TENNESSEE'S CENTURY FARMS
Change and continuity over 200 years of farming
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A Collection of Essays

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This project is funded by a grant from the Tennessee Humanities Council, a not-for-profit corporation with primary support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.
For over 200 years, agriculture has been the lifeblood of Tennessee culture, deeply influencing the state's economy, landscape, and folklore. "Tennessee Agriculture: An Overview" is a traveling exhibit that highlights the state's agrarian experience from the experiences of the Century Farmers. Tennessee Century Farmers represent a unique cross section of farm families. They have owned and cultivated profitably the same family owned land for at least the last 100 years. In 1976, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture established a self-nominating program to identify and recognize the achievements of the state's Century Farmers. In 1985, the Department joined with the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University to administer the program and publish a book. The Century Farmers, Tennessee Agriculture: A Century Farms Perspective, written by the Center's Carroll Van West, appeared in 1987 and has encouraged even more farm families to register with the program. Today, the Department of Agriculture and Center for Historic Preservation have identified over 600 Century Farms in Tennessee.

The tremendous changes experienced by Tennessee farmers over the last 200 years, from the devastation and bloodshed of the Civil War to farm tenancy in the late 19th century, to the industrialization and new opportunities created by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s, to the family farms that exist today, are just part of the story of our Century Farmers. Their individual farm histories underscore the day-to-day routine of agrarian life and the multitudes of factors that shaped it. For those who persevered and survived, farming remained a rewarding way of life.

Presenting continuity in the midst of often extraordinary change, the Century Farmers help to document the meaning of Tennessee's agrarian history, a past that, in these years of population growth, urban sprawl, and industrialization, is in danger of disappearing, leaving Tennesseans impoverished as to their heritage and their culture.

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Shortly after the Civil War, the assistant commissioner of agriculture, Joseph D. Keller, surveyed Tennessee's farm scene from Memphis to Bristol. Asserting that quality of climate and soil are the prime determinants which establish intelligence, moral culture, and civilization, he marveled at the potential for Tennesseans as they contemplated the richness and diversity of the state's soils. Tennessee lands, he wrote, are "capable of growing all the most desirable farm products of the continent." Farmers, having ample reason to feel some degree of depression and disillusionment after experiencing several years of marauding armies, which destroyed fences and outbuildings and even homes in their wake, may have needed the encouragement Keller provided. But there is considerable evidence that returning veterans, although many suffered war-related maladies which reduced their efficiency and shortened their working days, wasted little time on morose thoughts but harnessed available work animals and turned the weed-filled lands into productive soil.

Indeed, Keller was amazed at the industry. Farmers of the southwestern counties returned to "the grand ideal" and were "ambitious, industrious, and energetic." Indeed, many were "careless" about other important things, because they cared "for nothing so much as to see cotton fields flourishing." Farmers of the northeastern counties practiced much greater diversity, and Keller praised them for their dedication toward meeting "whatever tasks came to hand." Farmers of the central counties by 1870s had enclosed hundreds of acres—with either cedar and chestnut rails or rock fences—and were producing a diversity of crops and farm animals. More farms were improved than in the other sections of the state, and new farms to market roads were under construction. The chief money crop in the northern counties continued to be tobacco, and in the southern counties cotton. Peanuts also were raised and corn and a variety of other grain crops were produced in abundance. East Tennessee farmers also grew a variety of crops. Green County, although not yet the great tobacco center it soon would become, had more improved lands than any of the neighboring counties produced corn, oats, and wheat. The valleys were cultivated by horse-drawn machinery, but the vast amount of surface not else here in the eastern counties necessitated mainly hand cultivation.

Keller paid high respect to the farm wives. In his tours across the state he had seen them "cook, wash, iron, milk, churn, clean up, spin, and make clothes for the entire family...and construct articles for the ornamentation of their homes." All of this they did in addition "to bearing a house full of children" and, he might have added, without any of the modern housekeeping conveniences.

If these reestablished Civil War veterans and their wives needed an inspiration, they had only to look to the memory of their grandfathers and other forebears who had settled and first tilled Tennessee soil only a few decades earlier. Tobacco hunters and hucksters had arrived in the Tennessee Country by mid-eighteenth century, and people who wanted to pursue diversified agriculture were not far behind. By the 1770s, the Boones, Browns, and Roberts—famously mentioned the Carters, Sextons, and Roberts—were building log cabins along the banks of the Watauga and Nolichucky rivers. Soon into the Cumberland Country went James Robertson, John Donelson, Andrew Jackson, and others who established homes and cultivated the soil. Indeed, by the early 1800s many, finding the soil fertile and productive, were claiming thousands of acres and building more elaborate residences than the traditional small log cabin. Francis Dancy had erected a two-story house of marble and stone near Knoxville. James Winchester had imported stone from Baltimore to build a home for him near Gallatin, and Territorial Secretary Daniel Smith had built a house nearly of equal proportions.

Preparing the forested land was a tremendous task for people who had only primitive tools and hand labor; and years passed before thickly forested lands were cleared. Crops of corn and cotton at first were planted in fields of protruding stumps and
rocks and standing but girdled trees. Even so industrious a farmer as James Robertson cleared only about thirty acres during his first decade in Davidson County.

