

# Agriculture: Oklahoma's Legacy

## Background

By the time Oklahoma and Indian Territories wed in 1907 to become the Great State of Oklahoma, there were over 62,000 farms, producing 8.6 million bushels of wheat, 113 million bushels of corn, 8 million chickens, 347,000 turkeys, 2 million bushels of potatoes, 90,000 bushels of flaxseed, 864,000 bales of cotton, and 60,000 sheep. By 1910, the 3-year-old state had over 190,000 farms.

That's amazing, considering 100 years earlier, US government surveyors had declared Oklahoma part of a Great American Desert, "unfit for cultivation and uninhabitable by people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." The Great American Desert was renamed the Great Plains, once actual farmers moved in and proved earlier assessments wrong.

The land that would become Oklahoma had an agricultural legacy long before statehood and long before the US government bought it from France as part of the Louisiana Purchase. Thousands of years earlier, ancient people were cultivating corn, squash, sunflowers and many other plants now considered weeds. On the plains nomadic tribes burned brush to manage grazing land for herds of bison, elk and deer.

One hundred years after statehood, Oklahoma has become one of the great agricultural states of the Great Plains. We have rolling prairie land, forests and streams. Today Oklahoma has 85,000 farms and ranches. The average size of a farm in Oklahoma is 400 acres, although there are also many farms and ranches of 5,000 acres. About 73 percent of our state's 45 million acres of land is used for farming and ranching.

## Language Arts

1. Read and discuss background
2. Share the following "The Story of Oklahoma Agriculture."
  - Divide students into groups, and have them act out one or more of the events in the story.
  - Have students draw pictures to illustrate the events, and place them on a timeline in the proper order.
  - Ask students these cause-effect questions about the events:
    - What caused the Cherokees, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creeks, and Seminoles to come to Indian Territory? (Other people wanted their land, and the government forced them to trade it

## P.A.S.S.

### PRE-KINDERGARTEN

**Creative Skills**—1.3  
**Oral Language**—1.1  
**Reading**—8.3,4  
**Writing**—9.4  
**Large Motor**—1.1,2,3

### KINDERGARTEN

**Reading**—6.1; 7.2a; 8.1a  
**Writing**—1.2,3  
**Oral Language**—2.1  
**Math**—2.1  
**Large Motor**—1.1,2  
**Science Process**—1.1  
**Social Studies**—1.2  
**Visual Arts**—3.1a

### GRADE 1

**Reading**—4.4; 6.3abc  
**Writing**—1.4; 2.5  
**Oral Language**—2.4  
**Math Process**—2.3; 5.1  
**Math Content**—5.1  
**Social Studies**—1.1; 2.3  
**Visual Arts**—3.1,2  
**Physical Education**—1.1,4; 4.4; 5.1,4

### GRADE 2

**Reading**—5.3a,4a  
**Writing**—2.2  
**Math Content**—5.1,2  
**Social Studies**—1.1,3; 2.5; 4.1,2  
**Visual Arts**—3.1,2  
**Physical Education**—1.2; 5.2

## Vocabulary

**bale**— large bundle of goods tightly tied for storing or shipping

**bushel**—any of various units of dry capacity

**civilization**—an advanced stage (as in art, science, and government) of social development

**desert**—dry land with few plants and little rainfall

**explorer**—a person who travels in search of new geographical or scientific information

**flaxseed**—the small seed of flax used as a source of linseed oil and in medicinal preparations

**legacy**—something received from the past

**longhorn cattle**—cattle with long horns formerly common in the southwestern U.S

**maize**—Indian corn

**mound**—a small hill or heap of dirt or stones

**subsistence**—the minimum (as of food and shelter) necessary to support life

**surveyor**—someone who gathers information from or about a place.

**territory**—a part of the U.S. not included within any state but having a separate governing body

**topsoil**—surface soil usually including the rich upper layer in which plants have most of their roots and which the farmer turns over in plowing

**uninhabitable**—unable to live or dwell in

for land in Indian Territory.)

—What were two effects the end of the Civil War had on Oklahoma? (Freed slave came to start all-Black towns. Soldiers and freed slaves joined cattle drives and drove cattle through Oklahoma.)

—What were two causes for the Dust Bowl? (There was very little rain for several years. Farmers had plowed up too much grass and left the soil with nothing to hold it in place.)

3. Have students prepare questions to ask family members about when the family came to Oklahoma. Then have students share the stories with the class. Write down the stories for a classroom book. Have students illustrate their stories for the book.
4. Much of the story of Oklahoma is the story of people moving from place to place. Have students write their own stories about moving or of changes they have had to make. (Could even be stories of starting school, changing from 1st grade to second grade, etc.)

