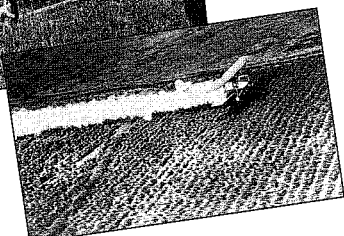
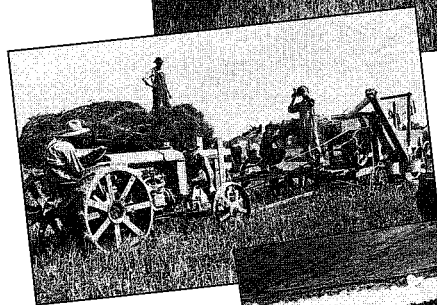
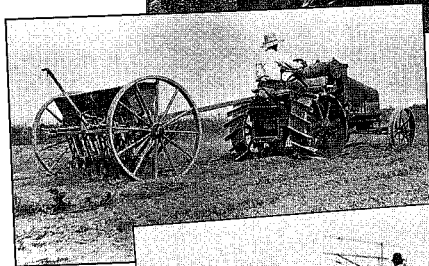
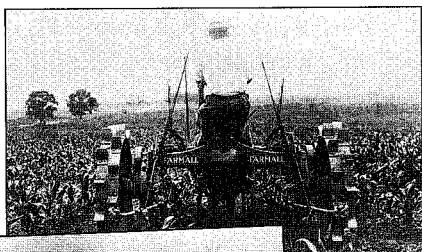


Through the Great Depression and New Deal: Effects of the 1930s on Tar Heel agriculture



Technology was beginning to invade some parts of the state during the 1920s—row-crop tractors (below, on top), grain drills (second down) for seeding grain crops, reapers (third down) and threshers (fourth down) for harvesting grain crops, even aerial crop dusters (bottom). Jane S. McKimmon and her corps of home demonstration agents, along with cooperative extension agents of the Agricultural Extension Service and individuals like Clarence Poe (see the sidebar on page 22), all helped explain and promote these new technologies. But the farmers of North Carolina and much of the rural South were struggling through an agricultural depression. And most simply had no money to spend on buying improved machinery or resources to waste on trying up-to-date practices.



In the 1920s, farming was still the backbone of North Carolina's economy. Members of families still worked the land together, tilling soil, sowing seeds, tending plants, and harvesting crops. A mule and a simple plow assisted with much of the work. Familiar crops included tobacco, corn, sweet potatoes, cotton, peanuts, and wheat.

But many of the state's white farmers and most of its black farmers did not own the land they worked or the equipment they used. Following practices that had started after the Civil War (1861–1865), most of them were tenant farmers or sharecroppers who concentrated all their energies on growing only one or two cash crops.

While tenant farmers had some freedom (as long as their rents got paid), many “croppers” could direct their efforts toward other activities only if the landowner allowed. They could not, for example, have a garden for vegetables, a cow for milk, some chickens for eggs, or even a few pigs for meat.

“We have never owned a horse or a mule or a cow or any tools or anything to ride in. Of course, we ain't never owned a house, and we never will,” remembered Mrs. Jim Jeffcoat, who was the wife of a sharecropper.

Though much of the nation was celebrating prosperity after World War I (1914–1918), North Carolina and much of the rural South were struggling through an agricultural depression in the 1920s. Most tenants and croppers, as well as farmers in general, were living in unpainted frame houses. Very few had a sanitary privy, and even fewer had running water, a telephone, or a car. Almost none had electricity.

Still, as hard as this life was for them, it was going to get harder by the 1930s.

In general, across North Carolina in the 1920s, farmers labored much as they had since the end of the Civil War in 1865. They still raised corn, sweet potatoes, and peanuts—the state's major food crops—and produced tobacco and cotton—its major cash crops. Many still did not own the land they farmed—one-third of the white farmers and two-thirds of the black farmers were tenant farmers or sharecroppers.

Definitions, pages 21–27

In this case, a **boll** is the pod of a cotton plant, the part that opens to reveal the cotton.

A **campaign** is a thought-out, planned effort designed to achieve a certain goal.

Canning is a way of storing certain types of fruits and vegetables for later use. These “canned” goods are usually sealed in airtight glass jars and stored in a cool, dark place.

Cash crops are crops that are grown to sell at a market and provide an income, or a profit, for the grower.

In this case, **chopped** is a slang term for hoeing.