It was not because Robertson and others lacked a labor supply; with primitive tools they did almost all the work humanly possible. Robertson brought slaves with him to Nashboro. The slave population grew through the years until at mid-century slaves numbered about one fourth the total population. Large families—Governor Sevier's brood of eighteen children was nothing unusual—constituted an omnipresent supply of help on the farm. When a task, such as building a cabin or large barn seemed too big for one family neighbors congregated for a "house raising" or "barn raising."

After the War of 1812, people moved in droves from the eastern states into the new lands across the mountains. The state's population, for example, increased from 261,727 in 1810 to 422,925 a decade later. Early in the 1820s the vast area between the Tennessee and Mississippi rivers was opened for settlement after the federal government purchased it from the Chickasaws in 1818. Soon becoming known as "West Tennessee," the land received thousands of white cotton farmers and soon Memphis became a major marketing city of the southeast. The widespread use of the cotton gin and the opening up of the rich cotton lands came simultaneously, and by mid-century Tennessee was one of the leading cotton producers of the country.

Tennessee agriculture, by mid-century, was widely recognized for its diversity. By 1840, the state was the nation's leading corn producer, and ten years later the cotton crop of 200,000 bales—up from 2,500 in 1810—was exceeded only by that of a few states of the deep South. Tobacco, grown primarily in the Highland Rim counties, was such that the state ranked only behind Kentucky and Virginia in production. Wheat and a variety of other crops also were grown in abundance. Much of the corn and other grain was fed to swine, sheep, and other animals which grazed over the country side.

Farmers also experimented with other crops. One Knox County landowner in the 1840s sold the vast profits he had realized from silkworms; others held high hopes for axifol, but by 1860 farmers in only three counties produced silk. Hemp and flax, once grown extensively in the eastern counties, was grown in only small quantities by 1860.

Individual farmers often were recognized for the high quality of their crops. Colonel John Pope's Shelby County cotton, for example, was judged at the London World's Fair in 1851 to be the "best known in the world." Three years later, Mark Cockrell's five thousand Davidson County acres pastured sheep which yielded the finest wool in the world. Cockrell's Tennessee hogs, short-horn cattle, and merino sheep were widely sought for breeding. William H. Neal's "Paymaster corn" soon was marketed throughout the world.

Agricultural fairs thrived in the three decades before the Civil War and circulated published materials and other printed materials. Tolbert Fanning's Nashville-based Agriculturalist urged Southern farmers to concentrate less upon cotton and tobacco and more upon diversified crops. Officials of the State Agricultural Bureau, established in 1854, offered information and advice to farmers and sponsored state, county, and regional fairs where farmers displayed their produce and competed for prizes.

The Civil War brought down the curtain upon agriculture and rural prosperity as Tennesseans had known them. The war, a contest between two conflicting economic systems for control of the nation, ended for Tennesseans with the Battle of Nashville (December, 1864) but the aftermath continued. Farmers recovered, but they faced problems of declining prices unknown in the 1850s. Farm produce in the 1890s, for example, brought in the open market only about one-third what it had sold for a few decades earlier, while prices of manufactured goods climbed rapidly. Suspicious farmers began to believe that industrialists and government leaders had entered into a conspiracy to control prices, and they reacted angrily as they contemplated the fact that a pound of cotton, selling at five cents in 1865 when before the war it had brought thirty cents, now sold for a dollar after being manufactured into trousers. They, therefore, readily joined the various cooperative groups designed to improve economic conditions for farmers and rural dwellers generally.

Chapters of the Grange developed in the early 1860s and then came the Agricultural Wheel. By 1870, members had organized into the Farmers' Alliance and gained a membership in Tennessee of more than a hundred thousand. Although constituting the backbone of the Democratic party before the Civil War, rural folk had not become active as a political pressure group until now. But with declining prices—along with the rapid growth of the four major cities whose urban, social, and economic values challenged those of rural society—farmers began to be heard.

With their influence growing rapidly within the Democratic party, Alliance leaders gained control by the early 1880s. James Buchanan, a Rutherford County farmer, had become known to rural voters as president of the Alliance, and his speeches and comment had been published in the widely circulated Troller, an Alliance magazine published in Nashville. Winning the Democratic nomination in 1882, he had little trouble in being elected governor in the autumn elections. Although the agrarians declined in political power after Buchanan's term as governor, they had made the impact they sought, and farm prices recovered rapidly as the century closed.

The first two decades of the new century were years of prosperity when compared with the 1860s and 1870s. More than a quarter million farms were operated by 1900; three times the number fifty years earlier—necessitated by the needs of the rapidly growing urban areas and the increasing foreign trade. "Our farmers are no more prosperous than at any time for 30 or 40 years past," one state official commented in 1908. Cotton soon brought 35 cents—nearly twice the price in 1894—and corn,
tobacco and other crops experienced definite gains. The foreign market declined sharply during the 1920s, as Europe recovered from World War I and imported cheap products from Australia, South America, and elsewhere. Over production and declining markets meant lower prices for Tennessee farmers. The financial depression beginning in 1929 soon fell in Tennessee and, by 1933, drought had combined with the financial problems to depress prices near to their 1900 levels. Registration of new passenger cars and farm trucks considerably illustrated the growing financial trouble. Tennessee had purchased 35,211 vehicles in 1929 but registered only 12,696 in 1932.

