

Industry-Poor Towns: Grow Your Own

HERE IS a suggestion for Cyril and other towns that have been hit hard by the decline in petroleum industry activity: "Grow some industries of your own by converting what Oklahoma grows into consumer products."

Ed Apple, president of a Stephens County group promoting industrial development, said it well a few days ago: "Stephens County has prospered from underground wealth, but we must learn to make our wealth on top of the ground."

Oklahoma basically is an agricultural state, but raw commodities account for only one-third or less of the retail price of food.

When it comes to getting a fair share of the big money in food, Oklahoma was relatively about as well off at statehood as today. We still export practically everything we grow by the ton, at the lowest market prices. Others profit by what we grow.

A few days ago I listened while some of our state's agricultural leaders talked. When one commented that "agriculture might not be a

growth industry," others differed with him, but he raised a reasonable question. It might not be. It depends on whether we wake up to our potential opportunities.

Two years ago Oklahoma State University Agricultural Division published a study entitled "Oklahoma Agriculture 2000." It said: "A future challenge will be to coordinate production and market developments for new and expanded commodity sectors including additional processing of farm products in our state."

It mentioned that some of the most promising opportunities are for processing fruits, vegetables, nuts and forest products, and for selected farm supplies. There are a few such plants in eastern Oklahoma. Last month 17 Oklahoma City investors raised \$2 million to build a vegetable processing plant near Erick.

A bushel of wheat will make around 73 one pound loaves of white bread that will retail for \$40 or more. Wheat is our biggest crop and we sell nearly all of it in bulk for \$3 to \$4 a bushel.

We also ship out our peanuts by the ton and buy back peanut butter by the ounce. Peanut oil makes other products, too.

Oklahoma could use a modern, efficient meat packing plant, too. The industry has had a lot of troubles lately but it doesn't seem right that other states should get the gravy from all the beef we produce.

Hides from Oklahoma's millions of cattle are sold for about \$25 each, mainly to Japanese and European buyers. They tan the hides to make leather. Then they manufacture shoes for export to the United States, where they retail for \$50 to \$150 per pair.

Research scientists and the Extension Service at Oklahoma State University have done a great job of helping farmers to increase crop and livestock production. We need to do a comparable job of improving our share of processing and marketing what we grow.

When we start growing our own industries to make jobs for our young people, then we can prosper "above ground" and all around.