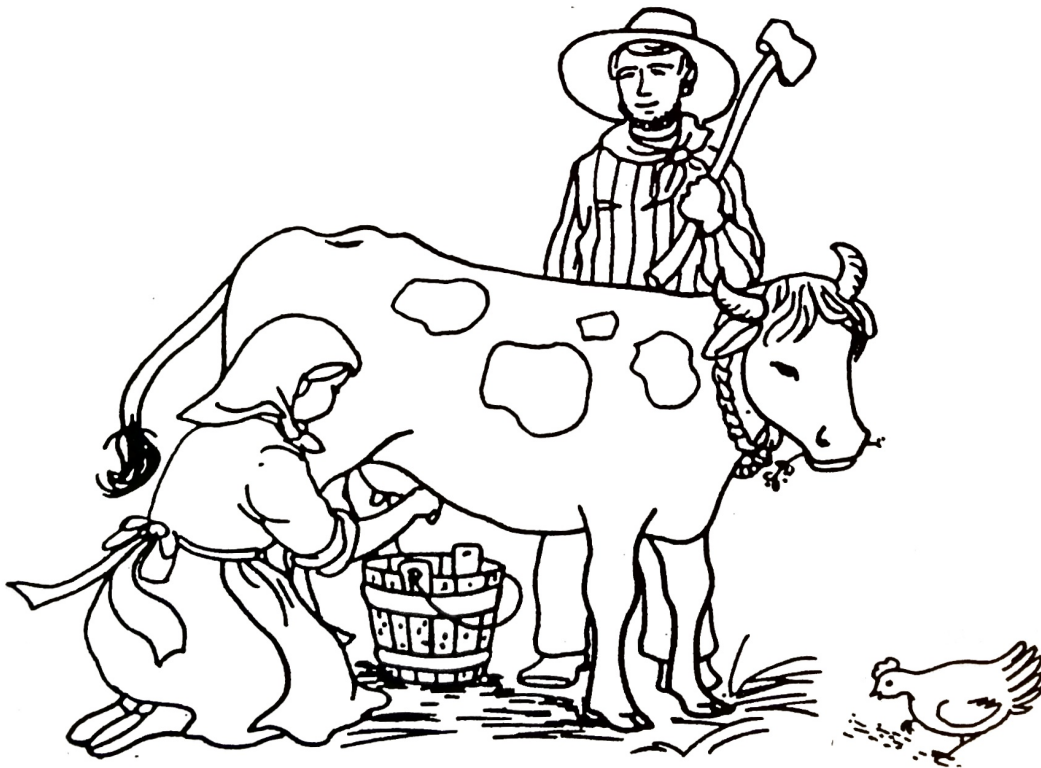


CHAPTER 13

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture has always been Arkansas's most important industry. Early settlers grew food in small gardens. This kind of farming, called "subsistence farming," continued even into the twentieth century. By 1850, farmers in Arkansas were producing crops for sale. The three most important crops were cotton, wheat, and corn. Livestock, rye, oats, rice, tobacco, vegetables, and fruits were also grown. Corn was the mainstay of subsistence farming. Farmers everywhere in Arkansas grew corn for food. They also fed it to their livestock.



In southeastern Arkansas, cotton was "king." The soil was good. Navigable rivers made transportation to markets easy. There was a national market for cotton. Prices were high, especially in the 1850's. Before the Civil War, large farms, known as "plantations," produced large amounts of cotton for sale. These plantations depended on slave labor.

Cotton could be grown in northwestern Arkansas. The big problem, however, was hauling it to market. The roads were hilly and rough, and discouraged cotton farming. Wheat milled into flour was easier to transport overland, so most farmers in northwestern Arkansas grew wheat as their main crop. Wheat, however, did not bring as high a price as cotton. The diversity in crops created important economic and social differences between northwestern and southeastern Arkansas. The farmers in the southeast were on a "roller coaster;" they either had an abundance of money or they were in debt.

The Civil War brought changes. The slaves were freed, but many Black citizens still worked on farms and plantations. Often, they worked for a percentage, or share, of the crops they produced. The landowner provided land, housing, and tools. The tenant farmers, or "sharecroppers," provided the labor. Their living conditions were usually poor. They worked very hard to make enough to live, and often ended up in debt to the landowner. In some ways, these tenant farmers were not much better off financially than slaves. Many poor white citizens were also involved in sharecropping.

Arkansas's agriculture recovered quickly from the war. More crops were being produced fifteen years after the war than at the start of the war. Cotton soon became the most important crop grown in Arkansas. By the 1870's, railroads made it easier to ship crops to market, and supplies were easier and cheaper to get. Because time and money were limited, farmers could only afford to grow one cash crop. In most cases, that crop was cotton.

By 1880, about 30 percent of Arkansas's total cropland was planted in cotton. In some delta counties, over half the cropland produced cotton. By 1930, cotton land had increased to 52.5 percent. After 1930, cotton's share of the land began to decline. Even so, as late as 1950 it accounted for over one third of the state's farm acreage.

