

Webb's Great Frontier And Red River Valley Agriculture

by Robert T. Smith

Agriculture was, and is, an important aspect of life in the watershed of the Red River. The Red River collects water from parts of eight states and forms a region remarkable in the diversity of its agricultural activity. Walter Prescott Webb's Great Frontier thesis is a useful tool to use in examining what changes have taken place in agriculture in that region in 175 years since western man first came in large numbers to its eastern fringe. Farming in the eastern half of the region had established itself by the beginning of the Civil War, and if Webb's hypothesis is correct, its characteristics were those of what Webb called the Boom Era. For a variety of reasons, agriculture did not come to the western half of the region until the beginning of the twentieth century, just as Webb's Great Frontier was closing and western society was, to use Webb's word, "recrystalizing." The institutions of this new society would have characteristics significantly different from those of the Boom Era.

This paper will examine agriculture in the eastern half of the region before the Civil War to see if it reflected the characteristics Webb associated with the Boom Era. It will examine agriculture as it exists in the western half of the region in the mid-twentieth century to see if it reflects the characteristics Webb associated with the post-Boom Era. Finally, it will focus on agriculture in the eastern half of the region to see how or if it has adjusted to changes which had taken place since the end of the Boom Era. From this exercise it should be possible to make some general conclusions about the evolution of farming the region.

The Red River has its origins far out on the high plains of New Mexico and southeastern Colorado. By any normal definition these dry washes certainly cannot yet be called rivers or even streams. They rush with water when heavy rains come, but turn to dust and gravel almost as soon as the water stops falling from the sky. These small streambeds begin to come together to delineate a major watershed in the west Texas panhandle. The North Fork, the Salt Fork, and the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River are now identifiable. There is still, however, little or no water in this system. The forks gradually come together to form the Oklahoma-Texas border and it is only about

halfway along that border that the river begins to show a regular trickle of water. By the time it reaches Shreveport it is carrying significant amounts of water, and from there to its confluence with the Mississippi it rolls through countryside identical to much of the rest of the southeastern United States.

Rivers have been traditionally looked upon as regional unifiers; this is not the case with the Red River. It is navigable only a short way up river and does not form a transportation backbone for its watershed. In fact, it really does not carry much water at all up river from Shreveport; and therefore is of little value in providing water for irrigation and other purposes. This same lack of water makes it useless as a source of hydro-electric power as well. What, then, is the value of the Red River watershed as a unit of study? From one point of view, its prime value lies in the fact that the watershed was settled over a span of time which encompassed the end of one historical era and the beginning of another.

Walter Prescott Webb was perhaps able to gain the insight he acquired to advance his Great Frontier thesis for the same reason; he grew to manhood on precisely that same seam of history. In *The Great Frontier* Webb argued that the discovery of new lands about 1500 ushered in a worldwide economic boom. With that boom came institutions suited to a world of plenty. More important perhaps, Webb noted that that era began to end sometime in the late nineteenth century; and in fact, by the outbreak of World War I, western civilization was "recrystallizing" into a post-Boom Era of economic shortages. Webb hypothesized that the new post-Boom Era would have many of the characteristics of the pre-Boom world before 1500. But then, what were the characteristics of these two eras?

The Boom Era was an exciting time. The individual was supreme. There was always the next county or valley to go on to when things got too crowded. It was a period of general economic well being. When times did get difficult, the Frontier came to the rescue. Collective effort was rare and relied upon only for very monumental undertakings. Rugged individualism, freedom, cantankerousness were all marks of the Boom Era. Ray Allen Billington describes the frontiersmen, the archtypes of this era, perfectly as ". . . arrogant, foolhardy, cocksure, lion-hearted, muscle-proud, bragging egotists . . ." The post-Boom Era was going to demand significantly different institutions. One of the things to go first would be the old type individual. The post-Boom Era would require collective effort, not rugged individualism. There would be greater specialization of roles and less room for mistakes. The greatest welfare program the world had ever seen, the freelands beyond the line of settlement were gone and those who failed could not simply move on to new and frequently greener pastures. To succeed in a world of

economic shortages, men would have to work together. The institutions of the new society would reflect this imperative.