Congressman Joseph W. Byrns of Robertson County was among those who counseled President Roosevelt on the agricultural aspects of the New Deal and he helped to write the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Within a short time nearly 50 percent of the state's cotton farmers had signed contracts to participate in the AAA programs, and producers of corn and tobacco soon followed. But it was the TWA among the New Deal agencies which made the greatest impact upon Tennessee agriculture. Electric power produced at a reasonable cost became the chief function of the agency, and soon through the operations of the Rural Electrification Administration and other federal agencies created to place electric power in rural homes, most Tennessee farmers were enjoying the benefits. Farm prices climbed steadily and farm life became more enjoyable, although it took the Second World War (1939-1945) to restore the country to prosperity.

A great many changes have taken place in Tennessee agriculture during the years since World War II. The internal combustion engine tractor, and the various implements propelled by it, became the most significant single development in the post-World War II days. Long hoes had been discarded and now hoes and mules, as drawers of farm implements, were replaced and had all disappeared except in remote areas by the beginning of the initial quarter of the century. Indeed, the number of farm families, around 12,000 just before World War II, had increased more than twelve-fold by 1980. By the 1980s the number of farms and farmers who had dropped sharply in previous years has increased many fold. The application of science to agriculture, resulting in improved seed, fertilizers, and a variety of weed and insect killing chemicals, enabled farmers to raise record-breaking yields with less back-breaking toil. Fertilizers and hybrid seed have enabled grain growers to quadruple production within a very few years. In recent years, farmers have experimented with a no-till method of planting which has increased production and reduced time for other work and labor.

Sorghum and barley—practically unknown to farmers in Killebrew's days—had made an important contribution to agriculture. From an annual production of less than four million bushels in 1920, the sorghum crop increased to a high of nearly 90 million bushels in 1984, as farmers plowed up grazing sod and corn fields to produce beans. Sorghum production has changed little during the past several decades except that barley, grown sparsely until the 1930s, dominates the market. Greene, Marion, and Sumner are the barley counties, while Montgomery and Dickson counties continue primarily with the dark red varieties.

Cloth brought in Killebrew's town so widely produced a century earlier, became king once more in 1987, as many farmers plowed up sorghum and corn fields and returned to the white gold. Increased prices—the highest in a decade—brought cotton farmers $2.18 million in 1987. The highest in the history of the state and one which doubt would have exceeded the wildest dreams of the Killebrew generation. Beams were second with tobacco hay, and corn not far behind.

An overview of the 1965 Thompson Dairy Farm, Knox County.

The state's rapidly growing population, along with expanding industry, annually take an ever increasing amount of food from the hands of the farmer. Nevertheless, improved farming methodology results annually in increased production. Regrettably, the small and independent farmer by the end of the twentieth century may become the modern vanishing American: a symbol of proud industry.

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**The Role and Work of Tennessee Farm Women**

Regional and national political influences as well as private local experience have shaped the lives of Tennessee farm women. In "The Role and Work of Tennessee Farm Women," Jean M. Jones reminds us that during most of North America's history a majority of women have lived on farms and that millions of our foremothers were farm women. They grew up as farm daughters learned the necessary skills to survive in a rural, often penurious, environment in the home on the land to which they returned at their deaths.

While certain constants can be found in these lives, they were also subject to changing conditions. The advent of massive industrialization and urban development impinged on rural life in very real ways, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed a transformation in the image of American farmers from that of "benevolence" to that of the "working poor." Nonetheless through it all, their innumerable—the farm wives and daughters—have remained firmly fixed as staunchly suffering companions.

Such recent Hollywood productions as Places in the Heart, The River, and Country have not dramatically altered this perception. Nonetheless, the fictional farm women portrayed by Sally Field, Sissy Spacek, and Jessica Lange reveal certain bona fide characteristics of gyps; determined rural women who stand by their men as long as they live and honor their memories when they are dead. The private tragedy of widowhood, the eternal struggle with the elements, and the harsh reality of changing economies have not been foreign to them.

More specifically, the agricultural South, too, has been captured on celluloid. Prior to the 1950s, the film industry, according to Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., an expert on the subject, "confirmed the predominate image of a gentle Southern class of county squires who ruled a well-ordered confederate society devoted to an agrarian ideal and the county pursuits and sustained by a large work force of adhering slaves." "The ladies too were stereotyped," he adds. "The planter's wife and daughter lived lives of leisure, highlighted by duties as hostesses with unlimited wardrobes."


Farm women have traditionally kept chickens for a simple food source and for the "egg economy," which they used for trade.

*Photo courtesy of Fritz and Betty Hines, Fayette County.*

Serious students of the South generally and of southern women specifically have effectively undermined the myths of at least within the scholarly community. Historian Frank L. Owsley's South of "plain folks" as well as Grady McWhiney's Cebus- influenced "cracker culture" illuminate the pale, male, white, columned, planter-dominated South, but "Hollywood history" all too often has fastened itself firmly on the American mind.

