The Changing Cotton Belt of Southeast Oklahoma

ROBERT V. GARNER, East Central State College

This paper presents the results of an investigation into the present status of agriculture in southeastern Oklahoma. For the purpose of this paper, southeastern Oklahoma is defined as an area bounded on the south by the Red River, on the east by the Arkansas-Oklahoma boundary, on the west by Garvin, Carter and Love counties and on the north by Pottawatomie, Seminole, Hughes, McIntosh, Haskell and Sequoyah counties.

The official USDA farm classification of 1958 lists 18 of the 22 southeastern counties in the cotton belt. This is part of a classification used in many current geographic texts. Unfortunately, this type of classification is over-generalized and misleading owing to the nature of the system utilized to determine the principal economic function of the areas being studied. This paper attempts to prove that southeastern Oklahoma is not now and has not for many years been a part of the cotton belt.

The Department of Agriculture uses a system of classification on the basis of the most important cash crop and then classifies the entire area accordingly. This ignores the fact that most farms in the United States, although specialized, are not operated on a one-crop basis. In attempting to classify regions according to the principal crop, the Department conducts a detailed examination of the production records and cash income for many years. Unfortunately, in a technological society such as ours, changes come very quickly and a long-range look at an area's production record may give a distorted conclusion.

If one were to use the 1940 statistics, this 22-county area would still be in the cotton belt. Table I shows the cotton production records in this region for the last 20 years. The area produced 243,344 five-hundred-pound bales of cotton during this period.

TABLE I. COTTON PRODUCTION IN 500-LB. BALES—AT SELECTED INTERVALS*

	1940	1950	1960
Atoka	1,600	35	75
Bryan	15,460	1,290	7,100
Carter	3,740	130	690
Choctaw	8,750	650	1,641
Coal	4,060	160	1,530
Garvin	19,670	860	3,950
Haskell	18,610	789	417
Hughes	17,000	120	1,150
Johnston	4,766	825	964
Latimer	1,850	210	3
LeFlore	20,710	710	401
Love	8,500	990	3,310
McCurtain	218	82	440
McIntosh	28,520	1,130	2,760
Marshall	6,750	2,386	1,381
Murray	4,210	78	193
Pittsburg	16,270	480	1,350
Pontotoc	7,400	35	170
Pottawatomie	3,000	600	1
Pushmataha	1,600	35	75
Seminole	10,980	40	600
Sequoyah	20,000	2,160	1,140

*Source U.S. Department of Agriculture

Small towns with cotton gin operations and well populated rural areas were the rule at this time. The farms were small and almost subsistent, except for the cash crop of cotton. By 1950, a major change was under way. The people were migrating to the large cities in search of industrial work. The worn out cotton land simply could not produce enough to hold the younger generation on the farm. Thus land consolidation began. The 1950 statistic used here is not a valid index for deducing the true decline of cotton production. An abundance of boll weevils and low cotton prices, in an exceedingly wet year (1950), brought cotton production to a new low of 18,280 bales. Statistics from 1946 or 1951 would have made a better comparison, but all the data necessary to make these computations were not available. The 1960 cotton production of 30,821 bales gives us a clearer picture when compared with the 1940 cotton production. Interestingly, McCurtain county is the only county to show an increase in cotton production in the 20-year period.

In classifying the principal agricultural cash income crop in southeastern Oklahoma, two types of income must be distinguished. One is income from planted cash crops and the other the total income per farm

unit. Table II gives(per county unit, the most important planted cash crop. Nine counties list peanuts as the most important crop. This crop is well suited for the sandy lands and has quickly become a favorite crop in many of these counties. Six counties listed alfalfa as the most important cash crop while only three counties report cotton as the most important cash crop. Two counties report soybeans and broomcorn as their most important planted cash crop in one county. Thus on the basis of this five-year study of cash income per planted crop, the entire area must be classified as general farming.

If we were to use the Department of Agriculture's system of reporting the one most important source of income per farm unit, then all counties would list cattle as the most important source of income. The production of cattle far exceeds any other agricultural pursuit in the 22 counties. The old cotton farms have been combined into larger farm and ranch units and improved pastures have been planted.

TABLE II. MOST IMPORTANT PLANTED CASH CROP PER COUNTY UNIT 1965*

Atoka—Peanuts	Love—Cotton
Bryan—Peanuts	McCurtain—Cotton
Carter—Alfalfa	McIntosh—Cotton
Choctaw—Peanuts	Marshall—Peanuts
Coal--Broomcorn	Murray—Alfalfa
Garvin—Broomcorn	Pittsburg—Peanuts
Haskell--Soybeans	Pontotoc—Alfalfa
Hughes—Peanuts	Pottawatomie—Alfalfa
Johnston—Peanuts	Pushmataha—Peanuts
Latimer—No Row Crops	Seminole—Peanuts
LeFlore--Alfalfa	Sequoyah—Soybeans

*Source—U.S. Department of Agriculture

To illustrate the changes in cattle production, Table III will be apropos. Notice that most counties have doubled in the total number of cattle. Only one, Pushmataha, shows a slight decline.

TABLE III. NUMBER OF CATTLE AND CALVES FROM SELECTED COUNTIES

	Bryan	Coal	Pontotoc	Pushmataha	Murray
1940	34,000	20,500	26,300	30,100	14,800
1950	32,500	22,900	38,000	25,700	20,800
1960	55,000	35,000	48,000	30,000	28,000

Ada, a regional marketing center for the central portion of southeastern Oklahoma, has had a 1003% increase in value of livestock sold in the 20-year period. In 1940, the Ada Livestock Commission sold $300,759 worth of cattle, but in 1960 the sale value was $3,985,989. The commission reports that, in 1964, $800,000 worth of cattle were processed through the Ada ring.

From the evidence presented, I believe it is safe to assume that southeastern Oklahoma is no longer a part of the cotton belt. In future classification of this region, let us hope that data concerning this changing area will reflect these recent trends.

LITERATURE CITED

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