How best can successful adaptation be measured? Economic well being is easily quantified and therefore is, if not the best, the most easily used indicator of success. Those who are economically successful can be defined as being well adapted to the struggle for survival in the environment in which they find themselves. The rugged individualist should prosper on the frontier, the person who is well suited to collective activity should prosper in the post-Boom world; the rugged individualist should find it difficult going in that same post-Boom society. Agriculture is the principal economic activity in the watershed of the Red River and therefore, by examining the economic viability of that activity in various parts of the watershed, at different times in history, it should be possible to determine the validity of these generalizations.

The lower reaches of the Red River run through the center of the state of Louisiana, cutting diagonally from the extreme north-west corner to the south-central point where the Red empties into the Mississippi. It is this great Y between the Red and Mississippi where the most profitable agricultural enterprise has been undertaken.² The region between the arms of the Y spills across northern Louisiana into southern Arkansas and was limited on the west by Indian territory and the drainage of the Sabine River during most of the nineteenth century. When the white man first came into the region in large numbers in the early nineteenth century, it was a land of deep forests and rich bottom land along the principal rivers, the Red and its tributary, the Ouichita. It was similar to other rolling hill regions of the southeastern United States the pioneer settlers had encountered earlier.³

Settlement was slow. By 1812 only a small strip of land on either side of the Red had been cleared for agriculture.⁴ It reached just beyond Natchitoches in 1820.⁵ Further settlement awaited Indian removal and the clearing of the river of snags to allow navigation, eventually as far as Shreveport. Once this was accomplished the bottomland was quickly converted to plantation agriculture.⁶ Pressure from yeomen settlers soon had the rest of the region covered with subsistence frontier farms often scratching out an existence on what would be otherwise marginal land.⁷ By 1850, the region was virtually settled.⁸ Plantation owning slaveholders controlled the rich bottom land and yeomen farmers were scattered throughout the rest of the region.

In 1860, boom era institutions clearly dominated the region. Relatively well-off family farms predominated. The New Frontiers in Oregon, Texas, and California had drawn off excess people and population density was stable at thirty to forty people per square mile.⁹ Some of the large plantations were well over a thousand acres in size, but most farms were less than 160 acres.¹⁰ There were large

amounts of unimproved land on most farms and figures indicate that a ratio of three to one in favor of unimproved land was normal. It was an individual's paradise. With his family and a few draft animals the frontier farmer could be completely independent. He could feed his family from the crops he raised and the game he killed on his own land. He was beholden to no man and epitomized the rugged pioneer of song and story.

With the exception of the plantations there was a conspicuous absence of collective activity. The plantations were able to survive only because of the institution of slavery. Slavery provided a source of cheap labor. Moreover, because of the alien nature of the slave population, the slaves were not indoctrinated with the cult of individualism which characterized western civilization in the Boom Era. In fact, one could probably make a relatively strong case that it was the effort to indoctrinate the slaves with the cult of the individual which eventually led to the collapse of the institution of slavery altogether.

In almost every way, the little world of the lower Red River watershed as of 1860 reflected Webb's picture of life in the Boom Era. The people who lived there were classical frontier types. They were able to remain economically solvent because they could pick and choose the best land. Excess population or excess competition never was a real problem because of the seemingly ever present frontier. Little did they realize that in less than two generations their world would no longer exist. In the face of a world of shortages, a new breed of farmers frequently operating on marginal lands would band together and pool their resources in order to achieve more efficient operation and conserve scarce resources. Their methods would suit the new post-Boom world and they would prosper to such an extent that the pioneer farmers of the lower Red River would no longer be able to compete, and locked into old ways of doing things they would be unable to change. The result would be economic deprivation. But to see the development of this new breed of farm it is necessary to shift to the dry lands of the west Texas Panhandle.

The western end of the Red River basin was not settled until the Boom Era had ended. Great portions of west Texas, the place where the Red begins to take shape, was virtually unpopulated in 1890.¹² The presence of better lands made agricultural settlement of the Great Plains unnecessary until population pressures forced their utilization. Through much of the nineteenth century the Great Plains, of which the western watershed of the Red River is a part, was looked on as a desert fit only for the roaming Plains Indians. In the 1880's land speculators, disguised as cattlemen, moved onto the plains and into west Texas in particular, where they established gigantic ranches like the XIT and the Matador. The open range cattle industry could survive only as long as there were great surpluses of grass land and as pressures

increased in the early 1900's to convert the land to more profitable agricultural use, the real livestock growers switched to more profitable methods of animal husbandry. The land speculators, on the other hand, threw off their disguises and made a fortune.