Without the filmmakers, America's still harbors a rosy view of rural American women. The kindly female figure in the gingham dress presides over a red cheesecloth-covered table garnished with food as neighbors and kin gather for the big Sunday dinner. She is white-skinned, rosy-checked, healthy and happy, and obviously delighted with the fruits of her labor. Any evidence of poverty, hardship, or discontent has been airbrushed from this still-life moment photo. Rural life may have been more slowly paced than urban society, but even that farm woman in the gingham dress did not exist in a static world.
The Black Farming Experience in Tennessee, 1865-1988

The history of the independent black farmer in Tennessee begins with the Civil War. Along with the preservation of the Union, the most important result of that conflict was the destruction of slavery, the system that had formed the economic and social foundation of the Old South. Prior to the war, the overwhelming majority of blacks in the state had labored as slaves in the field of white masters.

Emancipation permanently altered the relationship of blacks to their former owners, but it had little effect on the relationship of blacks to the soil. For another two generations at least, the majority of blacks in the Volunteer State earned their livelihood from the land, cultivating cotton and corn and wheat much as their slave ancestors before them.

Immediately after the war, most of the former slaves, or freedmen, continued to work for white employers under conditions little different from slavery. When the Radical Republican Congress failed to fulfill its promise of "forty acres and a mule," the freedmen had no choice but to turn to their former owners for employment. The former slaveowners, in turn, were determined to limit black independence by hiring the freedmen to work in labor gangs under close white supervision.

The freedmen, however, made it increasingly clear that they would no longer work like slaves, with the result that landowners were gradually forced to subdivide their plantation farms into tenant plots. By 1900, most blacks no longer worked as wage laborers in large gangs. Those who could afford their own mule and the necessary farm implements usually rented from a white landlord and paid either a fixed rent per acre or a share of the crop, usually one-half, for the use of the land. Those who lacked the means for independent farming usually worked as sharecroppers. Like tenants, sharecroppers also farmed small plots, but they used tools and work stock provided by the landlord and received from him wages in the form of a share of the crop produced. Largely in place by 1880, these systems of tenancy and sharecropping encompassed the majority of black farm operators for the next eighty years.

Not all black farmers worked on somebody else's land, however. Indeed, blacks in Tennessee accumulated land of their own at an impressive rate during the first generation after emancipation. By 1900, 28 percent of black farm operators in the state owned their own land. Considering that the freedmen had emerged from slavery without land, capital, education, or significant marketable skills, their record of land acquisition by the turn of the century was nothing short of remarkable. Unfortunately, the rate of accumulation leveled off thereafter; half a century later the proportion of black farm operators owning their own land was virtually unchanged.

From the late nineteenth century until well after the Second World War, black farmers—whether owner-operators, tenants, or sharecroppers—worked their land much as their white neighbors. In the mountains and valleys of East Tennessee, where blacks were few, farmers pursued diversified agriculture, concentrating on corn, small grain, and livestock rather than plantation farming. In Middle Tennessee, where the state's black population has historically been concentrated, black farmers mirrored the production patterns of the Deep South: a little corn, a little meat, and as much cotton as the land would bear.

The state's black farmers were more numerous; there they produced large amounts of corn, wheat, and pork, as well as small quantities of cotton. In West Tennessee, where the state's black population has historically been concentrated, black farmers mirrored the production patterns of the Deep South: a little corn, a little meat, and as much cotton as the land would bear.

 Tennant farm women are far too varied and complex to conform to media myths and nostalgic images. The female life cycle—menopause, childbirth, menopause, and death—is undoubtedly the most important common denominator among them but, class, race, location, and chronology account for considerable differences.

There were highborn and lowborn—the masters, the servants, the slaves, and the tenants. While their male counterparts may have marked the milestones of their lives with such public events as elections and wars, the women most often measured theirs in such private aspects of the human continuum as the births of children and the deaths of loved ones. They counted among themselves black females in slavery and freedom. Indians, particularly the Cherokee women who were tilled of soil and slaves shown from practically every European national group though dominated by those of English and Scottish Irish extraction.

One can assume that many of them experienced the beauty of a Tennessee spring and shared a strong love and affinity for the land. Some attempted to improve the appearance of drab cabins and ramshackle old farm houses with plantings of flowers, cat-tails, and roses, and almost all of them employed their skills with needles, looms, and sewing machines to make necessary items while still maintaining a仍育的 score of artifacts of great and lasting beauty.

Whatever the benefits of communing with nature, rural life placed harsh demands on its inhabitants. Isolation, loneliness, and drudgery dogged farm women and were ever more pronounced during the nineteenth century when the twentieth century. Few ever traveled more than a few miles from home, and even more likely to go into nearby towns and villages than to far away. Few escaped caring for animals or laboring in fields. When they stopped to prepare noonday meals or late suppers, men took their ease under a shade tree or on the porch. Women served husbands, sons, male relatives, and occasional hired help first and made do with the leftovers for themselves.

It can hardly be assumed that most Tennessee farm women have never had much cash at their disposal for well into the twentieth century, farm income fell below a few hundred dollars per year, which guaranteed a minimal subsistence lifestyle. Nonetheless, women pore over the pages of mail-order catalogs and considered the wares from a tamely salesman's case. They bought cloth at a

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The Farm House

When Tennesseans think of the "homeplace," they usually focus on the farm house. For farmers, country folks who moved to the city, and urban Tennesseans who derive much of their family history from the farm, the farm house appears in the center of activity, being the focal point of the homestead.

