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# *Rosedale's Economic Development: Agricultural Aspects*

WILLIAM M. CASH

The agricultural history of the Rosedale area began with the Mississippi River. For countless centuries the River periodically overflowed its banks, leaving behind rich soil from its northern reaches. The flood plain created, known as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, or simply the Delta, was practically level and quite fertile, being composed of a mixture of clay, silt, and fine sand. The agricultural potential of this land was apparent even to the earliest settlers who, encouraged by the region's accessibility, began to move into the area in earnest in the 1840's and 1850's.

Coming largely from areas having cotton-culture traditions, these settlers began to clear the numerous trees and the great cane thickets which covered the virgin land. Then, they began to plant cotton. This was no small undertaking. Indeed, like most other Delta areas, Rosedale's agricultural potential was developed by substantial planter-landowners rather than by small yeoman farmers. Although

Dr. William M. Cash is a Professor of History and Chairman of the Department of History at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi. Dr. Cash was assisted in the writing of his chapter by Ray Branch and Charles Pearce.

some land was cleared before the Civil War, the 1870's began the greatest period of development by the planters and their tenants. As late as 1923 planters in the area were still talking about the relatively "new" land that remained to be developed.

Cotton was undisputedly king. In most cases it was the planters' only cash crop, and farmers devoted most of their time to its cultivation. The soil and climate were ideally suited to cotton culture. Even as late as 1922, after years of extensive use and despite the ravages of the boll weevil, area planters averaged 207 pounds of lint or almost half a bale per acre. By 1929 almost ninety-seven per cent of the cultivated land in the area was devoted to cotton. The nearness of the River served to increase cotton's primacy by making it unnecessary to devote much land to food crops. Truly, Rosedale was part of a cotton kingdom.

Second in importance among crops was corn. Yielding only sixteen bushels to the acre, it was grown with other forage crops chiefly as feed for work animals. Its relatively low yield per acre kept it from becoming a commercial companion to cotton.

One of the major problems of farming in the area was the intermittent flooding by the Mississippi River. In response, and largely through the efforts of Deltans themselves, the modern system of levees was gradually built. During the earliest period of settlement, the responsibility for levee construction and maintenance rested on the individual landowners along the River. Due to the tremendous expense involved, this duty was soon given to the local county boards of police, or supervisors. However, local government proved unequal to the task. A slight overflow in 1876 emphasized the need for an extensive improvement of the levees. Despite some noteworthy efforts, the boards were unable to prevent the great overflows of 1882-1884. In the earlier year the River flooded from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to the Gulf of Mexico, remaining at flood stage at New Orleans for ninety-one days.

It was evident that something needed to be done that was beyond the power of the local boards. In 1882 the Federal government initiated the policy of helping to repair major breaks in the levees, a policy that was to continue until the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, the need to prevent such breaks caused Delta

politicians and farmers to press for the passage of Federal legislation that would provide more substantial aid. Their efforts were rewarded in the Ransdell-Humphreys Flood Control Bill of 1917. After some initial gains as well as frustrations, this Bill was modified in 1928 by the Jadwin Plan, with its series of cutoffs in hope of preventing another inundation similar to the 1927 flood. In contrast with most other sections of the levees, those around Rosedale were exceptionally sound. Nevertheless, there were major breaks which forced residents to rely on this outside help.

The 1870's marked the beginning of a period of agricultural unrest in the United States that was to affect profoundly the national life in the early twentieth century. Dissatisfaction among farmers arose largely from the increased cost of farming, from the declining prices received for agricultural products due to overproduction, and from the apparent governmental favoritism toward industry at the expense of agricultural interests. Located in "innately and inherently an agricultural county," Rosedale was not exempt from the most obvious manifestations of this discontent. The Grange and the Farmers' Alliance were organized in the area and formed the foundation for a local Populist party in the 1890's. Although the Populists were politically stillborn in the face of tremendous opposition and traditional voting habits, they influenced many of the policies of the Mississippi Democratic party, helping to keep that organization vitally interested in the various causes of the farmer.

Farm labor was a constant source of anxiety for the planters. Traditionally, landowners in the region were dependent on black labor, first in the form of slaves and then as tenant sharecroppers. The high percentage of blacks in the total population, from 1880 to 1930 comprising between seventy-four and ninety per cent of the total population of the county, frightened the planters. In an effort to change this situation and in the belief that white workers would prove to be more efficient, many planters began a search for a source of white labor. Many believed that they had found this alternative with the immigration of Italian agricultural workers into the area in the early 1900's. However, the Italian worker's unwillingness to remain a tenant, coupled with the planters' inability to entice enough immigrants into the country to fill the need, soon destroyed the

planters' hopes. Until sufficient mechanical advances were made, the dependence on black labor remained.