Commodities are products or services that can be bought, sold, or traded.

In this case, a **depression** is a reduction in business activity. The signals of a depression are unusually low production, widespread unemployment, and a slowdown in buying and spending. The United States has had many depressions over the years, but the Great Depression, or “the Depression,” of 1929 to 1942 was particularly severe and affected the whole world.

In this case, **displaced people** are forced out or driven away from their homes and property.

Definitions (continued)

To diversify is to move toward variety—to raise many different crops, for example, instead of concentrating on one or two.

An economy is a system of producing goods and employing people.

In this case, excesses are oversupplies or overabundances of products—more than are needed, even more than could possibly be used. These excesses resulted because farmers kept growing crops, but people were using and buying less and less.

A federal government is a central government that controls and coordinates the actions of several smaller but independent governments. In the present-day United States, for example, the federal government in Washington, D.C., works with the governments of the fifty states.

In this case, feed is food for domesticated livestock.

Frame houses are houses that are finished with wooden boards on the outside.

Glut is another word for an excess or an oversupply.

Lye is a dangerous liquid or solid that was once used to clean everything from walls to clothes to dirty ears.

The laws of supply and demand rule free-market economies like the one in the United States. These “laws” primarily work to balance the quantity of goods that can be sold at various prices with the quantity of goods that users wish to (or can) buy at different prices.

Sarah Dixon is a program assistant, volunteer, and former assistant to the volunteer coordinator at the Museum of History.

The portrait of Poe is from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History.

Mr. Clarence Poe

by Sarah Dixon

Henry Belk, an editor in Goldsboro, once said, “If one were asked to name the North Carolinian who has made the greatest contribution to progress and . . . education and health and improved living, most would name [Clarence] Poe.”

Clarence Hamilton Poe was born in Chatham County in 1881. At the age of sixteen, he moved to Raleigh and began work as associate editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, a weekly newspaper for farmers. He became its editor in 1899 and for the next sixty-five years, until his death in 1964, influenced millions of farmers throughout the South.

When Poe began his work at the turn of the 1900s, many farmers were still using mules for power. They were still devoting themselves and their family members to growing single crops, usually cotton or tobacco, that they could harvest and sell for a profit. Few were raising any livestock and many did not grow their own food. Instead, they bought everything they needed on credit, which they hoped to repay when their crops were harvested and sold. Many farmers, though, particularly tenant farmers and sharecroppers, were falling into debt and staying in debt by following these all-too-common practices.

At the age of twenty-one, Clarence Poe had already been editor of *Progressive Farmer* for three years. During the Great Depression, he served on several national committees, including some for government programs that led to production controls and price supports.



Poe was an agricultural reformer. He encouraged farmers to plant crops other than cotton and tobacco. He advised them to raise food crops and livestock so they could feed themselves and reduce their debts. Poe tried to get them to learn new agricultural methods and to use modern equipment. He also encouraged farmers to work together to improve their situations and helped establish cooperatives and organizations for farmers.

When Poe died at age eighty-three, he was writing his eighth book, as well as his weekly column for the *Progressive Farmer*. His influence had helped change agriculture in North Carolina and made living and working conditions better for the state's farmers, farm families, and farmworkers.



The Great Depression hits

History books suggest many possible causes for the stock market crash of late October 1929 as well as the costly, lingering results of the Great Depression (1929–1942) that followed. They tell stories about how the workers of the nation lost their jobs and their savings and how the richest families suddenly lost “everything.”

In North Carolina, when the Great Depression caused banks to be closed and led many of the state's businesses to fail, it hit hard the people who were already struggling and had practically nothing in the first place: farmers.

As cash became more and more scarce, farm prices fell and farmers earned less and less from the sale of their harvested crops. As landowning farmers earned less, tenant farmers and sharecroppers received less for their work, as well. Without money, food supplies dwindled, and worn, patched clothes deteriorated into rags. Everyday needs were ignored and occasional wants had to be forgotten.

What truly affected the state's farmers was the national economy, or rather, the lack of a national economy. In particular, what hurt them was the fact that they could

hardly exist on their income—the cash they received for selling the agricultural commodities they worked so hard to provide.

Supply and demand

At this time, prices for commodities were based solely on the economic laws of supply and demand. Supply, in this case, is basically the amount of a commodity that a farmer can grow to sell. Demand, in this case, is basically the amount of a commodity that people want to buy—and the amount they can afford to buy.