Unfortunately, there were many problems. A very small but large enemy came on the scene in the form of the boll weevil. Although it is small in size, the boll weevil became a gigantic problem. After 1900, destruction caused by this beetle forced farmers to diversify -- to grow more than one kind of crop for market. That way, if one crop failed, the farmer still had other crops to sell.

Rice had been grown in Arkansas as early as 1850, but had never been commercially important. In 1897, after having seen rice grown commercially in Louisiana, William H. Fuller planted three acres of rice on his farm in Lonoke county. His success encouraged more rice production. East-central and northeast Arkansas became the state's main rice growing areas.

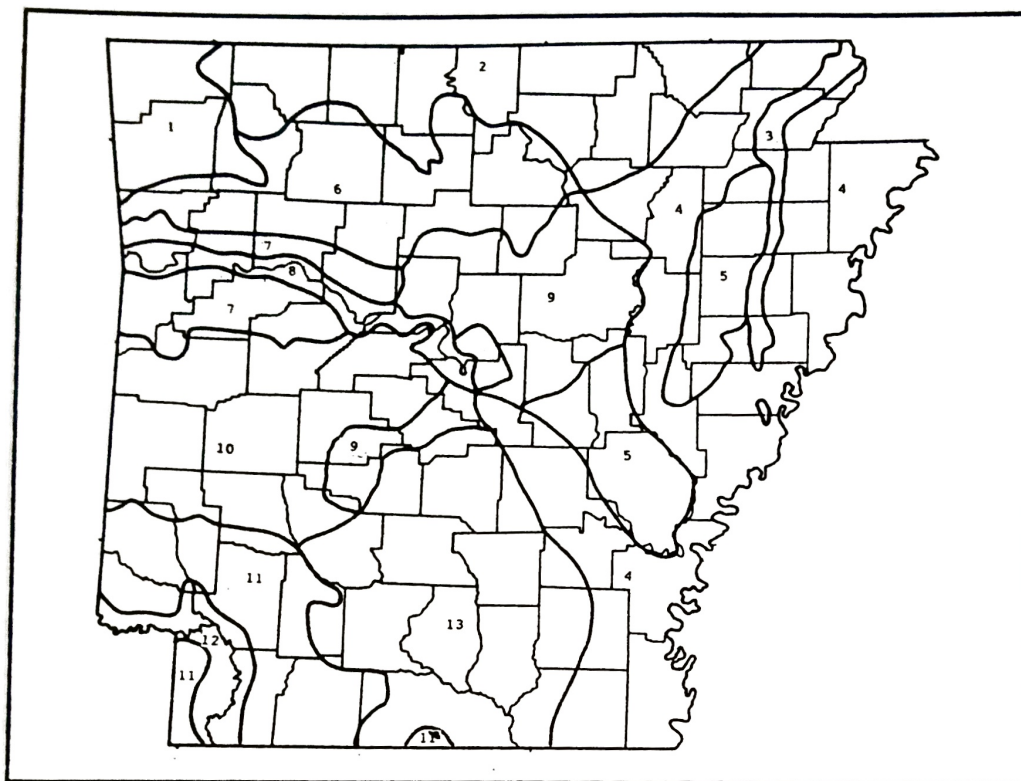
By 1910, Arkansas was the third largest rice producer in the United States. By 1949, rice was second only to cotton in value. As cotton production declined, rice grew in commercial value. By 1980, Arkansas was the leading rice producer in the nation.

Soybeans, introduced into Arkansas in the 1920's, quickly became a major cash crop. By 1930, there were 31,000 acres in soybeans; by 1940, the number had grown to 223,000 acres. Soybean oil has many industrial uses. In World War II, the need for oil-producing crops led to rapid expansion of soybean production.

Today's Arkansas farmer has a much different life style than his parents and grandparents. It was not until after World War II that tractors became commonplace. Horse-drawn farm equipment was thought to be the only way to plow, cultivate, and harvest.

Another kind of farmer who has entered the scene since World War II is the part-time farmer. These operators have off-farm jobs that leave the farmer with enough spare time to carry on small to medium sized operations. These part-time farmers are on the increase, and include many with retirement income.

Sometimes we take our food for granted. We forget that God gave us hardworking farmers to provide us with an abundance of good things to eat.



CROPS OFTEN GROWN IN ARKANSAS

REGION 1 - Poultry, dairy products, beef, fruits, and vegetables

REGION 2 - Beef, dairy products, vegetables, and strawberries

REGION 3 - Beef, dairy products, cotton, and fruits

REGION 4 - Cotton, soybeans, wheat, corn, and rice

REGION 5 - Rice, soybeans, cotton and, beef

REGION 6 - Beef and chicken

REGION 7 - Beef, dairy products, corn, vegetables and fruits

REGION 8 - Soybeans, corn, oats, and grains

REGION 9 - Dairy products, beef, poultry, vegetables, and fruits

REGION 10 - Corn and beef

REGION 11 - Corn, cotton, beef, dairy products, and poultry

REGION 12 - Cotton and beef

REGION 13 - Beef, cotton, and vegetables