One of the most difficult problems in Rosedale's cotton-growing history began with the advent of the boll weevil "scare." After appearing in Texas in 1892, the weevil traveled from forty to fifty miles a year in its journey toward the Delta. In 1907 it finally crossed into Mississippi at Natchez. Many farmers around Rosedale grew uneasy at the prospect of having their crops devastated as had occurred in the cotton fields in Texas, Louisiana, and lower Mississippi. As a result, new interest was kindled in a government rice-growing project on Lake Bolivar. After the first year's experiment returned a profit of seventy-two dollars an acre, many of the area farmers began to plant rice in addition to the traditional cotton. However, the "rice fever" failed to reach the proportions it did in neighboring regions of Arkansas, and a majority of planters continued to rely solely on cotton.

Some optimists believed that Rosedale would escape the heaviest infestations of the weevil because of Bolivar County's location. Earlier fears were somewhat allayed when the 1909 and 1910 crops proved to be exceptional. But in 1911 the weevil arrived in great numbers. The planters moved quickly to meet this new menace. Also, in an effort to increase their diminishing yields and to increase nitrogen in the soil, many were forced to switch from the traditional cottonseed meal fertilizer to the more expensive soda. Fortunately, at least in terms of the total impact of the destruction caused by the insect, the Delta suffered less than other regions of the state. Temperature and other modifying influences prevented a total loss of the crop. The damage, although great, still left the Delta farmers something on which to start rebuilding.

Area farmers discovered that the boll weevil was but one of their problems. Already suffering from the insect's damage, they were soon entrapped in the national depression of 1913-1914. Complicating the effect of the depression was the disruption of normal cotton markets in Europe, as well as the generally chaotic conditions prevalent on the continent. To make matters worse for the area, the Mississippi levee broke at Beulah in 1912 and threatened to do so again in the spring of 1913. Everything seemed to be working against the planters.

Many farmers began to realize that some of their problems could be alleviated through diversification. By increasing the acreages devoted to such crops as rice, hay, and corn, they would reduce cotton output. It was hoped this would increase the price. Moreover, the farmer would no longer be tied to a single crop but would be free to produce whatever was profitable. The movement toward diversification, however, entailed some risks. Many planters realized that their neighbors, having relied on cotton all of their lives, would seize the opportunity to increase their acreage. In addition, the resources of the farmers already were severely taxed by the depression in cotton prices, and many planters could not afford the additional investment. They were caught in a system they could not change.

The outbreak of World War I in Europe provided the background for an appeal to the Federal government for some type of aid. Since the cotton markets and trade were disrupted, continued planting would only result in a buildup of "carryover" which would depress prices. The government could solve the problem by loaning money for diversification or by buying the surplus production. Government response to these ideas was disappointing, since only token attention was paid to the farmers' pleas.

Early prospects for the 1916 crop were dismal. It was apparent that the boll weevil was causing extensive damage. Indeed, where the weevil had claimed 24.14 per cent of the state's yield per acre in 1914, it had risen to 24.68 in 1915 and would rise to 31.78 in 1916. Land prices were expected to fall drastically. Quite unexpectedly, however, the price of cotton began to rise due to the reopening of many European markets. Land rents in the area rose accordingly. Prosperity was rapidly returning. Farmers could then afford to be frustrated in attempts to buy additional land by the tight credit policy of the local banks which had adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude.

As time progressed, circumstances grew better. American entry into the War heralded an economic boom. The price of cotton doubled and subsequently tripled. Area land prices increased accordingly, rising from sixty and seventy-five dollars an acre to three hundred and three hundred and sixty-five dollars an acre. With new confidence many of the region's farmers began to find the money to

invest in lands. Indeed, it seemed as if the farmers' problems were solved.

The boom created by the War barely outlasted it. Farmers found themselves overextended in investments in land and equipment as the price of cotton began to decline. The first signs that something was wrong appeared in 1919. By 1920 the bottom had fallen out; the bubble burst; and the old problems were back as American agriculture entered another depression. This depression lasted only until 1921 when a general period of prosperity returned that was to last until 1925.

Past experience sobered many of the Rosedale farmers. They realized that only through some type of coordinated effort could their individual problems be solved. The major obstacle was the declining price of cotton. Observing this, they joined with other Delta farmers in a solution: the formation of the Staple Cotton Cooperative Association.

