

Oklahoma

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

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OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma is a place of diversity, which is reflected in its land, environment, history, people, and economy. Its agricultural regions and their variety of products reflect this same diversity. The diversity in physical conditions allows for varied agricultural styles and products brought here by the truly unique settlement of this land. Here we have native peoples from all over the country and immigrants from all over the world settled into territories either by oppression and force or the unparalleled opportunity of the open Land Runs. The exuberance for life for some and desperation of others were exemplified by their survival of the Dust Bowl.

Distinct physiographic regions are found in Oklahoma, from the High Plains and Black Mesa of the Oklahoma Panhandle east to the Red Soiled Plains, the Sandstone Hills and Tall Grass Prairies, and finally the Red River plains. Oklahoma is located between the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi coastal plain. There is a change in elevation starting from almost 5,000 feet in the Northwest to less than 300 feet in the southeast. Three general and distinctive vegetation zones are found with grasslands in the west turning to Savanna and Woodlands as one moves eastward. Oak, hickory and pine forests lie along the east and southeast borders with Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. Most of Oklahoma's rivers flow in roughly this same direction, from the northwest to the southeast. Annual precipitation ranges from less than 16 inches in the western Panhandle to more than 54 inches in the forested southeast. Tornados and hail are common throughout the state along with droughts and floods.

Two thousand years ago some inhabitants were farmers who grew beans, pumpkins, squash, corn and sunflowers. Later, Caddo and Wichita groups integrated hunting and farming for a more diversified economy. They cultivated plums, grapes, cherries, mulberries, and muskmelons. The agricultural knowledge and experience of these people were passed from preceding generations, parents to children, through spoken words and by example. Thesis and dissertation literature from Oklahoma's main universities describes these people, their lifestyle, and their agriculture in detail.

Spanish explorers and French traders traversed Oklahoma in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The Spanish and French contested imperial control until the French finally transferred the region to the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Congressional funds supported exploration and initial surveys. In the early 1820's Edwin James, botanist on one of these explorations, described Oklahoma as unfit for existing American settlement patterns and most of western Oklahoma was considered uninhabitable. United States officials concluded that this place, unfit for American settlers, would be the perfect place to transfer Native Americans from other parts of the United States, and began with the removal of Native Americans from the eastern half of the United States.

Beginning in the early 1830's Native American tribes from the southeastern portion of the United States, referred to by some as the Five Civilized Tribes, began the forced removal, commonly referred to as "The Trail of Tears," from their homelands into the Indian Territory. Conflicts with already existing Plains tribes, especially the Kiowa and Comanche was resolved with the establishment of Fort Washita and a renegotiated treaty. New treaties written in 1866 once again reduced the size of the land and the locations of existing tribes already in the Indian Territory. These treaties also expanded the number of tribes forced to relocate into the Territory. Roughly twenty additional Native American populations entered Indian Territory between 1866 and 1889. *Indian affairs: Laws and treaties*, compiled and edited by Charles J. Kappler, commonly known as *The Kappler Report*, includes U.S. treaties, laws and executive orders pertaining to Native American Indian tribes. A No Man's Land was designated with no tribal designation and eventually became Cimarron Territory. Cimarron Territory joined the newly created Oklahoma Territory in 1890. Oklahoma Territory had previously been the western sections of Indian Territory. Later a two million acre region in eastern Oklahoma Territory was designated as Unassigned Lands.

Land was held in common with the tribe as a whole having ownership. Traditional land tenure patterns among these Native American groups provided for individual settlement and residence, but never individual title of lands where they resided. An individual could occupy and use as much land as was necessary to provided subsistence, but was unable to sell this property, or transfer ownership. The right of ownership remained with the tribe. The non Native Americans who resided among them also held no title to the lands where they lived.

One of the first steps leading to eventual individual ownership and agricultural settlement was the authorization of a land survey. The Public Land Survey System of the United States was applied to what became the Oklahoma and Indian Territories following the Civil War. After the Initial Point had been established earlier near Fort Arbuckle, Ehud N. Darling and his crews began marking the north and south Indian Meridian and the east and west Base Line to create the townships and ranges to be used later with Native American allotments, land-run homesteaders, and land lotteries. A complete township was thirty-six square miles, or 23040 acres. When settled each township could provide homesteads for up to 144 applicants. Numerous federal documents including *The Public Land Surveys* chronicle the opening and settlement of Oklahoma.