Say, for example, a farmer had raised a crop of peanuts to sell. After harvesting his crop, he would take his supply of peanuts to a market to sell it. The farmer would naturally want to sell his peanuts for a price that would recover his planting costs, his equipment costs, and his labor costs. He would also want to add in an amount for a profit.

At the market, a buyer would make an offer to buy the farmer's supply of peanuts. His offer would be based on the demand for peanuts—the number of peanuts he could use or the amount he thought he could resell.

During the Great Depression, though, demands for commodities sometimes did not exist because most people did not have

Cotton Production and Supply, 1920–1940: United States and World

Season	Estimated United States figures				Estimated world figures		
(ending July 31)	Average price (cents)	Total produced (million bales)	Total consumed (million bales)	Oversupply carried over (million bales)	Total produced (million bales)	Total consumed (million bales)	Oversupply carried over (million bales)
1920–1921	15.8	13.271	4.893	6.534	19.665	17.151	11.752
1921–1922	16.9	7.978	5.910	2.832	15.334	19.778	15.169
1922–1923	22.9	9.729	6.666	2.088	17.926	21.337	10.494
1923–1924	28.7	10.171	5.681	1.555	19.036	19.982	7.571
1924–1925	22.9	13.639	6.193	1.610	23.836	22.642	6.614
1925–1926	19.6	16.123	6.456	3.543	26.678	23.930	7.948
1926–1927	12.5	17.755	7.190	3.762	27.819	25.869	10.473
1927–1928	20.2	12.783	6.834	2.536	23.426	25.285	12.654
1928–1929	18.0	14.297	7.091	2.312	25.628	25.782	10.535
1929–1930	16.8	14.548	6.106	4.530	26.653	24.878	10.541
1930–1931	9.5	13.756	5.263	6.370	25.304	22.402	11.892
1931–1932	5.7	16.629	4.866	9.678	26.329	22.896	14.808
1932–1933	6.5	12.710	6.137	8.165	23.634	24.986	18.336
1933–1934	10.3	12.664	5.700	7.744	26.124	25.324	17.116
1934–1935	12.4	9.472	5.361	7.208	22.909	25.198	17.540
1935–1936	11.1	10.420	6.351	5.409	26.790	27.627	15.072
1936–1937	12.3	12.141	7.950	4.499	30.119	30.820	13.649
1937–1938	8.4	18.252	5.748	11.533	35.370	27.050	13.695
1938–1939	8.6	11.623	6.858	13.033	28.221	27.748	22.702
1939–1940	9.1	11.376	7.746	10.596	27.875	28.986	21.638

This chart helps to show what happened to cotton prices in the 1930s and 1940s. Study the amounts produced (the supply) and the amounts consumed (the demand) in the United States. Do you see how those figures led to the amount of oversupply? Consumers were not buying as much cotton as farmers were producing. Study the effects of that oversupply on prices for cotton. Notice that, in general, as the oversupply grows, prices drop, and as the oversupply drops, prices rise. That is one way that supply and demand

affect prices. Now, look at the world figures—do you see how those amounts only made the problems larger? In the 1920s, North Carolina farmers needed a crop that guaranteed them a profit. Can you see why cotton was one of the crops they turned to? Prices were very high year after year. But, because so many farmers were raising so much, prices fell, and farmers lost money on cotton, too. What happened after farmers were paid to destroy their cotton crops in 1933?

enough money to buy things. Even when money was available and a small demand did exist, **excesses**, or **oversupplies**, often forced farmers to sell their crops for less money than they had spent to raise them.

Farmers had no real choices if they could not sell their products—they needed the money! They could take their supply back home and return to try again another day. Or they could accept the best price that a buyer offered—even if that price was lower than the expenses the farmer had already paid out.

The Depression lingers

When prices plunged during the Great Depression, farmers received very little money for most crops they sold. They needed a crop to raise and harvest that would promise them a profit. One crop they turned to was cotton, which had made money during and after World War I and throughout most of the 1920s. Farmers who had never planted cotton joined those who had been planting it for years. They desperately hoped to cash in on the previous success of the crop.

Unfortunately, large and successful harvests in the 1920s had gradually created a **glut**, or an oversupply—too much cotton. In 1930,

that excess supply combined with the worsening condition of the national economy to lower demand for the new harvests of cotton. Because demand was lower, prices fell.

From an average price as high as about 30¢ per pound in most southern markets in 1923, the price of cotton had fallen to 6¢ in 1932. By this time, the nation was in the depths of the Depression, and other North Carolina crops were suffering in the same way.

