 he released the first improved chile cultivar. To some, the image of the chile ristra hanging by the door is a sign of welcome to New Mexican homes.

The literature of agriculture and rural life in New Mexico ranges from stories reminiscing about the days gone by, ranching and rodeos, acequias, struggles between the poor (often Hispanic) and the land barons, and the changes wrought by railroads and dam building, to the effects of disasters such as the Dust Bowl. Materials range from books, government documents and extension publications, to newspapers and farming journals. These materials are an important part of the history of the state not only in agriculture but for the culture in general, for the two are intricately intertwined.

Many of the monographs reviewed in this project will deal with rural life in the west. *My life on the frontier*, by Miguel Antonio Otereo; *Buckboard Days*, by Sophie Poe; and *No Life for a Lady*, by Agnes Morley Cleaveland, are examples of this type of literature. Numerous theses and dissertations will also be considered. Periodicals dealing with New Mexico history and rural life include *New Mexico Magazine*, *New Mexico Historical Review* and *El Palacio*. Periodicals such as *New Mexico Stockman* as well as publications of the New Mexico Wool Growers Association will encompass the literature of the livestock industry.