AGRICULTURAL TRENDS IN BENTON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

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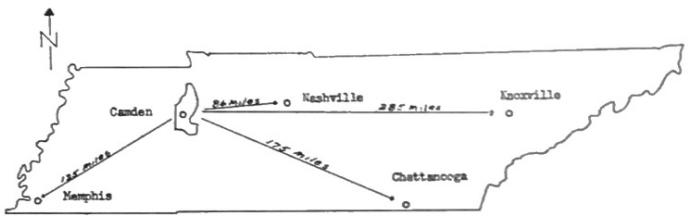
INTRODUCTION

Benton County, Tennessee, lies in the extreme eastern part of West Tennessee, approximately halfway between the southern and northern boundaries of the State. The county is bounded on the north by Henry County, and Carroll and Henry Counties form the western boundary. The southern boundary is formed by Decatur County and the panhandle of Carroll County. To the east it is separated from Perry, Houston, Humphreys, and Stewart Counties by the Tennessee River (Kentucky Lake).

The county extends about 50 miles along the west bank of the Tennessee River and covers an area of 275,904 acres. Of this total, 30,656 acres is inundated by the Kentucky Lake (Fig. 1 below).



The shape of the county is like that of a shoe. On the eastern boundary, the Tennessee River forms the heel of the shoe as it flows westward. The arch and sole is formed as the river turns northward again. The western boundary forms the top of the shoe which can be recognized readily as one observes a map of the county.

The first white settlements in the county were near the Tennessee River, which served as an important transportation route. The pioneers were largely self-sustaining. During the first few years they supplemented the food from the farm with deer, turkey, and other wild game. Practically all the products were grown for home or local consumption. Corn was the principal crop, with vegetables, small grains, and cotton of secondary importance. Later, the cotton gin so stimulated production that cotton became a cash crop and changed farming from a subsistence type to a cotton type, supplemented with livestock and forest products. A tobacco factory built in Camden in 1855 created a market for the tobacco that had been grown chiefly for home use. The growing of peanuts was begun about 1870. This was an even better cash crop than cotton for a few years, and considerable acreage was grown until recently.

The purpose of this paper is to review the agriculture in the county and show the recent trends in the overall pattern of the agricultural economy.

AGRICULTURAL LAND-USE

First, it should be noted that Benton County does not rank on 24 different lists of 10 Tennessee counties leading in each of the various aspects and phases of agriculture. This alone indicates that it is not an important agricultural county within the State.

Corn. Corn, having a wide range of adaptability, is grown on most farms in the county. Flooding of the Tennessee River by the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1945 resulted in a change of corn land utilization. The uplands of the county are producing corn today; whereas, until the Tennessee Valley Authority came into existence, the major corn producing areas were along the Tennessee and Big Sandy Rivers and their tributaries.

The change in corn land utilization brought about a decline in corn production for a few years. However, scientific farming, modern machinery, and cheap Tennessee Valley fertilizer have contributed greatly to the upland production of corn. In 1959, a total of 9,633 acres produced 276,610 bushels of corn.

Practically all the corn in the county is marketed indirectly through livestock. Small grain crops such as maize, oats and wheat are utilized to supplement corn for the feeding of livestock.

Table 1
Acreage of Selected Crops in Benton County, Tennessee for Selected Years

Crop	1949	1954	1959
Corn	14,554	16,160	9,633
Cotton	5,197	2,612	1,554
Oats	185	407	101
Wheat	220	773	496
Soybeans	2,834	2,803	1,785
Sweet Potatoes	29	10	4
Irish Potatoes	51	26	12
All Hay	12,457	3,150	2,448

Cotton. Although the acreage is small, cotton is the most important cash crop in Benton County. It is grown chiefly on the silt pan soils of the uplands. The total acreage has varied through the years, with a general upward trend until 1939, but since then a decided decrease in acreage. After a maximum of 7,586 acres in 1929, there was a great decrease in the next 15 years. A gradual increase in yields, however, has resulted from the more liberal use of commercial fertilizer and of higher-yielding varieties.

At one time, the county had three cotton gins, whereas now cotton must be marketed in neighboring counties. Allotted cotton acreage, unavailable farm labor,

and lack of cotton gins have caused many farmers to turn cotton land into pasture.

Hay. Census data, though not complete for all the census years, indicate a shift from grass hays and small grains cut for hay to legumes. The principal hay crops are lespedeza, red clover, timothy, soybean and small grains. The soybean hay is grown chiefly on the imperfectly and poorly drained bottom soils, whereas grass hay and lespedeza are grown on the upland soils. Perhaps a larger acreage in the future will be the result of a growing number of livestock on each farm.

Pasture. In 1940 there were 17,362 acres of plowable pasture in the county, an average of 9.4 acres to each farm. The plowable pasture is usually on the more eroded upland soils that are less desirable for crop production or on bottom lands that are uncertain crop-producing soils because of poor drainage. Woodland pasture is found on nearly every soil type, but most is on hilly or steep relief. Other pasture is more or less permanent in character and in most instances occupies soils that are unsuited for continued crop production because of poor drainage or severe erosion. Lespedeza is the principal pasture crop, and it is found also with timothy, redtop, orchard grass or rye grass. The permanent pastures usually consist of lespedeza, wild grasses, Bermuda grass, and some white and hop clover.

The upland soils are not naturally productive of nutritious grasses and clover, especially after they have been depleted by cropping. The quality and carrying capacity of pastures on these depleted upland soils are therefore low. In recent years a few high-yielding pastures have been developed on upland soils through better management.

Minor Crops. Small acreages of sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, sorghum, peas, and beans are grown on most farms, principally for home use, though sorghum is a cash crop for a few farmers. This crop should be of greater significance to farmers of the county.

A New Pattern of Agriculture

A new pattern of agricultural economy seems to be emerging. Today there are fewer farms than in 1954, but the average size of the farms has increased from 123 acres in 1954 to 137 acres in 1959. The total number of acres in farms has decreased from 128,056 in 1954 to 104,966 in 1959. The average value per acre has increased from $37.64 to $65.95 within the same time period.

During the above 5-year period, 23,000 acres went out of the "farm" classification. Also, approximately 26 percent of the farms in 1954 are no longer independent farm units. Perhaps this could partially be explained by the consolidation of farms into larger units. The remaining farms are larger by 11 per cent and valued more by 92 per cent.

The value of all farm products sold in 1954 was $935,031, whereas the 1959 value was $1,267,349. This shows an increase of $332,318 that can largely be credited to increased livestock farming. Livestock operations increased $202,748 with an increase of $102,362 in the value of cattle and $89,488 in the value of hogs. During the same period there was an increase of $101,944 in the value of all crops sold.

In order to meet increasing farm operation costs, many small farm owners are forced to seek additional income in local industries in Camden, the county seat. These farmers enjoy additional income from industry and at the same time maintain a small group of either cattle or hogs. In some instances, a part of the additional income is used to purchase feed for livestock.

The combination employment of agriculture-industry allows many small land owners to remain on the farm. Benton is not the only county in Tennessee with industrial workers that are actively engaged in some phase of agriculture. This practice is common in many areas that are in transition between agriclulture and manufacturing.

Conclusion

It is the opinion of the writer that in the near future 50 per cent of the present farm operators in the county will be seeking "full-time" industrial employment or, since the average age of the farmer is 52, obtaining social security. Consequently, farms will become larger in size and smaller in number with most operators concentrating on a livestock-feed economy.