From 1929 to 1932, tobacco prices had fallen from 18.5¢ to 12¢ a pound; corn, from \$1.00 to 45¢ per bushel; wheat, from \$1.41 to 65¢ per bushel; sweet potatoes, from 90¢ to 60¢ a bushel; and peanuts, from 4¢ to 1.3¢ per pound.

The first battles

As farmers grew more and more desperate, they feared they had nowhere to turn for help or hope. Actually, though, **federal**, state, and local government agencies, community organizations, and hardworking individuals were trying to help out. Many of those efforts tried to get people to help themselves.

One such effort was a state **campaign**. Late in 1929, O. Max Gardner, the state's

Definitions (continued)

Soil management is to research, teach, and use practices for conserving soil.

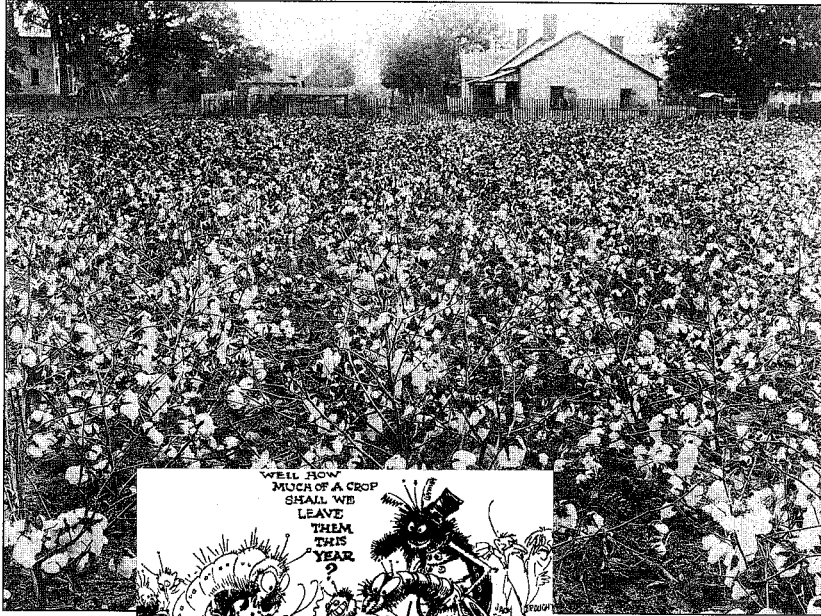
*In this case, a **market** is a public place where people take items such as harvested crops and grown livestock to be sold.*

Meal is the ground seeds of cereal grains (except wheat, which is called flour).

Most of the legislation for the New Deal was passed during Franklin Roosevelt's first three months as president in 1933. By the end of 1939, many of these laws were allowing the government to influence parts of the economy it had never before been able to influence. But this involvement did help get people back to work, money back in pockets, and food back on tables.

*In this case, **price support programs** are government programs that maintain, or support, certain prices for certain crop harvests. In other words, if the market price for a crop falls below a certain price, the government will buy it at that price. By storing the harvest and regulating the timing and quantities of sales, the government will resell the harvest when prices are higher. These complex programs guarantee farmers that they will receive a certain minimum price for the crops they plant.*

During the Depression, few people could afford to buy anything, even food. For example, few people could afford to pay the prices farmers were asking for their corn. Even if no one could afford to pay the full price of the corn, it still had to be sold—the farmers needed money themselves, and even a little was better than nothing. Sometimes the farmer could sell it for



Farmers thought that the more cotton they planted, the more money they would make. As prices continued to fall in the early 1930s, they planted more and more to make up for lost money. Many farmers did not understand that this practice was the opposite of what was needed. The government understood, but its words made no sense to farmers. Governor

O. Max Gardner had tried a "Live at Home" campaign in late 1929. He wanted to encourage North Carolina's farmers to grow their own food and feed, but he also hoped this plan would redirect their attentions from growing so much cotton and other cash crops. This campaign failed. In the elections of 1932, voters elected a new governor and a new president—Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt's New Deal had a program for farmers called the Agricultural Adjustment Administration Act. This act provided money to farmers who did not grow certain crops, including cotton. Again, many farmers did not understand the ideas behind this practice. Indeed, the ideas did not make sense to many people, and many cartoons were created at the time. Still, since they could get paid, cotton farmers were persuaded to cooperate. Unfortunately, by the time the act took effect and the farmers agreed, the 1933 crop was already in the ground. In order to get their money, thousands of farmers destroyed their crops.

governor from 1929 to 1933, had launched his "Live at Home" campaign to encourage North Carolina farmers to **diversify** their crops. He publicly had encouraged farmers to become more **self-sufficient** by growing their own food and feed. That way, they could support themselves without spending what little money they had or could earn. He also asked land-owning farmers to allow their sharecroppers and tenant farmers to do the same.

