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Wonderful Productiveness of Tillman County Soil

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by W.A.Conner, County Agent

Like the plains of Abraham and the rich valleys of Babylonia, the level plains of what is now Tillman County rendered their first agricultural service to humanity in the feeding of vast herds of cattle from the luxuriant growth of native grasses. Standing to the north, sere and bald with age, the Wichita mountains kept their patient, solemn watch across the unkept fields through creeping centuries. On the south rolled lazily the swirling saline waters of the Red river along its path of restless sand. The prairie dog barked from the plain where prairie dog life had often flourished and decayed. The prairie owl dozed in the mesquite bush and bison and antelope moved leisurely from turf to turf while the wind hissed through the dry grass. Such was the monotonous industrial history of our county while eastern empires rose and fell.

Even when the ever westward stream of immigration had crowded the Indian from his forest-sheltered home to the hunting grounds among the plains, our territory was hardly less solitary and undisturbed except for the diminishing tribes of fields and waters. But soon was civilization to plant her markets within easy reach for the hardy pioneer, who secured leases for large tracts of grass lands upon which was grazed thousands of cattle – a veritable forest of horns. It is well that this breed of cattle was somewhat spare in form and fleet of foot, as hundreds of miles lay between them and the nearest railroad station to which they were driven to be shipped north and east. The grazing lands of each individual or company was the “ranch” and was managed by the foreman and a sufficient number of cowboys to keep the cattle upon their own territory during the grazing season. In the winter they were usually left to roam at will till the spring “round up,” when all cattle were gathered up and sent to their respective

ranches, where the young were given the ranch brand and others cut out for the drive across the country to the "cow towns."

In this way a grade of cattle that would be almost a certain loss in our community today, gathered fortunes from the fertile plains for their owners and food for a large portion of the world's populations, till the last round up swept the plains and ended the first chapter in our agricultural history.

"The choosing of a home."

With this thought uppermost in the mind of a new type of pioneer, Tillman county's soil was hurriedly inspected for its fertility and physical conditions. All sod and mesquite, this task developed into an intensely interesting and exciting guessing game. Along the south and west some of the land that has since proved the most productive was shunned as being too light and sandy, and a thinner type of silt was chosen farther back which had a tight clay subsoil and consequently less resistance to drought. The mixed type coming between was greedily sought and up to this time was probably been in greatest demand. It was some years later when the Big Pasture on the east was thrown open to settlement, and although this was of a tighter silt and close clay subsoil, the first settlement having tapped the agricultural resources and revealed the hidden treasures, an energetic home-building citizenship almost immediately dotted the land with prosperous and attractive farmsteads.

It was with considerable hesitancy that some of our best farming lands were broke out, as the country was new and untried. But when either cotton, wheat, corn or alfalfa began to bring in many times as much income as the best native grass lands, and the nature of the climate and methods of farming best suited to the locality became better understood, doubt began to vanish and every man set about to work out a system of well-balanced diversified farming. These efforts met with wonderful success in a very few years. This is easily accounted for. We are located in that portion of the cotton belt so far north as not like to be infested by the cotton boll weevil, and where the climate is such that the grass usually

gives little trouble and expense through the growing season, yet our yields compare favorably with the heart of the cotton belt. With our mild winters, smooth fields and fertile soils, few sections surpass or even equal us in economic wheat production, while corn, kafir, milo, feterita and barley may be depended upon to furnish us an abundance of grain for home consumption and a large amount for export. This safe growing of an abundance of cheap feed of a choice variety is destined to make ours one of the leading live stock sections of the southwest. The mild, healthful climate and short winters peculiarly fit us for poultry raising and dairying, giving us an even distribution of farm labor as well as an even distribution of income.

According to Assessor W.B. Burks, Tillman county has 2,500 farms. These farms produced last year, according to very conservative estimate and actual count, the following:

Corn, 1,395,000 bushels, valued at \$697,000.

Wheat, 2,100,000 bushels, valued at \$2,100,000. Barley, 100,000 bushels, valued at \$50,000.

Oats, 600,000 bushels, valued at \$200,000.

Cotton, 22,000 bales, valued at \$1,350,000.

Alfalfa, 24,000 tons, valued at \$192,000.

Poultry and eggs, valued at \$130,000.

Butter, 322,000 pounds, \$50,000.

Cream, \$300,000.

Stock sold for slaughter, \$300,000.

Sorghum (sweet for forage), \$28,000.

Grain sorghums, including forage, \$322,000.

Broom corn, 70 tons, \$3,000.

Cotton seed, 11,000 tons, \$352,000.

Total, \$6,014,000.

This gives us an average of \$2,400 to the farm, besides many products used on the farm and not counted in, such as fruits and vegetables, dairy and poultry products, etc. It is not a bad record. This wheat crop would feed our present populations for 20 years and the cotton crop, though the smallest in several seasons, would clothe us for thirty years. These are the two main cash crops in our diversified system. It will be noted that these two cash crops bring in considerably more than half our total income, which shows that we are yet leaning toward the cash crop system.