An additional step to break up tribal ownership of their lands occurred when Congress approved the Dawes Act in 1887. Under its provisions individual members were allotted lands, with remaining lands made available for homesteaders. It was felt that forcing Native Americans into becoming farmers would be in their best interests. The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole tribes in Indian Territory were exempt from forced allotments until passage of the Five Civilized Tribes Act in 1893. With the conclusion of tribal allotments, remaining lands were opened for homesteaders. These

activities were governed by the Dawes Commission and the Five Civilized Tribes Commission under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Others whose reports document this settlement include the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions who set up mission schools for the Indians.

After the Civil War three major cattle trails; the Great Western, Chisholm, and Shawnee East and West, crossed the state to drive herds north out of Texas to be fattened on the open range from Kansas to the Dakotas and west to Wyoming and Montana. For two decades, beginning in the late 1860's, several hundred thousand cattle were driven north each year. Individual herds would commonly be spread out over two miles along the trail. Remnants of the trails can still be seen today from satellite images. This movement of cattle and accompanying cowboys helped dispel the idea that Indian Territory was a barren wasteland. Much of the land crossed by the Chisholm Trail was very similar to lands being settled and broken under the plow in Kansas. Until homesteading began in the late 1880's herds continued to follow the Chisholm Trail north to railroad towns in Kansas, first at Dodge City, and later Newton, Wichita, and Caldwell. And tales of the potential agricultural abundance of the Territory began to spread.

Land openings through runs and lotteries occurred throughout the Oklahoma Territorial period from 1889 to 1907. The first public land openings occurred in what was to become the Oklahoma Territory. In April of 1889 the two million acres in the Unassigned Lands were opened in a land run which included over 50,000 people looking to homestead on the prairie. Only about 12,500 homesteads were available. Two years later a second land run adjacent to the first run took place with almost 20,000 potential homesteaders.

The Cherokee Outlet, created in the 1880's, comprised in excess of six million acres was leased to over one hundred livestock producers for a short period of time, but on September 16, 1893 this land was also opened for settlement. The largest of the land runs, the Cherokee Outlet attracted 100,000 potential settlers competing for 37,000 homesteads. No other state was settled in this fashion, a unique experiment not used elsewhere.

Several hundred thousand new settlers joined the existing Native American inhabitants during this short period of time. Very few from both groups were properly skilled or prepared for the rigors of growing crops and raising livestock on individual farms. But the creation of the Oklahoma Territory in 1890 brought with it institutions which were designed to help. The Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, and the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station were established in 1890. Both were located in the Payne County town of Stillwater. Oklahoma A & M College was designated as a land-grant college under the provisions of the Morrill Act of 1862. Morrill Act and Hatch Act funds were used in combination with territorial appropriations to start classes at the College and initiate agricultural research at the Experiment Station. The college campus was relatively small and attracted few students outside of Payne County. The Agricultural Experiment Station, however, attracted attention from across the Oklahoma Territory. Over 160 acres was set aside for field trials and livestock production. Farmers

from across the territory attended Field Days and participated in Demonstrations. Extension specialists from the Station worked closely with local county agents throughout the Oklahoma Territory. Within a year the first bulletins were issued with recommendations directly related to agricultural production in the territory. Crop and livestock trials were undertaken to help determine which varieties and species seem best adapted to Oklahoma conditions. The Magruder Wheat Plots were prepared to test fertilizer impact on the continuous cultivation of wheat. This particular test plot has the distinction as the longest continuous trial of its kind west of the Mississippi River and is described, among other places, in the Oklahoma State University Centennial Histories Series published in 1990 to document and celebrate the university during the anniversary.

During the territorial period much was accomplished in spite of the many challenges confronting territorial citizens. In 1890 over 96 percent of Oklahoma's population lived in rural areas. By the time of statehood in November of 1907 when the two territories, Indian and Oklahoma, were merged into the 46th state of Oklahoma, the rural population still exceeded 80 percent as compared to 54 percent in the rest of the United States. Both territorial and state documents describe the agricultural governance boards.

After gaining statehood Oklahoma proceeded to demonstrate to the fullest extent its agricultural capabilities. From the tip of the Panhandle to the swampy forests of the southeast, Oklahoma's farmers and ranchers began to take advantage of the land that was finally open to all. Although drought brought trouble in the early years of Oklahoma Territory, by statehood the weather cooperated to provide bountiful harvests of all crops. In the Panhandle, long a ranching domain, large herds of cattle and sheep mingled with fields of wheat, sorghum and barley.

In a time of non-mechanized farming with the standard farm averaging 160 acres, the Panhandle and other northwestern counties stood out as the exception. Texas, Grant, Kay, Harper and Woodward counties all boasted a number of farms over 300 acres and many more exceeding 200 acres.