But Gardner also had a behind-the-scenes hope: to distract farmers from their devotion

to raising cash crops, particularly cotton and tobacco. As farmers concentrated their efforts on diversifying and growing food crops they could use, he hoped they would reduce their production of cash crops. This reduction would then lead to a reduction in the oversupply of cotton and tobacco and thus to an increase in their market prices.

This plan, however, failed, primarily because the state's farmers refused to change their practices. These farmers thought they could not afford to change—after all, to raise only food crops or to not plant crops at all would have meant a certain loss of all their income. Besides, without a national effort to reduce national production, any sacrifices by North Carolina's farmers really would have had little impact.

The governments step in

In 1932, North Carolina elected a new governor, J. C. B. Ehringhaus, and the United States elected a new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Both began immediately with a different plan of attack.

In Washington, D.C., Roosevelt worked with Congress to create a series of new laws that would help revive the agricultural and industrial economies, relieve the unemployed, and improve society in general. These laws came to be called the New Deal.

The principal New Deal program to help farmers was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) Act of 1933. The AAA encouraged farmers to reduce the amounts of certain crops that they planted by offering them payments, or **subsidies**, that would be paid by the government. North Carolina's cotton farmers quickly agreed to work with this program.

Unfortunately, by the time the AAA act took effect, the state's cotton farmers had already planted for the 1933 season. The Cotton Section of the AAA decided to try to persuade cotton farmers of the South to go against their nature: to plow under, or destroy, parts of their growing crops. In North Carolina, the Cotton Section worked through Agricultural Extension Service (AES) agents in the state to reach 150,000 farmers.

AES agents, together with community leaders, farm organization leaders, the press, bankers, and politicians, urged farmers to accept the government payments in exchange

Definitions (continued)

the same amount of money it had cost him to grow it, sometimes he had to sell it for a price that was lower than the cost to grow it.

With less production, fewer goods would be available, and prices would have to go up—that was what the government told farmers, anyway—plant, or produce, less, and you will get more money for what you do plant.

Profit is the part of income that remains after debts have been paid.

This time of prosperity was a time of fortune and opportunity for many—full employment, high production, and money for spending and investment.

Public health is the organized effort of keeping a community healthy by preventing diseases and

the Olds Report

BY STEVE EVANS & CHRISTIAN POIRIER

Good day. I am Colonel Fred A. Olds, founder of the North Carolina Museum of History. Today, we are going to hear a story of farm life in North Carolina during the Great



One of the hardest days of my life was when I was a little girl on the farm. Daddy was a cotton farmer, or rather a sharecropper. We couldn't afford to own any land—just rented it. In fact, we borrowed near everything from the landowner. He gave us the seeds an' told us when



"One day, I was taking water out to my daddy in the field, an' I heard him whipping his mule. I'd never known him to whip that mule before. He was so proud of that mule. It had taken him a lot of seasons to teach it not to walk on the plants.



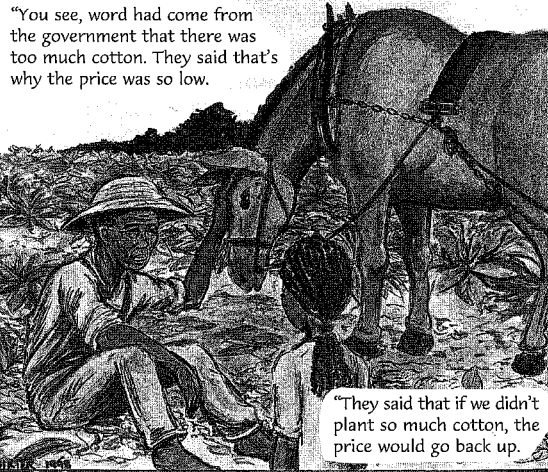
"I ran to the top of the hill, an' what I saw stopped me in my tracks. Daddy had stopped whippin' the mule, an' was sittin' next to it—cryin'! I ran to him an' asked what was wrong. He said he couldn't get that mule to walk on the plants so the plow could turn 'em



"An' he didn't want to make that mule do it, either . . .

