Acadiana Agriculture Leads In Agri-Business

By BOB ANGERS JR.

Acadiana agriculture is rice on the west and cane on the east and cotton in the middle. It's self-sufficient in milk and a famous yard and some of the world's finest livestock and prolific vegetables and nursery stock can earn a man up to $3,500 an acre.

Acadia, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary and Vermilion form a cornucopia that is constantly improving and forever challenging with the introduction of new agricultural techniques that provide more abundance from the soil and the growth of an "agri-business" industry that creates new payrolls.

Four faculty members from the College of Agriculture at the University of Southwestern Louisiana provided a report for this special edition of The Daily Advertiser. They were Dr. Thomas Arceneaux, dean of the college; G. K. Riley, professor of horticulture and head of the plant industry department; Dr. E. K. James, professor of animal industry; and Dr. James Foret, professor of horticulture.

Arceneaux and James point out that at one time Acadiana imported milk, but this condition has changed to one of self-sufficiency and with surpluses going into the manufacturing of byproduct like cheese and powdered milk, and even a limited export. This has created agri-business for the area like the Bordier and Southwest Pure Milk plants in the Lafayette area, Pelican Creamery in New Iberia and Vermillion Co-op in Abbeville.

The dean underscores the progress that has been made in the major crop. Back in the 30's rice production came to about 12 barrels per acre but now the yield has about doubled. He attributes this to better varieties, better rotation, mechanization and such dramatic innovations as planting rice by airplane.

What the men in the rice industry have done is duplicated in the sugar belt in the east wing of Acadiana. Arceneaux sees a stable sugar industry plus the possibilities of new smoketree stocks that would use byproducts of cane, like bagasse.

The cattle industry has also recorded spectacular gains, and the agriculture dean says that the red tide were made after control of the tick.

Arceneaux lays great stress on the importance of higher yields per acre to offset the relative shortage and cost of land. He uses improved cotton technology and the opportunity in pork production and the nursery stock industry as illustrations.

Income $70 Million

When an agri-business show was held in Lafayette in 1964 figures compiled in the 7-parish Acadiana area by the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce showed that total farm income was nearly $70 million. The seven parishes had slightly more than a million and a half acres in farm land and the average farm size was 107 acres. There were 14,579 farms with 56,554 persons, for 14.7 per cent of the Acadiana population residing on the rural properties.

The university was a co-sponsor with the Lafayette Chamber of the agri-business show and James estimates an increase of about 10 per cent today over the 1964 figures.

A study of agriculture-related businesses in the seven parishes showed that 556 separate enterprises were providing jobs for 26,213 persons.

Acadiana beef, swine and poultry ventures resulted in auction barns, meat markets and slaughter houses, processing plants and hatcheries.

Dairying meant milk and byproduct processing plants and receiving facilities. Cotton brought about gins, compresses and oil mills. The rice industry had dryers and rice mills in operation. Cane growers were served by sugar mills.

Sweet potatoes meant auction houses, business for shippers and packers and processors. Okra had receiving, assembling and processing facilities and hot pepper led to processing plants.

Other Agri-businesses

In Acadiana included fertilizer manufacturing plants, feed and fertilizer and seed dealers, farm equipment manufacturers and dealers, feed mills, nurseries, airplane service, oil mills, wood veneer mills and insecticide plants. In addition labor employed on the farms excluding family labor amounted to 16,200. The agri-business show emphasized that "Agriculture is more than farming."

The USL dean and faculty members in the college are enthusiastic about the future opportunities. James says that a market is now provided in the Lafayette area for expanded hog production, but that local farmers have not taken full advantage of the opportunity.

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While corn is the basic grain for hog production, Arceneaux says that byproducts like rice and cotton seed meal offer some feeding opportunities.

Labor is a factor in South Louisiana agriculture including the dairy business, the vegetable and fruit and nursery fields. James says that in dairying the investment per cow is now about $1,500 and this means a man with a herd of 100 cows has an investment of $150,000 and his return may only be $7,500. The result has been fewer dairies and about the same number of cows but more production because of improved herds and better technology.

Agriculture is in a price squeeze, the head of the USL animal industry department says. The farmers can produce considerably more than they do. In order to meet the need for more efficient operations because of the squeeze, they have abandoned marginal lands and turned more and more to mechanization. Hand labor is not economical in the present situation and James believes that there is more need for more localized research. During the last five or six years research in the Gulf area has taken on its own complexion, he reveals.