Essentially, the idea behind the formation of the Cooperative was a sound one. The object was to have farmers pool their cotton into one central organization that would then be able to negotiate directly with the mills from a position of strength. The building of bonded warehouses would enable the Association to control the amount of cotton on the market and thus keep the price stable. Initially the formal organization was to take place when the membership represented 200,000 bales. Members were to pledge their cotton crops to the Association until 1925. By the summer of 1921 this goal had been reached, and the Association was formally organized. Chartered in Tennessee and headquartered in Memphis, the Association was governed by twenty-one directors. Three were to come from bankers' organizations in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. The remaining eighteen were to be selected from six geographical districts, one in Arkansas, one in Tennessee, and four representing Mississippi counties.

Reaction to this event in Bolivar County was mixed. Several county banks had expressed reluctance to support the Association and a few had even threatened to cut off the credit of farmers who joined. Fortunately, the banks in Rosedale were almost unanimous on the need for the Association and readily endorsed its work. It was

not surprising, therefore, that a Rosedale resident, Walter Sillers, Sr., would become one of the first presidents of district six, the Bolivar County area.

The formation of the Staple Cotton Cooperative Association was not the end of the planter's problems. Although the organization was able to help somewhat in arranging direct sales to the mills, it was simply not large enough to affect the price of cotton in the domestic and foreign markets. Many members, believing that the Association was the answer to all of their problems, apparently refused to reduce their acreage, making the Association's task that much harder.

Meanwhile, the sharecropping or tenant system was becoming even more firmly entrenched in the area. In 1900, 82.4 per cent of the farms in the county had been worked by tenants. This percentage grew steadily until 1930 when it stood at 94 per cent. At that time, however, the exodus of many workers from the Delta, coupled with the Federal government's new interest in destroying the system, began to have an effect. By 1935 the percentage had dropped to 91.4.

Some planters continued to search for an alternative to the single-crop characteristic of their agriculture. A few experimented with pecans as a potential source of revenue. Most of these trees were imported from nurseries near the Mississippi Gulf Coast. By 1925 there were a reported 2,586 trees in the county, 2,471 of them of bearing age. Rice still offered hope, but the cost of the initial investment was prohibitive to most planters at the time. A majority of the planters still sought relief through political and semi-political channels. In 1926 Rosedale farmers were represented at conventions called at Jackson and Memphis to recommend action on the cotton situation. They were also represented at the organizational meeting of the Southwide Cotton Council in 1928. National proposals for relief also interested the area planters. A few planters around Rosedale endorsed the McNary-Haugen plan as early as 1925. This bill called for the establishment of a system of tariffs in order to regulate the domestic and foreign prices of American agricultural products. Despite President Coolidge's repeated vetoes of the plan, demand for some type of legislation of this nature steadily grew

throughout the South. Continued Southern pressure in Congress finally resulted in a tariff being placed on cotton in March, 1930.

The area's agricultural prospects were dim in 1930. The planters were still bound to the one-crop and tenant systems. Prices remained low. Men began leaving the farms for the cities in great numbers throughout the country. As the nation settled into the Great Depression, the already depressed planters could only expect greater difficulties. The New Deal and technological innovations, which in time would transform agriculture in the Delta, were not yet on the horizon. Moreover, in 1930 the Rosedale area experienced the worst drought in its history.

The continuing migration of farm laborers to the industrial centers and the necessity to reclaim land from the aftermath of flood waters prompted the introduction of tractors into the Lower Delta in 1925. Within five years Rosedale planters, too, were utilizing the tractor. Among the earliest tractor owners were Johnny Kirk, Walter Sillers, Jr., and Alfred Welshans. However, in the initial stages plantations as large as 3,000 acres had but a single tractor, and 60 or 70 tenant families with the accompanying workstock were still in evidence.

Notwithstanding the experimental designation assigned to the early models, tractors readily gained acceptance by the Rosedale farmers. One planter reported that he "had to build a fire under the tractor in the morning and hand crank it, but it was good." Likewise, he recalled the disadvantage of the lug-wheel tractor with the slanted cleats and the resulting poor traction in "seep-water spots." The introduction of the pneumatic tire in the early 1930's, and the increased horsepower required in breaking heavy soil, were primary considerations in promoting tractor usage. An additional factor abetting the adoption of the tractor was the financial arrangements offered by the International Harvester and John Deere Companies. Because traditional lending agencies were reluctant to finance farm machines, the implement companies liberalized credit and suspended down-payments to encourage and to permit machine purchases.