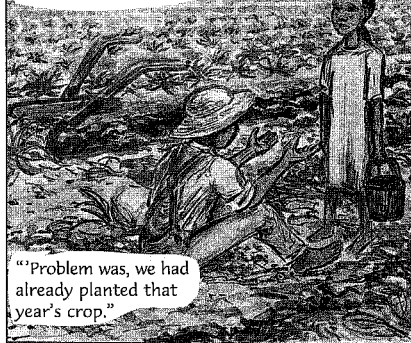
" . . . but he had to.

"You see, word had come from the government that there was too much cotton. They said that's why the price was so low.



"They said that if we didn't plant so much cotton, the price would go back up.

"Daddy was worried about how we would get our money if we grew less cotton. But word was the government was going to pay farmers not to grow it! That was hard to believe, but 'turned out to be true.



"Problem was, we had already planted that year's crop."

So the landowner came and said, "Plow it up! Turn 'em under!" My daddy couldn't understand—few people did . . . But he took that ol' mule out to do what the landowner said. 'Must have been on seventy years ago, and I can remember it like last week.



And such was the beginning of a system of crop subsidies and price supports that are still in effect to this day. I'm Colonel Fred Olds, and this . . . is . . . history.



Definitions (continued)

by controlling them if they get started. The most common ways of organizing these efforts are educating people about the spread of a disease, inspecting environments that could assist the growth and spread of that disease, and inoculating or vaccinating potential patients against it. Public health programs are usually organized by a government agency.

Rural areas are places in the country, away from urban or metropolitan areas. Urban areas are city areas.

For colonists and people of the late 1700s who were used to throwing buckets of wastes—spoiled foods, wash water, human feces—out a window or into ditches that ran in front of their houses, the privy, or "private" outhouse, was an improvement in sanitation. But as privies became more common in the 1800s, they continued unsanitary conditions because many of them were not built properly or were located too close to homes and water sources. The development of the sanitary privy, which enclosed and contained wastes, in the early 1900s was a major breakthrough in the public health movement.

Self-sufficient, or subsistence, farmers provided for the basic needs of their families without much help from others—they grew their own food, made their own clothes, and built their own homes.

Sowing seeds is the same as planting or broadcasting (scattering in the wind) them so they can grow.

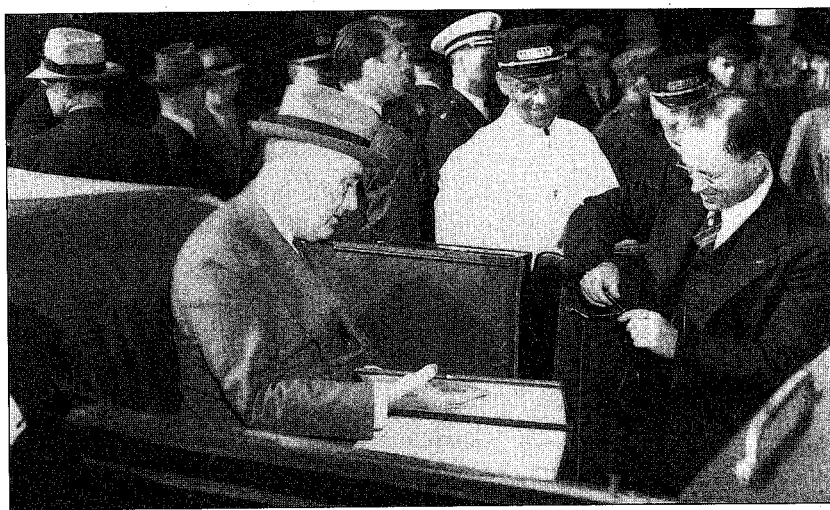
In this case, subsidies are grants, or gifts, of money from the government that support a program. For example, when farmers agree to grow only a certain amount of tobacco, they receive a subsidy. That subsidy pays

for destroying some of the young cotton crop. Nearly all agreed and signed contracts to do so. After the cotton plants were plowed up, farmers across the state received money from the government. And, as expected, since less cotton was being produced, cotton prices rose.

Similar agreements soon lowered the supplies of other cash crops and raised their prices. Tobacco, wheat, corn, and other farm commodities, including hogs, all became part of this new "price support program."

