

How Times Change Down on the Farm

By Ferdie J. Deering

Oklahoma was settled by Indian tribes who received land under treaties with the United States government and by people from other states who received land free just for settling on it.

Twenty-five years after statehood, there were more than 200,000 farms in the state, most of them were operated by tenant farmers who did not own the land they plowed.

These farmers and their families generally

An Analysis

lived in substandard houses, were poorly clothed and often subsisted on inadequate diets. They were poor before welfare became big business.

When the Depression hit, they already were in trouble because drouth and boll weevils had virtually wiped out their crops. Average incomes per farm dropped below \$1,000 per year — gross!

Naturally, they flocked to the cities looking for jobs. Okies bound for California became a national joke, but not all of those who went west were from Oklahoma. And many genuine Okies succeeded in town jobs because they knew more about working than quitting.

By the end of World War II, tenant farming and share cropping had pretty well disappeared from the Oklahoma scene. Mechanization made it possible for land owners and their sons returning from the military to farm more acres without tenants or hired labor.

They bought adjoining land and more machinery, so the number of farms declined until now there are only about one-third as many as at the peak. Probably

three-fourths of what Oklahoma grows is produced and sold by one-fourth of these farmers.

What's more, tenant farming is coming back. Details by states are unavailable, but there is no apparent reason to believe that Oklahoma is moving in a different direction from national trends.

In an analysis of published and unpublished data from the 1979 U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Finance Survey and the 1978 Census of Agriculture, USDA Economist Gene Wunderlich of the Economic Research Service has identified trends that reflect a changing agriculture system.

Nearly one million farmers — about 40 percent of the nation's total — now are tenant farmers, but they are not like tenant farmers of the past, who usually owned no land.

Seventy percent of today's tenant farmers studied owned at least some of the land they operated. They rented more than 400 million acres, nearly half of it for cash. Only one-third of the rental agreements called for crop share rents only.

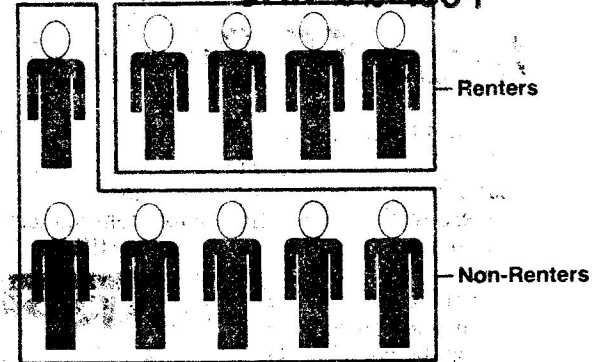
Farms operated by farmers who were both owners and tenants averaged four times as large as full-owner farms. Farmers who rented all of their land averaged twice the acreage of full-owner farms.

Younger farmers often started as tenants, renting as much land as they could operate, using their resources to buy machinery and meet production costs.

In Oklahoma, many

All Farmers

JAN 22 1984



Studies show that 70 percent of farm-land renters also rent land, and that 40 percent of all farmers rent some land to farm.

vocational agriculture students rent land and farm it while in high school. By the time they finish college, they may be well established, with sizable investments.

Agricultural observers have noted that while the number of farms (by definition) has leveled off in the state, traditional middle-sized "family farms" continue to decline in numbers. Increases have been occurring in numbers of larger and smaller farms.

Farms are classified as "small farms" if gross sales amount to less than \$20,000 annually. Such units often are operated by individuals with off-farm incomes. They live on tracts bought from retiring farmers and

sometimes rent additional land.

Middle-sized farm owners frequently expand both by buying and renting additional land in order to increase volume of production and to utilize expensive equipment more efficiently.