Farm houses are much more than dwellings and work places. They are rich repositories of cultural history. Studying their architecture is just one way of appreciating their value. The houses document the methods, skills, and craftsmanship of the builders, the economic and social status of the owners, the use of local building materials, ways of controlling the climate and environment, and the farm's evolving lifestyle as reflected in the design of their houses. These "homeplaces" are among the most enduring and tangible legacies of the Century Farm families and in this brief pictorial essay suggests, they are the physical manifestation of the change and continuity of Tennessee agricultural history. Though each house reflects the individual tastes and needs of its owners, the evolution of log house to ranch house on our agrarian landscape is unmistakable.

Cecelia S. Hawkins and Carol Van West

Log houses built in Tennessee throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were popular because of the availability of log trees and the relative simplicity of construction. Many log dwellings were later incorporated into larger houses as families grew and their financial status improved. On some farms, original log buildings are still used for storage and other purposes, but all are reminders of the houses that built by farmers.

Log houses were often covered with wooden siding as soon as possible to insulate and to eliminate the need to constantly retighten the logs. Many houses, like the Reed-Stout House, below top, in Hamblen County which appear to be built much later, are actually early log dwellings which have been covered and remodeled over the years. Note the similarities between this house and the Oliver cabin in Cades Cove.

Roebuck Farm, Lincoln County, photo courtesy C. Van West

Shandy Grove, McMinn County, photo courtesy C. Van West

The "gable front and wing" house is a style that was most popular during the last half of the nineteenth century. Many variations are found on Century Farms and all across the Tennessee landscape.

Mother Ann Farm, Hawkins County, photo courtesy C. Van West

After 1900, the ranch house represented the latest in modern construction techniques, materials, and style. One story with a sloped pitched roof, many houses are built of either brick or wood, usually have garages, minimal front porches, and decorative shutters. Located on the Moore Farm in Tipton County, this ranch house brings to the farm house setting the conveniences of modern living to the farm.

Photo courtesy Tipton family.
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Despite major similarities, black farmers also differed from their white neighbors in significant ways. Most importantly, blacks consistently operated smaller farms than whites. For example, in 1900, farms run by whites averaged 99 acres, while black-operated farms averaged 45 acres, less than half as large. Black farms were smaller primarily because black farmers were poorer, but also because they faced discriminatory obstacles to wealth accumulation that whites did not face. For whatever reason, this pattern has been stubbornly persistent. As late as 1982, the average white farm consisted of 139 acres, the average black farm only 49.

A major result of this disparity is that black farmers have consistently earned much smaller incomes from the land than white farmers. Indeed, their farms have been so small that they have found it difficult to grow enough food to feed themselves, much less produce a surplus for sale in the marketplace. In 1860, in West Tennessee’s Haywood County, for example, three fourths of white farm families were self-sufficient in foodstuffs, but only one fourth of black families were independent of the local general store. This disparity was partly because black farmers planted a greater proportion of their land in cotton than in food crops, but it also reflected their limited possession of cattle and hogs in comparison to white farmers.

The farming patterns that blacks adopted shortly after emancipation survived relatively intact for over seventy-five years. Until the 1850s, the major development in black farming involved the use of the cotton gin to which blacks were granted the land but the number of blacks who did so. The number of black farmers in Tennessee increased slightly from 1880 until 1930, but sometime during the 1930s their number began to decline. The Great Depression affected all southern farmers adversely, but it hit black farmers with extra severity. Black farmers received few benefits from New Deal programs aimed primarily at restoring prosperity to large landowning farmers. Further, many black tenants and sharecroppers were thrown off their land as landlords reduced their acreage in order to earn Agricultural Adjustment Administration subsidies. Although the number of white farmers in the state actually increased during the 1930s, the number of black farmers fell by more than one third. This decline continued through the 1940s, the decade of the Second World War, as black farmers increasingly left their land to pursue opportunities in northern defense industries or to join the armed forces.

This trend among blacks away from agriculture accelerated greatly after World War II. Blacks left the farm in ever-greater numbers—between 1950 and 1970 the number of black-operated farms in the state fell by approximately 80 percent. This decline was partially due to blacks’ search for opportunities outside the South, but it also stemmed from a fundamental transformation in agriculture that characterized the post-World War II South. Black tenants and sharecroppers became expendable as landowners turned to gas-powered tractors and mechanized cotton pickers to work their crops. In addition, black farm owners suffered as the amount of acreage necessary for viable agricultural production grew markedly, partly because of improvements in technology and partly because of an increasing emphasis upon livestock since the war. Few black farmers have possessed the capital or the acreage necessary to make a successful transition from crop production to a dairv or beef cattle operation.

Today the independent black farm operator in Tennessee is a dying breed. One hundred years ago there was one black farmer for every six white farmers. In 1862 there was one black for every fifty whites. Today the black farm operator is a minority. In the early 1980s only about 150 black farmers remained in the entire state. Because of increasing opportunities off the farm, landless blacks are simply no longer willing to work as farmers in the hope of someday rising to ownership. In addition, the few remaining black farmers continue to be much smaller than whites, in fact, too small for extensive commercial production.

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This women is a part of the Tennessee women's generation of farmers. She comes from a family of farmers, with both her parents and grandparents growing vegetables, fruits, and livestock, and her father is a skilled mechanic. Women farmers have always been known for their hard work and dedication.

