News Article for Coosa County 125th Birthday
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Roger Vines
County Extension Coordinator

How Agriculture Has Changed!

I was at a meeting recently where the speaker told the group that Alabama and our whole country for that matter has gone through two revolutions and we are entering a third. The first revolution was the agricultural revolution that made our country strong. With new advances in farming research we went from a subsistence economy to being able to meet most all our food demands and have food left over to help feed the world through exports. During this revolution the vast majority of people lived on small family farms. The second revolution was the industrial revolution, thanks in part to Henry Ford. With improved farming practices, fewer farmers could produce more food and fiber and allow others to work in industrial plants and assembly lines. Over time many people moved to the major cities to find higher paying jobs and as a result the large farms got larger, and the small farms began to disappear. The third revolution we are entering is called the information and communication revolution. Just think how the internet, cell phones, computers, satellites, and electronics have changed our society already. But let's go back to farming.

Farmers have always been a hard working bunch and much smarter and creative that most people have ever given them credit. In the "good old days", the land was cleared with an ax and sweat, and the ground broke by mule and plow. Then came the tractor and what a difference that made. The early models were very simple machines without a lot of power but they would pull a plow. But the race was on. Soon a variety of tractors were on the market and each year they became larger and stronger. Soon tractors had a PTO (power take off) so you could run a mower as well as a pull a plow. I believe the Allis-Chalmers company was the first to come up with the three-point hitch system that is still in use today. Tractors went from having heavy solid metal wheels to rubber tires, from two wheel drive to four wheel drive, and from gasoline powered to diesel powered. Then came the inventions of power steering, the front end lift, airconditioned cabs and huge tractors and implements to cover huge farms in the Midwest. The implements and attachments have also gone through some remarkable changes and now there are attachments for bailing hay, splitting wood, blowing grain, spraying weeds, and the list goes on.

As you look around Coosa County now with our large areas of forest land, it's hard to picture a time when we grew cotton, corn, vegetables and other crops. Yet many areas of the county still show evidence of these small farms. A walk through the woods will often show signs of terracing, a much needed practice in order to control erosion and still grow crops on hilly terrain. Much of this started back in the 1930's. In fact one record indicates that in 1933 there were a total of 1963 acres terraced on 127 farms in Coosa County. Through a cooperative agreement with the county governing body and the Farm Program (later to become the Extension Service and other agencies) three power terracing units were purchased and used around the county. The basis for using these units was a charge of $3.00 per hour which amounted to about $3.00 per acre on well cleared land.

Coosa county was one of the first in the state to have an established Extension and Farm Program. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 officially began Extension in Alabama, but Coosa County already had a farm demonstration agent, a home demonstration agent, and a 4-H Club agent. The roles of these people were to "extend" the research knowledge base of the Alabama Land Grant Institutions such as the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (later Auburn University) to the farm families in Alabama. This was done through demonstrations or "on-farm" tests of practices developed through research. In fact, the first 4-H club which started around 1909 was called "Boys Corn Clubs". The idea was to teach young boys how to

raise corn using the most up-date methods and compete to see who could produce the most corn. When the boys began to produce more corn per acre than their parents, the parents began to take notice as well. One of these first corn club members was Mr. Morris Catchings, and his family still sponsors an award called the J.M. Catchings Award each year to an outstanding boy and girl 4-H member in our county.

The first two Coosa county agents were Mr. W.T. Coker and Mr. J.T. Staples who were special agents from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Not much is known about these two individuals but the third agent, Mr. S.M. Day who worked for a number of years, provided some records of farming at that time. Mr. Day got the job "accidently" when he wrote a letter to the USDA in Washington asking for information on "scientific farming". Because of his interest in learning, he was called and offered the job of county agent. He was employed and began to work two days per week at a salary of $25 per month. He began work on August 1, 1910. The next year his Corn Club boys, won the region for growing the most corn per acre. He also documented that at that time farming operations in Coosa County included: 32,047 acres of cotton, 24,821 acres of corn, 3,712 head of horses and mules, 4, 196 head of dairy cows, 1,349 head of beef cattle, 5,844 head of swine, and 53,797 chickens.

A few years later around 1915, home demonstration agents were hired and began the home demonstration clubs. These agents worked with women to provide education on cooking, food preservation, sewing, and other topics related to home life. An outgrowth of this was the Tomato Clubs for the Girls, which was the beginning of girls becoming involved in what is now the 4-H Club. Before long there were over 300 women involved in Home Demonstration Clubs and over 330 girls in the Tomato Clubs.

The Coosa County Farm Department, as it was first called, grew even bigger. As quoted in the CENTRAL ALABAMAIAN, "the Farm Department has grown from a small County Agent's office, until now it embraces eleven different departments, all actively serving the farmers of the county. These departments are as follows: Farm Credit System, Coosa County Farm Bureau, Farm Debt Adjustment, Farm Demonstration Work, Home Demonstration Work, 4-H Club Work, Agricultural Conservation Program, Cooperative Jack, Coosa County Farmers Exchange, Soil Conservation Program, and Rural Resettlement. The activities of these departments, centering around those of the local Extension Service, make up the Coosa County Farm Program." Now these divisions of the Farm Department are separate agencies, however not all have remained to the present. The agencies we still have under different names, include the Extension System, the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Soil and Water Conservation District, the Alabama Farmers Cooperatives, and the Alabama Farmers Federation. And while not part of the original Farm Department, we also currently have the Forestry Commission and Department of Conservation to assist with the management of our forest lands.

If you noticed above, one of the departments that did not persist until the present was the Cooperative Jack Program. You may say, what was that? The record shows that "The Farm Department has recently acquired a cooperative jack under the active management of of Mr. E.L. Boyett. The jack is an exceptionally fine individual and the farmers who have seen him are very favorably impressed by him. A service fee of $10 will be charged, with $5 payable at service and $5 when the colt arrives."

To sum this up, we have seen some huge changes in agriculture in Coosa County over the years. Back in early 1900's, farmers bragged about their cotton and corn harvest. One article states that "sixty-seven farmers using the new 6-8-4 fertilizer averaged 337 pounds of cotton lint per acre over eighteen farmers who used other grades and only produced 243 pounds per acre." Today (in counties where we have cotton) the farmers soil test and apply exactly the nutrients needed by the crop and typically produce 700-800 pounds per acre. A good harvest of 25 bushels of corn per acre has been replaced by yields of 100 to 125 bushels per acre. Much of this is the result of new hybrid corn varieties and improved cultural practices. I'm sure the farmers back in those days would be very impressed! But more than this, I think they would say, where did all the cotton go and why did you let all this farm land grow up in trees!