In the early years of agricultural activity in the upper Red River Valley, there were, of course, some attempts to reestablish Boom Era institutions. They were never successful. The marginal lands of the high plains simply could not support farming organized as it had been in the Boom Era. The individual did not possess the resources to survive in such a hostile environment. Especially critical was capital reserve which individuals just did not have. The Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the 1930's finished the frontier farmer on the Great Plains. The chronicles of that sad story are numerous and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Nelson Algren's *Walk on the Wildside* are merely representative. The excess population was drained off to California, or the cities, or into the petroleum industry. The way was clear to reconstitute the agrisystem in the upper Red River Valley along collective lines.

The upper Red River Valley is today one vast winter wheat range, with some cattle grazing activity interspersed.¹³ Collective activity predominates throughout the region. Huge sections of west Texas are irrigated and irrigation is an activity which by its very nature demands collective effort. In order to farm efficiently it is necessary to operate very large farms, which in turn require large expenditures for machinery, extensive use of managers and hired farm workers.¹⁴ Much of the actual work which is done on these farms is machine hired custom and contract in nature.¹⁵ In effect, the farmer in the upper Red River Valley today has become a manager of a corporation engaged in farming activities. He keeps books, negotiates for services, buys and sells, but does little of what might be called traditional farming. What he does do is of secondary importance to his principal function of managing the corporation for those who have invested in it. Participants in the corporate activity may include other members of his own family or it may include private investors.

The success of this new type of farming is underscored by the economic well being of the upper Red River Valley. The farms of the region are of very high value when compared to other regions.¹⁶ The per capita income in west Texas compares favorably with well-off urban areas in other sections of the United States. Several counties in west Texas have among the highest family income average in the United States.¹⁷ Aircraft and modern roads have solved what was perhaps their greatest cultural problem, the sparseness of population, and so they now are able to live at a level comparable to management personnel in urban based corporations.

Time has not dealt kindly with pioneer farmers who populated the lower Red River Valley. Their farming operations could not com-

pete effectively with the modern corporate efforts which developed in the twentieth century. Those who remained found it impossible to change the way they had operated in the Boom Era. As the population grew, so did economic pressures, but there was no more free land to reduce that pressure. The people could move to the cities but that would entail adopting a collective way of life which would be difficult for them to accept. The region was not suited to large scale farming operations and today it is primarily a forest products region. Still, people hang on to a way of life there which is no longer realistic in Webb's post-Boom Era. Their conditions are reflected in the economic collapse of the region. Farms remain small and are still owned by the man who farms them.¹⁸ The inability to change has trapped the frontier farmers of the lower Red River into a way of life which is hopelessly out of date.

Life for the small farmer in the lower Red River Valley is not very good. His farm is small and is worth little.¹⁹ He cannot borrow enough money on it to benefit him and neither can he afford to sell it. Cooperative effort is alien to his nature and it is only through such efforts that he is likely to get enough capital to significantly alter his circumstances. Practically the whole eastern third of the Red River drainage had a median family income as of 1959 of \$4,184 or below. The per capita income is equally low.²⁰ With the exception of the city of Shreveport, there is not a single economic bright spot in the entire lower Red River Valley.

In summary, an examination of the two extremes of the Red River Valley reveals some pertinent facts. First: When the lower drainage was settled in the last days of what Webb called the Boom Era, the rugged individualist was rewarded because of his hard work and willingness to go it alone. Second: When the upper drainage was settled, the post-Boom Era had already set in and only those who were able to engage in collective activity were able to prosper. Third: The farmer in the lower drainage in the post-Boom Era has suffered in a variety of ways because of his inability to alter well established institutions to fit new conditions. Farms which were economically viable in a frontier environment were no longer so in a collective society. If conclusions can be drawn from so tentative a study as this, it is that corporate effort is the wave of the future in agriculture and those that resist are doomed to financial insolvency and will eventually find themselves out of the agribusiness altogether.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion, A History of the American Frontier*, (4th ed.; New York: Macmillan Co., 1974), p. 406.
2. Roger Wallace Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1939), p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. Billington, *Westward Expansion*, p. 394.
5. U.S., Department of the Interior, *The National Atlas of the United States of America* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 136. Cited hereafter as *National Atlas*.

6. Shugg, *Origins*, p. 80.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
8. *National Atlas.*, p. 138.
9. Billington, *Westward Expansion*, p. 395.
10. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860. Agriculture*, p. 202. Cited hereafter as *Census: 1860, Agriculture*.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *National Atlas*, p. 139.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 261.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 262, 263.

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