Agriculture Advances Across Nation, State

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This past year was the centenary of the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture and of the Land-Grant College System, of which Louisiana State University is a part.

A basic fact of American agriculture during the past 100 years is that through the government's assistance in promoting agricultural development and research the United States farmer has been able to produce more than the economy can absorb.

According to a recent USDA report, the United States is the world's largest exporter of agricultural products, with 65 million of the nation's 321 million harvested acres going for export. In 1920 the volume and value of products set records, as $4.3 billion in farm products were exported.

Louisiana has always been one of the leading rice-producing states in the nation. In 1856 the state's cotton farmers produced almost five times this amount.

Louisiana's best agricultural success story, however, is in cattle. In 1867 Louisiana had 450,000 head of cattle, valued at $10,50 each for a total of $4,746,000. At the beginning of 1962 there were 1,838,000 head, averaging $107 each for a total of $194,526,000.

Recent sugar-cane industry figures show that Louisiana growers harvested about 300,000,000 bushels cane in 1961, with a value to them of $33 million. The sugar produced had a retail value of $155 million. State cane growers were estimated to have about $200 million invested in land and equipment. Replacement value of the state's sugar facilities was estimated at about $180 million.

Agricultural figures for Lafayette Parish over the past half century, as reported by the Agricultural Extension Service from records of the U.S. Department of Commerce, indicate that farming is still a big industry in the parish, that crop farms have been increasing in number but decreasing in size, and that much former crop land has been converted into pasture or forage crops for a fast-growing cattle industry in Lafayette.

In the early 1920's about 87 per cent of the parish's land was devoted to farming. Later records indicate about 78 per cent is farm land - some 141,672 acres. Some 76 per cent of the farmed land grew crops. By the 1940's the amount had dropped to 64 per cent by 1959, to 45.5 per cent.

Figures on farm land used for pastures, however, tell a different story. In the 1930's about 20 per cent was devoted to cattle farming. The 1940's saw the percentage jump to nearly 30; in 1959 the records report 45.8 per cent of the farm land dedicated to pasture.

An inspection of farm crop acreage shows all varieties have been decreasing except various kinds of hay. The rising hay acreage is understandable in view of the growing cattle industry in Lafayette Parish.

Between 1949 and 1959, the number of farms reporting land in cotton, corn and vegetables dipped from about 2,195 to about 1,550. The decrease during the same period for farms reporting land in sugar cane for sugar was from 320 to 73; in Irish potatoes from 552 to 295; in sweet potatoes 1,992 to 914; and in orchards from 1,151 to 20.

While some farmers have increased their crop acreage by taking over smaller tracts unable to operate individually, by others, the switch had been generally one of conversion to pasture or hay crops.

Examination of crop acreage records over three decades - 1939, 1949 and 1959 - shows reductions as follows: cotton, from 38,020 to 22,633 to 11,535; corn, from 41,839 to 17,219 to 13,666; sweet potatoes from 7,618 up to 12,072 and down to 5,908; Irish potatoes, from 418 to 177 to 92; sugar cane for sugar, 11,119 (five years previous the acreage had been 16,206) to 7,363 to 5,703.

The 1962 acreage in cotton is reported as 12,188; in sugar, 8,705; and in rice, 9,590. In Lafayette Parish rice has been a fluctuating crop: figures every half decade were as follows: 1919, 1,106; 1929, 7,363; 1939, 7,104; 1949, 3,188; and 1959, 8,103.

Though crop acreage has declined in Lafayette Parish, actual production has not been cut as drastically, by reason of increased yield per acre averages in most crops.

Cotton yields in the 1920's was only about 180 pounds per acre. In the 1940's it rose to about 365 pounds per acre. In 1954 a high 512 pounds per acre was recorded; 1959's average was 443.

From 1919 through 1954, bushels of corn per acre generally ran around 15; in 1959 the yield per acre had almost doubled, 27.4 bushels.

Rice has shown similar leaps in yields. Figures between 1929 and 1944 average about 10 barrels per acre. The 1949, 1954 and 1959 figures rise thus: 11.7, 15.8 and 21.2 barrels per acre.

Sugar cane yields have been increasing, but the 1959 figures showed a slight decline to 17.5 tons per acre. Every decade from 1919 to 1959, sugar yields as follows: 11.9, 12.1, 16.1 and 19.9. The 1954 yield was 21.2.

Although potato yields have been generally on the increase, the drastic decrease in acreage has made both sweet and Irish potato crops less important to the parish. For example, in 1919 Irish potato production in bushels was 26,112; in 1954, 70,657 bushels. By 1949 production was down to 11,763 bushels. A decade later the figure was down to 7,261.

The 1959 sweet potato figures were twice those of 1919, that is, 501,154 bushels. Five year statistics between 1953 and 1954 indicate the rise and fall of Lafayette Parish sweet potatoes: 679,631; 1,356,335; 197,067; and 918,550 bushels.

The growth of the dairy cat industry is reflected in the who milk gallons sold over the year. In the first three decades from 1919, production was already large; from 39,860 gallons to 202,025. By 1944 production more than doubled to 1,086,000. In 1949, 1954 and 1959, increases were still rapid: 1,114,122 to 799,114 to 2,366,854 gallons.

In 1949, farm income in the parish was $6,341,020, of which 50 per cent was from crops and 20 per cent from livestock and livestock products. In 1954, income was of $8,879,248, of which 66.5 per cent was from crops. By 1959, farm income was down to $6,861,248.

Percentage was far different, however. Crop income totaled of 66.5 per cent; livestock and livestock products, 33.5 per cent.

The average per farm total cash sales in Lafayette Parish was $130 in 1949, $3,032 in 1954 and $973 in 1959.