Tractors greatly altered the labor and crop patterns in Rosedale. The tractor's ability to reclaim from flood waters as much as twenty-five acres per day, and its capacity to reduce man-hour

requirements in breaking, preparing seedbed, and cultivating, prompted the movement from tenant families to a day-labor arrangement. One planter remarked that he quickly reduced from twenty hands to three tractor drivers, who had been instructed in tractor operations by the implement companies. The decrease in tenant families and in workstock modified crop patterns. Previous human food crops and forage crops were largely discontinued as the gasoline tractor became more popular. Indeed, by the late 1940's Rosedale farmers had basically completed the transition from mules to tractors.

Although the tractor solved the problems of land preparation and cultivation, labor was still needed in harvesting the cotton. Because of the high cost involved in hand-picked cotton and the low market receipts, International Harvester Company developed experimental mechanical pickers. Rosedale farmers observed that the early one-row pickers had difficulty in spindle doffing. Furthermore, they were apprehensive of the mechanical pickers' inclusion of trash in contrast to the "snow-white cotton" picked by hand. A significant improvement in the picker came with the introduction of rubber spindle doffers. Additionally, the transference of the task of lint cleaning from the picker to the ginning operations helped to promote widespread acceptance of the picker. By the late 1940's, pickers with their increased horsepower and improved performance were commonplace in Rosedale.

Ginning technology kept abreast of the mechanization. Hopson's Plantation in Clarksdale developed a lint cleaner to remove debris from the machine-harvested cotton. Gins progressed from the use of cordwood to coal, diesel, natural gas, and finally electricity in powering their operations. These technological improvements were reflected in the range of output from an early thirty bales to over one hundred bales per day.

Since Rosedale planters were utilizing tractors and mechanical pickers, extensive manual labor was required only for weed and grass control. Expensive day laborers chopping cotton were incompatible with the mechanized operations. Chemicals became an economic necessity in the total mechanization process. Although flame treatment was early attempted, it was generally unacceptable. Modern

chemicals were readily accepted in the early 1950's and demonstrated their effectiveness. However, a major obstacle was the highly toxic nature and potential danger to the personnel in the manual application of chemicals. A welcomed innovation was aerial spraying. Insecticides (specifically Calcium Arsenate) were among the first chemicals utilized. Even in the early 1930's, workers dispensed the insecticides with "shake sacks." A laborer rode a mule with a sack tied on each end of a stick. The bouncing of the mule shook the poison out on the cotton plants. Later, the airplane was used to apply this dust. Today, Rosedale farmers insist that chemicals are an absolute requirement in farming operations.

Crop diversification had long interested Rosedale farmers. Soybeans were grown as early as the 1920's but predominantly as a forage crop. These early beans were broadcast and were of the vine type, which created harvesting difficulties. Research by the Delta Experiment Station, and the subsequent improvement of the plant, permitted the planting in rows and machine combining. Implement companies responded with the necessary harvesting equipment. The commercial potential was recognized by Rosedale farmers, who by the 1950's had added a valuable second cash crop. Contemporary farmers proudly report yields as high as fifty bushels per acre and substantial income from bean production.

A further crop diversification was the growing of rice. Early experiments with rice had alerted the farmers to the necessity of expensive new equipment, extensive land preparation, complicated water arrangements, difficulty in combining, and especially control of grass. Thus, only a few were initially involved in the risky adventure. However, by the 1920's, some farmers noted that rice could be produced on soils that were considered unsuited for cotton production. Likewise, they observed that Layne Central Company could assist with the water arrangements, that combines had been developed by the implement companies, and that chemicals could effectively control the grass. Shortly, rice production increased to the extent that the Rosedale Rice and Grain Cooperative was formed to provide drying and storage facilities. Rosedale farmers state that the early production of forty bushels per acre now approximates the yield

of one hundred bushels per acre. They further emphasize their commercial involvement in rice through their membership in the Mississippi Rice Growers Association, which among other services assists in marketing the production.

The traditional picture of the Delta farmer as a simple little fellow following a mule is not at all descriptive of today's Rosedale farmer. Instead, he is a combination of businessman, scientist, and marketing expert among the many hats which he must wear. Above A, he is adaptable, as demonstrated by this transition from the daylight-to-dark mule operation to air-conditioned tractors; from a one-crop production to three-crop diversification; from a "shake sack" application to aerial spraying; and from a combine that was "a bunch of tin to sure enough machines." The Rosedale farmer has experienced economic depressions, bad weather, and shifting government policies. Yet he has accepted the challenges with an optimistic determination. The supreme compliment perhaps comes from a city dweller who states that "we appreciate him" and describes him as "a darn good guy."