Contemporary Tennessee farm women have more control over their destinies than ever before. Breakthroughs of the twentieth century, from rural electrification to the automobile, have dramatically improved the quality of life for farm women. The advent of the automobile, the installation of telephones, and the creation of state-supported institutions of higher learning have all contributed to the increased mobility of farm women. Women have been able to take advantage of new educational opportunities and have become more active in their communities.

In the 1960s, blacks constituted only about 1 percent of Tennessee farmers with sales over $100,000. At the present Tennessee’s blacks farmers possess too little capital and too small holdings to be economically competitive. Unfortunately, a continued decline in black farm operation appears inevitable.

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Agricultural technology changed very little between the time of the ancient Egyptians and the end of the eighteenth century. Most agricultural production was achieved with human labor. During the next two centuries, however, farmers in the United States eagerly adopted implements and machines to replace hand labor and increase their efficiency and productivity. By the 1970s and 1980s the larger commercial farmers of Tennessee had adopted all aspects of modern agricultural technology.

A partnership of livestock and farmers was the workforce on Tennessee farms until well into the twentieth century. Many farmers today recall the work routines and sweat associated with mules.

Photo courtesy: Patricia Salyer, Patton Granda

When the first settlers moved into Tennessee in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they carried with them only the most primitive farm tools. Most of the work of clearing the land and milling a few acres was done by hand. Very few implements extended the power of the strong arms and backs of those early pioneers. Until the 1850s and 1840s most plows were made of wood and barely tilled the soil as they were pulled along by a yoke of oxen or a single horse or mule. Wooden harnesses smoothed the ground slightly in preparation for planting. Wheat and other small grain seed were scattered by hand, while farmers planted corn, their main crop, in hills with a hoe or shovel. The hoe was the main tool for cultivating. Farmers harvested their grain with a sickle or scythe and threshed it with a flail or by having animals tramp the grain out of the straw. Corn stakes were cut by hand and the ears were picked and shelled by hand. As cotton production increased in Tennessee in the first half of the nineteenth century, except for plowing, it too was raised mainly with hand labor. The same was true of tobacco.

By the 1840s and 1850s, however, important technological changes were occurring on Tennessee farms. Iron plows, better hoes, a few grain drills, ropers, threshing machines, and slabs and corn grinders were being used by the more progressive farmers. Cotton growers in Fayette, Hardeman, and Haywood counties in the Southwest part of the state had adopted better planting equipment, as well as improved plows and cultivating implements. In the eastern part of the state where farms remained small and labor self-sufficient there was little change in production methods up to the eve of the Civil War.

Despite some technological progress, Tennessee farmers lagged behind in most other states in the use of modern machines. In 1850 the average value of implements and machinery on the state's 72,730 farms was only $74. Only five other states had a smaller amount per farm invested in machinery. Most of the farmers who utilized the latest tools and equipment lived in the Nashville Basin and in the Western part of the state where farms were larger and conditions were somewhat more prosperous.

Between 1850 and 1889, Tennessee farmers as a whole, failed to keep pace with the gains being made in agricultural mechanization throughout the Midwest and West. The number of farms more than doubled in that thirty years, but investments in farm implements rose from only $53 to $89 million. This represented an average investment in implements per farm in 1880 of $555, nearly $501 less than a generation earlier. Many of the larger owners did adopt improved horse-drawn machinery—plows, disc, grain drills, corn and cotton planters, cultivators and reapers. But small farmers and tenants were left behind. 

By the 1940s, Tennessee farmers had nearly ceased to use tractors except for farming the land, planting, working, and harvesting large crops.

Pho courtesy: Thompson National Rice County

Of the main problems connected with using tractors and mechanizing farming operations was the fact that Tennessee farms remained so small. By 1940 the average crop land harvested per farm in the state was only 25 acres, eight acres less than in 1890. These small farms did not produce enough to warrant the expense of purchasing a tractor and related machines, a motor truck, or electric power. The small and often irregular fields did not lend themselves to the efficient use of tractor power. Of the state's 213,524 farms in 1950, some 77 percent contained less than 100 acres total of both crop land and other land. It was the 52,000 larger farms that moved toward mechanization, but not all of them bought tractors until after World War II.

A number of factors in the 1930s and 1940s had a major impact on developing farm technology. The Tennessee Valley Authority began to provide cheap electricity for farmers and this permitted them to employ a wide variety of tools and machines. By 1950 some 71 percent of Tennessee's farms were electrified, a rise from only 16 percent a decade earlier. By mid-century 25 percent of the state's farms had an electric water pump, and 16 percent used electric chicken brooders. Over 6,000 dairymen had electric milking machines.

Another important development for the larger commercial farmers was the federal programs of paying farmers to leave land idle and the system of price supports. Government support of prices was especially important for cotton and tobacco growers in Tennessee. These federal programs provided money which farmers could invest in machinery. By 1950, 22 percent of Tennessee's farmers had tractors, and 24 percent had motor trucks. Forty-three percent reported owning automobiles. Besides tractors and a whole array of modern plows, discs, planters, fertilizers, and insecticide spreaders and cultivators farmers were using grain and soybean combines and cotton pickers and picker-shedders. In short, by mid-century on the most modern farms, crop production had been completely mechanized—except for cotton and tobacco.