Oklahoma agriculturally is split in a rough diagonal separating the northwest from the southeast. The northwest region is wheat country similar to southern Kansas, with sorghum, corn and barley also appearing. Ranching in the Panhandle is perhaps second to wheat in terms of financial importance. The southeastern section of the state more closely resembles the old south. The majority of settlers in this portion of Oklahoma migrated from southeastern United States and brought their agricultural expertise with them. For the first half of the twentieth century cotton was king in the "Little Dixie" of Oklahoma. This portion of the state sustained itself almost entirely from the production, sale and distribution of cotton. The extractive economies of forestry and mining occurred in the far southeast with small ranching concerns spread throughout.

Within a decade of statehood crops were growing and so were profits. The international effects of World War I sent commodity prices soaring much to the delight of Oklahoma farmers. The war signaled a boom time for farmers who took out loans, bought more land and equipment and plowed every possible acre for wheat, cotton and other cash

crops. The high prices did not last long however as glutted markets sent farm prices plummeting to almost the lowest point since statehood. Many rural Oklahomans, especially those whose livelihoods depended upon agriculture, lost their assets. Many lost their farms. With markets overcrowded and prices low, surviving farmers all across the state began to turn up even more land and raise more crops in a last ditch scramble to survive.

The Great Depression entered Oklahoma about five years before it hit the rest of the country as the plow every acre tactic of Oklahoma's farmers had the opposite of the desired effect. Adding to the state's troubles were increasing drought conditions. Perhaps the easiest way to recognize the symbiotic link between Oklahoma and agriculture is to examine the state during agricultural down turns. When the farmers begin to hurt so does the rest of the state. The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression better than anything else perhaps reveals the close relationship between Oklahoma and agriculture. As conditions worsened in the 1930's entire towns in the western half of the state disappeared as the sole basis of existence, agriculture, for all intents and purposes no longer existed.

Some environmental historians have argued that The Dust Bowl was man-made. A general lack of caring and greediness led to the misuse of land throughout the western portion of the state. The fact that the word "okie" is used to describe a traveling farmer from any state is again symbolic of the close ties between Oklahoma and agriculture. This realization was not lost on bureaucrats who in line with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs authorized the first shelterbelt in the United States when trees were planted outside of Mangum, Oklahoma. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) were federal programs that were very active in Oklahoma, providing both environmental recovery assistance and employment opportunities. The Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA) was a state initiative begun during this time to bring electrification to rural Oklahoma. Watershed programs also got their start in Oklahoma with the first one occurring near Cheyenne, Oklahoma and eventually included much of the Washita River system. While Oklahoma farmers played a role in creating depressed prices and dust storms, they also worked to alleviate and address the disastrous consequences of earlier misguided actions. Oklahoma's favorite son, Will Rogers said, "Every farmer in Oklahoma has a picture of the new Farm Board hung on their wall, right in between the two mortgages."

The 1950's saw some drought and dust as well, but for the large majority of the state the entry of the United States into World War Two signaled a new time of prosperity that lasted until at least the 1960's. By 1970 Oklahoma's population had returned to levels reached in 1930, but less than a third of its citizens lived in rural areas. Mechanization and manufacturing provided employment opportunities in growing urban centers. The size of farms grew dramatically as the number of farms in the state declined from over 142,000 in 1950 to only 70,000 in 1987. Corporate farms and large scale farming operations unheard of in earlier generations began to have an impact on the methods of agricultural production.

As agriculture in Oklahoma enters a new millennium, the complex and diverse challenges it faces may be different from those of previous generations, but the determination to convert problems into opportunities remains the same. New situations require diverse skills and talents, and these the people of Oklahoma possess in abundance.

Materials documenting the agriculture and rural life of Oklahoma include books, federal and state government documents, extension publications, and newspapers and journals of local and farming interest. No comprehensive bibliography of published materials important to the study of agriculture and rural life in Oklahoma has been prepared to date. Through this project we will compile such a document. This bibliography will draw primarily on the collections at the Oklahoma State University, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, and Oklahoma Historical Society and additional materials identified in catalogs and publications found in smaller collections throughout the state. Following and complying with the review process set forth in this grant, we will identify the most significant publications for preservation. After culling the items from the list that have already been preserved through other initiatives and other phases of this grant, we will identify the top approximately 25% to be preserved from our bibliography. We anticipate, based on the results of this grant in states similar to Oklahoma (e.g. New Mexico and Arkansas), our preliminary survey of Oklahoma literature, and preliminary survey of the materials already filmed by other states in our region, to identify approximately 750 titles comprised of 1000 volumes.