Good livestock

James expresses optimism about the livestock industry here. He said that within 50 miles of Lafayette is some of the best concentrations of bleeding animals in the world. Examples are short horn cattle in Lafayette Parish, and Brahma and Charolais breeds in the Kaplan area and in Lafayette. Angus cattle found over the 7-parish area are the best in the world, he stated. Some of the animals have been purchased at a cost of $40,000 to $50,000 a head.

He doesn't know of another area that can boast of the quality of horses found in Acadiana. He said they included quarter horses that are worth from $500 to $1,000 and thoroughbreds that run from $5,000 to $10,000.

Foret reports about 300 acres in the 7-parish area planted in nursery stock. Growers realize $2,500 to $3,500 an acre, depending on the cost of plants and species. There are seven major wholesale growers, five of them graduates of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. They employ 65 to 150 fulltime people. He also reported about 30 fulltime garden centers and as many more seasonal garden centers that help supply outlets like supermarkets.

The nursery stock industry in the seven parishes of Acadiana is worth about two million dollars, but the professor of horticulture estimates that it could reach $5 to $10 million. In the language of the nursery stock producer and the horticulture instructor landscape plants are known as "ornamentals."

Grown on a commercial scale are azaleas, Japanese Yew, boxwood, yaupon, various genera of hollies, juniper, ligustrum and trees, primarily live oak. About 60 per cent to 70 per cent of the production is shipped out the (Continued on Page 14-A)
Agriculture

continued from Page 5-A

As has been the case, but Louisiana imports that much or more back in and Forret estimates the export-import business to be on the minus side dollar-wise for the state.

He said that the bedding plant business is pretty well dominated by a Kansas firm and believes that this area is missing out on a splendid economic opportunity. About 90 per cent of the little transplants grown in the United States are grown in greenhouses by first class horticulturists. The bedding plants constitute about 25 per cent of the gross retail sales in the areas where they were grown in greenhouses by first class horticulturists. The bedding plants constitute about 25 per cent of the gross retail sales in the New Orleans market. They include marigolds, pansies, calendula, coleous and zinnias.

The USL faculty member says that a college-trained student with one to five acres of land and initial capital of about $25,000 to $40,000 could net from $8,000 to $11,000 annually, on one acre of the land after the first year's operation.

His budget would include expenditures of about $4,000 to $6,000 for greenhouses, $3,000 for irrigation equipment, $9,000 to $10,000 worth of containers, $1,000 for insecticides and fertilizer, another $1,000 for seeds, and about $2,000 worth of miscellaneous impediments like peat moss and sand. He would also need a van and truck.

Foret says that a market exists for bedding plants.

Vegetable Opportunities

Riley came to the USL faculty in 1931 after four years with the experiment station at the University. He sees many more opportunities in Acadia for vegetables and other processing crops, like sweet potatoes. There is emphasis on the home fruit market for such items as figs, peaches, citrus and a limited amount of strawberries. He says that some farmers are changing to higher value crops and but for the problem of labor needed in hand harvesting even greater gains could be realized.

For the long range future Riley believes it is important to get more people interested in truck farming to meet the demands of a growing population. He adds that the production doesn't come from this area someone else will provide it.

Hot pepper offers opportunities for enlargement, and so do other high value crops.

The university-operated farm is a laboratory designed to accumulate knowledge for the students and the general public, says the head of the plant industry department. On a tract of between 10 and 20 acres various vegetable crops adaptable to the area are grown. These production unit labs provide testing for new varieties, a check of herbicides used in weed control and students can participate in a practical experience.

Riley, who is now teaching second generation students at the university, estimates that within the next 20 years the area can increase crops for processing and marketing by some 50 per cent. Among the trends he has noticed are a gradual movement of the sweet potato industry from Lafayette northward as far as Avoyelles. St. Landry remains a good sweet potato parish and Acadia is making gradual strides in growing of potatoes for fresh market and processing.

Vocational agriculture teachers in areas like Caren- cro, Henry and elsewhere are growing vegetables and bedding plants that are helping both the students and the community.

Arceneaux reveals that there are approximately 400 students in agriculture at USL, exclusive of home economics, and with a demand that can hardly be met for college-trained agriculturists. This search for talent comes from farms, agri-business, the teaching ranks, research firms and elsewhere.

Within the past year Future Farmer of America chapters have started to stress the plant sciences and this is expected to result in a new influx of students seeking education in agriculture. A special course for about 100 teachers of agriculture will be held at USL this summer.

The college of agriculture has five divisions: general agriculture, including agri-business; department of animal industry for all farm livestock; plant industry, including horticulture in all its phases and crops; agricultural engineering and vocational agricultural education.