Mechanization of cotton production had been delayed because engineers had failed to invent a successful spindle-type cotton picker prior to 1941. In that year, however, the International Harvester Company manufactured a one-row, tractor-mounted cotton picker which did well in field tests. Only a few of those machines were produced before the end of World War II. By 1948, however, the International Harvester plant in Memphis manufactured 1,100 mechanical cotton pickers and several of them were sold to Tennessee farmers. Over the next two years...
Change and Continuity in:  
The Tractor

In 1986, the Progressive Farmer magazine celebrated its 100th year of operation with a special historical edition emphasizing the major changes in the South during the last century. The most significant change cited was the shift from the primary source of power from horses and mules to tractors. The total shift in power source took almost a century, and as with most change, was met with considerable resistance. Farmers in Tennessee and around the nation had long hoped for a way of reducing the hard physical labor required to till fields and plant crops all day by plowing or planting only a few acres. They found their answer in the tractor. Because the evolution of the tractor to its present form has been one of the most significant events in all of farming, several individuals and companies are in agricultural history books because of their contribution to its development. The most famous tractor names: John Deere, Cyrus McCormick, Wm. Deering, and J.I. Case.

Steam traction engines provided a mobile source of power but they were certainly not the ideal source for the average farmer, especially the small Tennessee farmer. They were heavy, bulky, hard to operate, extremely hot, dangerous, and very expensive. The jobs they could perform were very limited and horses were still required to do most of the farm chores. Therefore, steam tractors could not be substituted for horses, they provided an additional source of power. Farmers needed a source of power to replace horses, not just supplement them.

Steam traction engine production peaked about 1900 but several companies continued production through the mid-1950s. Companies producing steam tractors included Russell, Avery, Holt, Advance Rumely, and Nichols and Shepard. Some of these firms shifted to gasoline tractors while others merged with growing and more modern concerns.

The internal combustion engine had the most significant influence on the agricultural revolution. Like the steam engine, it evolved from a small one-cylinder engine to the farm traction engine with two or more cylinders. Tractors and other internal combustion engines were introduced in the latter part of the 19th century but the primary experimental period for tractors was 1900 to 1910. By 1900, tractor companies were committed to developing a small, light, versatile tractor that the average farmer could afford. The term "tractor," first used in 1900 by a salesman for the Hart Parr Tractor Company and the term caught on rapidly in the industry. Early tractors were called gasoline traction engines although the main source of fuel in the early 1900s was kerosene, commonly called coal oil. Other early fuels included gun powder, turpentine, coal dust, and gasoline. Diesel and natural gas were introduced in the 1930s and 1940s.

These early gas tractors were big and bulky with many of the same problems that steam tractors had. A number of individuals and companies accepted the challenge to produce the "ideal" tractor that would replace horses and provide power for the average farmer. For example, in 1910, fifteen tractor companies produced over 4,000 tractors for sale, but by 1920, only 600 tractors were sold. The demand. Some companies only produced one tractor and then ceased production while others introduced several models before being bought out by a more successful company. With all the different companies competing for the farmer's business, names for tractors were quite imaginative such as Waterloo Boy, Little Chief, Sonora, Common Sense, Iron Horse, Square Turn, Do All, Friday, and the Love Tractor.

The decline of the tractor industry occurred nearly as fast as its growth. In 1925, only 56 companies produced farm tractors and by 1935, only 20 companies were in business. Ninety percent of the total production came from nine companies, International Harvester, John Deere, Case, Massey Harris, Oliver, Minneapolis-Moline, Allis-Chalmers, Cleveland Tractor Company, and Caterpillar Tractor Company. Only four of these are still in operation today.

Tractors produced before 1930 had steels with a wide variety of wheel design for traction. In 1932, Allis-Chalmers and Firestone introduced the first tractor with rubber tires. Rubber tires were immediately accepted and steel wheels soon became a thing of the past. By 1934, the light, versatile tractor that small farmers were looking for was available. Because a minimum sized farm is required before a tractor can be justified and because the average farm in Tennessee is smaller than most states, Tennessee farmers were the leaders in leasing tractors for horses, but they were not far behind.

Because horses and mules were no longer essential to the farm, they were no longer used to provide feed for food production. The major impact of the tractor was the tremendous reduction of labor and labor cost per acre of producing quantities of food and fiber for the farm.

N. Oren Roubins is professor of agronomy in the Department of Agriculture at Middle Tennessee State University and a noted authority on vintage tractors.

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decades larger cotton growers in western Tennessee mechanized their entire operations from land preparation through harvest. By 1970, some 1,800 farms in the state used mechanical pickers, greatly reducing labor requirements in producing cotton.

Like cotton, tobacco had historically resisted mechanization. Tobacco farms covered only a few acres and, other than land preparation and cultivation, much of the work depended on hand labor. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that machines for topping and picking, as well as improved equipment for curing the tobacco crop, were being used among the most efficient growers.

Overall, Tennessee farms moved rapidly after mid-century to use the latest equipment to cut labor costs. In addition to mechanizing crop production, livestock farmers adopted machines in their operations. The new machinery included better mowing and windrowing implements, pickup hay balers, and foreign harvesters. Also equipment to automatically feed and water livestock was widely adopted. And, as mentioned earlier, dairymen turned to mechanical milking machines.