After the New Deal

Hard times were far from over for the farmers of North Carolina, though. Many tenant farmers and sharecroppers (who seldom received their fair share of the government money) were forced by their situations to stop farming, many of them forever. Many landowning farmers (who could not afford to keep up their farms or to pay the back taxes they owed) had to abandon their lands, as well. Most of these displaced farmers moved into towns, where they had to face a whole



Memories of life on the farm: Putting a face on life during the Great Depression

by Grethel McLamb Boyette

I was born in 1920, the fifth child of seven. My parents were *good* tenant farmers in eastern North Carolina. Now, I say they were “good” tenant farmers because we didn’t move every year like the “bad” tenant farmers did. We moved only twice from the time I was born until I was sixteen years old, when my father was able to buy a farm.

We put down roots in our community. We worked hard, behaved ourselves (we were too busy not to), and were good neighbors and friends with our landlords and other “good” tenants. During those years, if we were poor—and we were—I didn’t know it. Everyone, including most of the landowners we knew, lived like we did. We hardly knew a world unlike our own existed.

In a way, the landowners really had more to lose than we did—we had only ourselves, our animals, and



“Almost everyone tilled the soil with mules throughout the Depression, even though tractors were available.”

some farm implements, a wagon, and a buggy. Many, many landowners lost “everything” when they became unable to make payments on their homes, their land, and their taxes.

During the Depression years, I believe that most people living on farms lived better than most who lived in the cities or towns—we could raise our own food and cut firewood, and we certainly were not jobless! As a child, I was not aware of how frightened my mother was for us. Or how concerned my father was about what would happen if the crop didn’t “bring in” enough money to “pay out” in the fall.

MY PARENTS were both from families who owned quite a bit of land. But they had run away and gotten married, against her father’s wishes, when they were eighteen years old. So, they were on their own. As with others of the time, children came regularly and often. By the time they were thirty, they had seven children and themselves to feed, shelter, and clothe.

The two homes that I grew up in were big, white, rambling ones with big porches and big rooms. They had wood floors that we scrubbed once a week and wood walls that we scalded with hot lye water once a year.



As the Great Depression wore on, some state programs and some of President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs began to help rural communities. Hard times were far from over, especially for tenant farmers and sharecroppers and even some smaller landowning farmers. But at least some farmers were getting federal subsidies, electricity, sanitary privies, and badly needed soil conservation programs.

new set of problems and hardships—but where they might be able to find work with a regular paycheck.

Still, New Deal legislation did help rural communities in general. The AAA acts, as discussed, helped to control cash crop production, supplies, and prices. The Rural Electrification Authority introduced electricity to many areas of rural North Carolina and to individual farms. The Civilian Conservation Corps expanded soil management programs that helped save much of the unplanted farmland in the state from erosion. And the Works Progress Administration provided thousands of “modern” privies that not only improved sanitation in the countryside but also helped to bring several public health problems under control.

Perhaps most important, though, New Deal legislation set the stage for increased government involvement in farming. Since the 1930s, agencies in local, state, and federal governments have become partners in agriculture. Their programs offer technical assistance to farmers, plan and manage price support programs like cotton subsidies, and operate other agricultural programs.

Definitions (continued)

them a price (for not growing more tobacco) that is supposed to equal the income they (theoretically) would have received if they had planted and successfully sold it.

In this case, suckers are late leaves or stems that will “suck” life from the main plant if they are allowed to grow.

In this case, tenants are people who rent or lease land or a house from another person. The system of tenancy, or renting farmland, that developed in North Carolina after the Civil War (1861–1865) partially solved the problems of two groups of people. One group was made up of farmers who had no land. The other group was landowners who had no farm laborers. Depending on their situations and the deals the two groups made, some farmers became tenant farmers, others became sharecroppers, or “croppers.”

The editor wishes to thank Gilbert C. Fite and John L. Bell for their input and assistance with this article.

“The Olds Report” was conceived and illustrated by Christian Poirer of Raleigh. All photos on page 21 are used courtesy of the University Archives at D. H. Hill Library, North Carolina State University. The photo of Roosevelt in Fayetteville in 1942 and the cartoon from the Greensboro Daily News, May 17, 1933, are from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History. The chart on page 23 is adapted from a similar table in North Carolina Agricultural Statistics, 1937–1940. The photograph of the cotton field is from a collection at the Museum of History.

OUR MOTHER made all of our clothes except for the large sizes for the men and boys. We had three levels of clothes: play (or work) clothes, school clothes, and Sunday clothes—and one did not cross over those lines! They were handed down in those same categories.

