Lafayette Farms Decline, But Income Shows Increase

The number of farms in Lafayette Parish, as well as throughout Louisiana, is on the decline. On the face of that statement, it would appear that agriculture in the state is headed for lean times. Specifically, figures released this week from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that in 1969, there were 1,452 farms in Lafayette Parish. In the last previous census of agriculture (five years earlier, in 1964), the number of farms reported in the parish was 1,826. Louisiana five years ago had 62,466 farms. In 1969 it had only 42,269.

But that is only part of the story. Although there were fewer farms, agricultural income went up during those five years. Most significant is the value of all farm products sold in Lafayette Parish in 1969. This amounted to $9,903,144. Far from this almost $10-million figure is that of the value of 1964 farm products, which was $7,763,250. Value of all crops sold in 1969 was $5,280,457; in 1964, $4,583,552. Value of all livestock, poultry, and their products sold in 1969 was $4,621,612; in 1964, $3,173,700.

The report also shows that the average farm size in the parish is a far cry from 16 acres and a mule of long ago. In 1969 a farm averaged 93.9 acres and its value (land and buildings) was $61,064. This is somewhat lower from the rest of the state, where the average farm climbed from 166.7 acres in 1964 to 231.5 during the five-year span. Grouped by acreage, the largest classification in Louisiana was the 13,610 which had 10 to 49 acres. However, 1,185 had 1,000 to 1,999 acres and 536 had 2,000 acres or more.

The value of all agricultural products in 1969 was $496.4 million, almost $90 million more than in 1964. Of the 1969 total, crops, including nursery products and hay, accounted for $296 million, a gain of $17 million. Sales of livestock, poultry and their products amounted to $197 million in 1969, up $63 million from 1964.

An interesting aspect of the report is the extent to which the corporate structure is now being used by farm operators. Of the total farms in Lafayette Parish in 1969, 445 are reported as selling $2,500 or more of agricultural products in the year. Of this number, 14 are incorporated, including family farms.

As with everything else, operational costs went up. Hired farm labor in Louisiana was paid $59.5 million in 1969, up more than $13 million over 1964. In the same period, costs of contract labor, machine hire and custom work increased $5.5 million to a 1969 total of $16.7 million. The value of all farm machinery in use in 1969 was almost $430 million.

Farming is still not a young man's game. Farmers are younger, but not much. The average age of all operators in 1969 was 51.4 years, slightly younger than the 1964 average of 52.1. There were 627 operators under 25, but 6,431 were 85 or older.