## Social Studies

1. On a map of the US, show your students the state of Oklahoma, then trace the following historical migrations. As you trace the migrations, have students tell you the direction of the movement (N, S, E, W)
  - the movement of the Plains Indians through Oklahoma from Canada to Mexico and back again;
  - the movement of the Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw and Seminole from east of the Mississippi River to Indian Territory;
  - the movement of settlers into Oklahoma from Kansas, Arkansas and Texas;
  - the Okie migration from Oklahoma to California.—Divide your classroom or space on the playground to represent these migrations. Use signs to designate the cardinal directions.
  - Have students simulate the migrations to show how Oklahoma was settled. Assign students to each migration, and have them move as you read about the event. Use the cardinal directions to tell students which way to move. (For variation, have some students gallop, some skip and some hop.)Some students should represent the people who were already here by pretending to work in a garden (hoeing motion).

## Visual Arts

1. Discuss the meaning of the word “legacy” (definition in column at left). How is agriculture Oklahoma’s legacy? Have students brainstorm with you to plan a bulletin board with the theme, “Agriculture: Oklahoma’s Legacy.”

## Science

1. On the chalkboard draw two columns, one labeled “plants” and one labeled “animals.”
  - Read the names of some of the plants and animals listed in the statistical chart, and ask students to place them in the correct column.
  - As an alternative, provide students with slips of paper with the names of the plants and animals written on them. Provide two boxes, one labeled “plant” and one labeled “animal.” Have students place the slips of paper in the correct boxes.

## Math

1. In the chart of Oklahoma Ag Statistics included with this lesson, many of the agricultural products are rounded to the nearest million.
  - Create a chart with columns marked 1907, 1927, 1947, 1967, etc.
  - Provide manipulatives to represent chickens, cattle, and corn.
  - Have students count the number of millions for each (e.g., two toy cows to represent 2 million on farms in 1927), and place them on the chart under the correct year.
  - Which year had the most of each product? Which had the least?

## Extra Reading

Antle, Nancy, *Beautiful Land: A Story of the Oklahoma Land Rush*, Puffin, 1997.

Booth, David, and Karen Reczuch, *The Dust Bowl*, Kids Can, 1996

Hesse, Karen, *Out of the Dust*, Scholastic Paperback, 1999.

Pinkney, Andrea D., and Brian Pinkney, *Bill Pickett, Rodeo-Ridin' Cowboy*, Gulliver, 1996.

# The Story of Oklahoma Agriculture

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## **AD 600–1400, Spiro Culture**

Many years ago, there were people living in villages along the Arkansas River in eastern Oklahoma. These people built giant mounds of earth, like perfectly rounded hills. The mounds were at the center of their villages. All around the edges of the mounds, the people planted fields of maize to eat. Maize is what we call corn. We know these people lived there, because they left jewelry, cooking pots and other things buried in the mounds.

## **First Europeans**

No one knows what happened to the Mounds people, but many years later some other people were living in the same place, growing gardens along the Arkansas River and the Red River in southern Oklahoma. These people were ancestors of some Indian tribes that still live in Oklahoma today—the Osage, Caddo, Quapaw and Wichita. There were also people of the Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache and Comanche tribes living here part of the year. They hunted bison, deer and other game. These were the people living in Oklahoma in 1541, when two explorers from across the ocean first came. They were the first Europeans to see Oklahoma. Their names were Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and Hernando de Soto. They came from Spain.

## **Louisiana Purchase**

Spain claimed to own Oklahoma for awhile and then decided to give it to France. France sold it to the United States government in 1803. The government sent Zebulon Pike to look at Oklahoma. He didn't think anyone could live here. He called it a "Great American Desert." The explorer Stephen Long came through later. He agreed with Zebulon Pike. He did not think anyone could grow food here, even though people had been growing food in Oklahoma for over 1,000 years. Some other farmers came along and decided to try it anyway. They discovered that Oklahoma was a fine place for growing food.

## **Indian Territory**

People in a different part of the United States wanted to move onto land that belonged to the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek and Seminole tribes. The land was east of the Mississippi River. The US government decided those tribes should trade their land for some land in Oklahoma. The tribes didn't

really want to move, but the government said they had to. After awhile they came to Oklahoma. They built new homes and towns and planted maize and other crops.

## **End of Civil War**

A few years later, the United States had a war to stop slavery. Many of the freed slaves were farmers. Some of them decided to come to Oklahoma and build towns that were for African Americans only. There were more all-Black towns in Oklahoma than in all the rest of the country.

Some of the freed slaves came to Oklahoma to be cowboys. There were huge herds of wild longhorn cattle in Texas and Mexico. There were also soldiers returning from the war who needed something to do. There were people in other parts of the country who wanted beef to eat. The cowboys in Mexico taught the freed slaves and the soldiers how to be cowboys. After that the black and white cowboys began rounding up cattle. They drove the cattle through Oklahoma to railroad towns in Kansas. Then they put the cattle on railroad cars and shipped them to the places where people wanted more beef to eat.

After a few years people moving in to Oklahoma started putting fences around their farms. Then the cowboys couldn't drive cattle through Oklahoma anymore.

## **Land Runs and Statehood**

In 1889, the US government had some land left over in Oklahoma where Indians weren't living. The government let people who weren't Indians move in. They had several land runs to decide who would get what land. They called the land that didn't belong to the Indians "Oklahoma Territory."