Contrary to the widespread idea that everyone in the Depression wore clothes made from feed sacks, I never wore a sack dress. My mother used the sacks for everything from dishtowels to aprons to quilt linings, but she would not make our dresses from them. If I needed a dress, and we had no money, we caught a chicken or gathered a basket of eggs, and I walked to the nearby country store to trade for some cloth.

OUR FOOD was cooked on a big wood-burning stove. It was made fresh each day because we had no refrigeration. We caught a chicken, wrung its neck, dressed it, and cooked it right when we needed it. We killed our own hogs and prepared them ourselves, too. We grew corn and took it to the mill to be ground into meal, and sometimes we had wheat to be ground for flour.

We grew all our own vegetables and fruits and canned what we didn't need right then so we would have some for winter use. We bought only what we couldn't make—such things as sugar and seasonings and medicines. The traveling Watkins man visited us at least once a month. From him, we bought our flavorings and spices and Rosebud Salve (which cured everything but our colds) and Vicks Vaporub ointment (which, when rubbed on our chests, cured them). The fish man came on Fridays with a big box of iced-down fish in the back of his pickup truck. We bought them regularly and fried 'em up quick!

ALMOST EVERYONE tilled the soil with mules throughout the Depression, even though tractors were available. A farmer could till all the acres he could manage until President Roosevelt brought in the New Deal policies to lower production and raise prices. Therefore, we tended a lot of acres, and everyone in the family worked.

Each of us had his or her own jobs to do according to size, age, and strength. We worked in the fields and we worked at the barn. Most women did all the regular house chores and also went to the field or barn. Children started working when they were about six or seven



"The boys would plow before and after school, often until dark."

years old. Most were made a "hand" by the age of eleven or twelve. This honor meant that we could now carry the workload of an adult farmworker. Days could



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start at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and end after dark. But no one worked on the farm on Sundays!

We all chopped the cotton and tobacco with a hoe. We picked the cotton boll by boll and dragged a sack that we filled as we went along. We topped the tobacco by hand and removed the suckers by hand. We pulled the big, green, horned worms off the tobacco and squashed them under our feet or dropped them into a can of kerosene if we had it along.

In addition to the cash crops, cotton and tobacco, we had corn and hay to be grown and harvested. My older brothers pulled the ears of corn by hand and tossed each one into the corn cart that the mule drew slowly along the rows. Getting up hay was everyone's job.

THE CHILDREN of many families, especially the boys, were kept out of school to work on their family farms. Not so at our house—my mother simply would not allow it. I am not sure she ever plowed, but I know some women who did so their boys could go to school. The boys would plow before and after school, often until dark.

My mother knew how hard her life had been, how hard she and my father had to work to just "keep up." My father knew, also, but he couldn't quite envision how to change it. Mother knew our lives would be easier only by us being educated. She set goals for us and my older brother, their third son, went away to college in the middle of the Depression. He paid his tuition by furnishing fruits and vegetables, especially sweet potatoes, to the college for its dining room. He helped me to go to college and I, in turn, helped my younger brother and sister.

THE DRIVE and determination that our parents possessed had kept us fed and clothed during the Depression and had made it possible for us to follow paths that they could not have even dreamed about for themselves.

The images and thoughts and feelings of my youth have lasted a lifetime. You can tell that I learned to love the land and to appreciate it. I learned that if you had a job to do, you'd better get it done, or you'd find yourself working in the field at dark on Saturday night. I learned that anyone can overcome a seemingly insurmountable hurdle by keeping a vision and a goal before him or her. And I learned not to waste time or talent and to be creative in finding a way to that goal.



Definitions (continued)

Tending something is paying attention to it, or caring for it.

In this general sense, tilling means plowing, or turning (or "turning under"), the soil—to break apart the soil, which kills weeds and prepares a field for planting. Tilled dirt is loose so that seeds can be planted and more easily take root.

In this case, topped means that the top of the tobacco plant had been cut so the plant's strength could go to building the leaves.

Grethel McLamb Boyette was a founding member of the Tobacco Farm Life Museum in Kenly. She still sits its board of directors and serves as a full-time docent. As docent, she is assistant to the curator and frequently gives talks about North Carolina farm life. This remembrance is from one of these talks, which she made at a teacher workshop sponsored by the Museum of History.

"Boy plowing with mules" is used courtesy of the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Woman feeding chickens" is from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History. "Man feeding his mules" is from a collection at the Museum of History.