While these figures show the great productiveness and possibilities of our county, we should not be misled by our present prosperous condition. No country has ever been so productive that its fertility could not be exploited. The soil is the child's heritage. If we rob the soil of its fertility today, we rob the child of its living tomorrow. We can no longer send him to a new frontier. Fortunately, however, Tillman county's soils are of such a nature that they may be made to improve from year to year, at the same time far excelling the present production. On most of the sandy loam skirting the river on the west and south, alfalfa can be grown as the legume in a soil-building rotation. Peanuts and peas are here at their best in the loose, moist soil and subsoil. In our adjacent mixed soil or heavy sandy loam we have some of the best alfalfa lands. Both these types can also usually be depended upon for profitable yields of corn and are naturally adapted to swine and cattle raising. On the east and north we have a tighter type of soil, most of which produces well and does not easily deteriorate. This type, like most Oklahoma soils, is easily improved by the addition of organic matter and the growing of a deep rooted legume to subsoil the clay beneath. A few trials indicate that sweet clover is the plant to perform this duty, as well as to supplant in a

measure the disappearing native grasses on the rougher pasture lands. This section should make a profitable dairy and poultry community.

With our pasture problem largely solved in wheat and barley for winter, sweet clover for spring and early summer and Sudan grass for late summer and fall, the way is paved for live stock farming and soil building, as well as the continuous production of profitable cash crops. This type of farming will give us greater stability in all lines, as an adverse year will not so seriously affect our income and, with the improved soil condition, adverse years are far less likely to come.

And the foundation is being laid for better livestock. Farmers are studying as never before the efficiency of the different classes of domestic animals. Heavier horses are more in demand than formerly, and practically nothing but registered sires are to be found in the county, and registered draft mares are eagerly sought and imported. This practice will, within a few years, practically eliminate all but high grade and pure bred horses. A radical change in the cattle industry is also sweeping over the community. Farmers who, a few years ago, endeavored to make a profit on ordinary low grade stuff for beef purposes, today find themselves face to face with the fact that the cost of keeping a cow for a year is about equal to or greater than the price of the low grade calf, with nothing left for profit. This has resulted in the importation of many excellent herds of shorthorns, Aberdeen Angus and Herefords. Such animals at little more expense for maintenance are paying a good margin of profit in the offspring when placed on the block, and even a better figure when sold for breeding purposes. These cattle will probably continue to be profitable until a change in economic conditions calls for ever greater efficiency in both man and beast, when, perhaps the dairy function of the animal will have to be taken into consideration. In some of the beef breeds this function is also worthy of note, while in others it is a negligible factor. However, our cattle are not all of the beef type. The dairy cow, always an exponent of progress, is championed by no small number of those of the dairy temperament who are willing to milk and give the special care necessary for

greatest efficiency of these breeds. This industry is suitable to a large number of our farms and people, because of its continuous profitable employment of farm labor, its soil building propensities and its linking in with poultry raising and pig feeding in the disposal of skim milk and economic use of grain.

Suppose that on every one of the 2,500 farms in Tillman county were kept ten good dairy cows. In skim milk and cream these cows should bring us \$100 a head, besides the calf. This would amount to two and a half million dollars for nearly half our last year's total agricultural production – just another way of marketing our cheap feed stuff – at the same time increasing our production in cash crops by increasing soil fertility, and also increasing our source of revenue along with other lines of animal industry. It but remains for us to “weed out” our inferior and unprofitable animals and build up herds that will be a credit to the community, and as cow testing associations are now being formed, it is hoped that this will soon be brought about. Occasionally, from some remote corner, yet comes the paralyzing report that an ambitious citizen has conceived the idea of creating a dual purpose animal by crossing the dairy and beef breeds, hoping to get the milking functions of one and the beefy conformation of the other in a happy combination in the offspring, but such reports are on the decrease.

In the solution of our problems of soil and farm organization other problems of great importance may be encountered. Many of these problems, such as the control of insect enemies and diseases of live stock, can never be solved through individual effort, but may be easily handled by cooperation. No other vocation responds more readily and favorably to a program of cooperation than does the great field of agriculture. Here man cannot live along. His fences are not a barrier to the many things that concern him and the community at large, but with the help of his neighbors such a barrier may be constructed.

Of course, we were not neighbors at first, but only a group of strangers from different sections, with different conditions, making up mere “settlements” in a strange land. But time has beaten down the old sod house and raised beautiful and comfortable buildings. About the farmstead here and there are marks of

earlier activities – of sacrifice and of joys – which foster sacred memories of the past and transform the old camping ground into a home. Our ideals and interests and those of the settler across the way have become very similar and we are neighbors now, sharing together our joys and misfortunes. Providence has given us a great country, with almost unlimited resources, and we have accepted our responsibility in supplying the necessities to a large number of less fortunate ones with our surplus.

Standing to the north, serene and bald with age, the Wichita mountains will keep their patient, solemn watch across the fields of ripening grain and grazing herds through prosperous centuries. On the south will roll lazily the swirling saline waters of the Red river, among its banks of fragrant green, while from the plain comes the hum of agricultural industries mingled with the songs of happiness; and the bell from the steeple in the clump of trees at the cross roads is calling the population of all creeds to unite in the Sabbath worship, while within the strong walls of the adjacent spacious structure is trained the rising generation in terms of their life's work. We look and cease to grieve for the primeval prairie and pronounce the industrial civilization good.

W.A. Conner, County Agent (1916)