In 1907 the government decided to put Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory together to form the Great State of Oklahoma.

## **Dust Bowl**

During the 1930s, Oklahoma almost did become a desert. There was very little rain for several years. Farmers had plowed up too much grass and left the soil with nothing to hold it in place. The good topsoil started to blow away. Clouds of dust buried roads and houses as far away as Washington, DC. On April 24, 1935, the worst dust storm of them all rolled across Oklahoma. That day was called "Black Sunday,"

because the dust was so thick it turned the sky black.

At about the same time, many Oklahoma farmers started leaving Oklahoma to find work in California. Some of those farmers left because of the Dust Bowl, but others left because of tractors. Tractors were a new invention. People who owned the farms figured out that if they had tractors, they didn't need as many workers. The workers who didn't have jobs anymore had to leave Oklahoma and find work somewhere else. They heard they could find work in California, so that's where they went.

After the Dust Storms, farmers decided they had to find a new way to farm. The government decided to help. Some farms had hardly any topsoil left. The government decided to buy those farms and turn them into public lands that couldn't be farmed. Instead they made those lands into lakes and parks and places where people could go to have fun. The government helped the farmers move to land that was better for farming. Farmers learned some ways to farm that would not hurt the land.

## **World War II**

In 1942, our country went to war. The government told Oklahoma farmers to grow more food because the war was tearing up the farms in Europe.

In Oklahoma, farmers started growing peanuts for the first time, but not for peanut butter. The government needed the oil from the peanuts to use in the war.

Some farmers stayed home from the war to grow food. Some of the people who didn't go to war left the farm to help build airplanes and other things needed for the war.

When the war was over, there were many people who decided not to go back to farming. They found they could make more money working in cities.

## **1950s**

Farming in Oklahoma changed quite a bit during the 1950s. Some of the things invented to use in the war turned out to be useful on the farm. Chemical pesticides kept the bugs off crops so the farmer could grow more. Farmers also found ways to water their crops and keep them alive, even when there was no rain. This was called "irrigation."

In eastern Oklahoma, some land had been used up from growing cotton on it. Some farmers started growing grass on that land for cattle.

Pecans had been growing wild in Oklahoma for hundreds of years. In the 1950s, farmers figured out how to grow bigger pecans that people wanted to buy.

## **1960s**

In the 1960s Oklahoma farmers had more and more trucks and tractors. They grew more cattle and wheat but had fewer milk cows and chickens. Cars were better and faster, so many farmers decided they wanted to live in town and drive to the farm to work. There were many more improvements to agriculture so farmers could grow larger cash crops on less land.

## **1970s**

In the 1970s the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System opened. This system connected Oklahoma to the Mississippi River. Oklahoma farmers could ship their wheat, soybeans and other products to New Orleans. From here they could be shipped all around the world.

In 1972, Oklahoma farmers began selling some of their wheat to the Soviet Union. This allowed wheat farmers to make more money.

## **1980s**

In the 1980s the prices farmers got for their products went down, and the cost of farming went up. Many farmers had to sell their farms. Stores and other businesses in small towns had to close, because the farmers were their main customers. Some farmers kept their farms but had to get jobs in town, too.

Another way some farmers stayed on the farm was to try different kinds of farming. This was called "alternative agriculture." Some farmers started catfish farms. Some opened dude ranches and invited people to come experience farm life. Others grew fruits and vegetables.

## **1990s through Today**

In the 1990s farmers started using computers and other technology. This helped them grow more food on less land. There were fewer farms, but those farms were larger.

There are not as many farmers in Oklahoma today as there were 100 years ago. On land where crops once grew there are cities and towns, shopping malls and houses. We are still an agricultural state, though. Oklahoma was built on the good soil of the Great Plains and the hard work of our farmers.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Oklahoma Agriculture, 1907–2007

	1907	1927	1947	1967	1987	2007*
number of farms (in thousands)	190	197	164	89	70	86
chickens on farms (in millions)	3	20	20	3	2	3
milk cows on farms (in thousands)	numbers not found	726	654	173	113	156
beef cattle on farms (in millions)	numbers not found	2	3	4	5	4
sheep and lambs on farms (in thousands)	60	101	155	145	90	76
hogs and pigs on farms (in thousands)	numbers not found	1,000	835	350	200	2,398
wheat (bushels, in mil- lion)	9	33	88	99	191	90
cotton (bales, in thou- sands)	864	1,000	260	225	numbers not found	280
hay (tons, in thousands)	494	2,000	2,000	numbers not found	numbers not found	6,608
potatoes (bushels, in thousands)	2,000	3,000	2,000	numbers not found	numbers not found	307 acres
oats (bushels)	numbers not found	21 million	25 million	numbers not found	1 million	463,000
corn (bushels, in mil- lions)	113	84	26	numbers not found	numbers not found	38

Source: US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract: Earlier Editions and USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service

\*latest census

Most numbers are rounded to nearest million or thousand