By the 1970s and 1980s, almost every aspect of work on modern Tennessee commercial farms had been mechanized. By 1982, the 25,444 larger farms with sales of $10,000 or more annually were the main users and beneficiaries of the latest agricultural machinery. Farm technology had triumphed and transformed life and work on the state's commercial farms. It had been a revolution not only in Tennessee, but throughout the South and the nation.
Agricultural History


Technology


The Century Farms Exhibit Schedule

1988

Nashville (State Fair) Monday – September 18 - September 20

Clarksville ............................ Monday – October 1 October 2

Doverville ............................ November 21 – November 22

Decaturville ............................. November 3 – November 4

Knoxville .............................. November 5 – November 6

2000

Knoxville .............................. August 4 – August 6

Clarksville ............................ August 7 – August 8

Doverville ............................. August 9 – August 10

Decaturville .......................... August 11 – August 12

Knoxville .............................. August 13 – August 14

The Century Farms Program

The Century Farms program is a unique and exciting way to explore the history of agriculture in Tennessee. By highlighting the century farms, the program seeks to preserve and celebrate the rich agricultural heritage of the state. It offers visitors a unique opportunity to experience the history and culture of Tennessee through its farms. The program features century farms that have been in operation for at least 100 years, providing a glimpse into the past and the evolution of agricultural practices. Whether you are a history enthusiast, a lover of rural life, or simply interested in learning more about the agricultural history of Tennessee, the Century Farms program is an excellent resource. The program includes guided tours, workshops, and other educational events, all designed to engage visitors in the fascinating history of Tennessee's agriculture. Whether you visit one of the century farms, attend an educational event, or learn more about the program online, you can be assured of a rich and rewarding experience exploring the history of Tennessee's agricultural heritage.
Acknowledgements

"Tennessee's Century Farms: Change and Continuity over 200 Years of Farming" represents a collaboration of individuals and organizations in the most productive and pleasant sense of the word. From the idea to the reality, the exhibit, supporting publications, and activities have met with positive response and considerable cooperation from everyone who has been invited to participate.

The project has been very fortunate to have advisors who have accepted their responsibilities with enthusiasm and genuine interest. Continuing her commitment to the Century Farms program and the state's agricultural history, Dorothy Curtis, curator of the Oscar Farm Museum at the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, has advised the project since its beginning, offering thoughtful suggestions and the benefit of her experience and knowledge of farming and farmers. Robert Patterson, executive director of the Clarksville Montgomery County Historical Museum, assisted the project in construction and interpretation considerations. Century Farm owners Mr. and Mrs. John Corper of Beech Lawn Stock Farm near Fayetteville, have graciously provided information, photographs, ideas, and their support in many ways.

To the scholars who prepared the essays and suggested reading lists for this booklet, I am sincerely grateful. Each is well respected in his or her field, and this project has been strengthened immeasurably by their contribution.

Most of the artifacts traveling with the exhibit are on loan from the Oscar Farm Museum in Nashville, others are contributed by project staff and friends. The photographs are featured primarily from the Century Farm families, with additional ones provided by the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Tennessee State Library and Archives, the University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, and the Center staff. To the teams across Tennessee who readily agreed to host the exhibit and honor these local century farm families, we are grateful for your cooperation and your hospitality.

At MTSU, many individuals and departments have been involved in the development of this project. Beginning with the students who helped shape the idea of the exhibit and write the preliminary funding proposal—Todd Lowe, Mary Katherine Moore, who also worked on the project as a student assistant, Pamela Reynolds, and Matthew Rutherford—all are to be commended for their efforts and their accomplishments. Other students who have had a part of the planning and implementation are Teresa Brown, Lyles Forbes, Tony Hayes, and Mary Mason Shell. Very special thanks go to Ken Hay who put many hours of work and much thought into the exhibit. He was responsible for its construction and made many practical suggestions regarding its design and transport.

The staff of the Center for Historic Preservation have been the long-term supporters of the project, and I especially appreciate the encouragement and backing of the director, James R. Hubie. Carrell Van West, author of Tennessee Agriculture: A Century Farms Perspective brings both his academic training and farming background (his family owns a century farm) to his position as assistant director of this project. He also supplied many of the current photographs. Edward A. Johnson, research curator at the Center, has been an invaluable advisor on many aspects of the project, including data organization and exhibit planning and construction. Special thanks go to Marilyn Woodard, secretary at the Center, for her accounting and handwriting skills and her cooperation in the many project-related details.

The entire project could not have been accomplished without the guidance and cooperation of Publications and Graphics, Roma Clark, Judy Hall, Melinda Brandon, and others on the staff of that department, who have worked closely with me, and I have relied heavily on their professional recommendations, talent, skills, and creativity. Photographic Services and Printing Services have also directed their usual high quality work toward this project. The Department of Industrial Studies provided their excellent facilities while Frank Stanford supervised and assisted with the fabrication of the exhibit. Motor Pool and Maintenance employees go to considerable trouble to remove and replace the van’s extra seats each time the exhibit goes to another location. Finally, thanks to the Traffic Office of Southwestern Great American for providing the exhibit’s packing materials.

Climbing from a rural background that reaches back through six generations of Tennessee farmers, this project has been a personal and professional opportunity which I have greatly enjoyed. Much of that pleasure has come from meeting and working with people across the state who share a common dedication to the sensible management of change that will allow the continuation and progress of the state’s number one industry—agriculture.

Caneta Skelley Hawkins
Project Director