

## Musings About Change in the Ways We Farm, Ranch and Eat.

When I was growing up, Texas advertised itself as the “Land of Cattle, Cotton and Oil,” and the area where we lived had plenty of examples of each. We lived in an Oil company camp that my father worked for in Gains County, surrounded by ranches and cotton fields, and after high school I worked several summers in the oil field there as well.

Initially, at least in my memory, most of the surrounding land was cattle ranches, although being in the “drought of the 50’s,” there weren’t that many cattle most of the time. So as far as I was concerned, the pastures were just there for me to explore and watch the wildlife, and later, do a little hunting.

The timing was such that a lot of the mesquite/shinnery/short grass pastures were being plowed under by bulldozers with big discs as I watched and were turned into cotton and sorghum fields. When I was 10 years old I went to work for the farmer of one of those fields, and I continued working there summers and some week-ends for five years until the farmer died and then I worked for his wife for another year.

The main work was irrigation of the cotton fields with water being pumped out of the, at the time, seemingly exhaustless, Ogallala aquifer. And over time we went from one method of irrigation to the next to yet a third.

The first method involved making a big ditch at the high end of the cotton rows, pumping water into the ditch and then digging holes in the ditch at the head of each row to let the water flow down the row until it reached the end. WE then filled in the holes in the wet rows and opened others down the line. The second method used the same ditches but we used syphon tubes to draw the water out of the ditch and into the individual rows. Both methods involved constant tending.

The next method replaced all of the ditches with joints of aluminum pipes with sprinklers which were laid down a row between the cotton to water many rows at a time. Then periodically, several times each day, we had to move the pipe over 30 or 40 feet to water the next section. The sprinklers didn’t involve constant tending, but it did require two of us to move the line of pipe every few hours. The cotton was wet and the irrigated fields were muddy—it was a messy job.

I didn’t stay in farming long enough to experience the modern version of irrigation which involves the center-pivot systems and/or the mechanical movement of a whole line of sprinkler pipe, involving less manpower, but more expense.

My involvement with the “cattle” part of Texas was mainly limited to the consumption end except for the three 4-H calves I raised. Back then feed lots were much less common and smaller scale and a lot of us got our meat locally from local ranchers or local slaughter houses/butcher shops.

We would buy, sometimes along with a neighbor, a whole or half of a carcass and have the butcher process it as per our instructions and wrap and freeze all of the meat. The butcher had huge freezers with many compartments that we called “meat lockers,” which we rented from the butcher and that is where we went to get our meat to take home.

An example of another part of the food business, I worked part time in the winter at a local grocery store, doing all sorts of odd jobs. Occasionally, I got to work behind the meet counter, mainly weighing our hamburger meat or wrapping steaks. On a few occasions I was given the task of cutting up whole chickens into pieces on a band saw (I am sure OSHA would go ballistic at the thought of a 13 year-old boy using a band saw, but I still have all of my fingers).

We have come a long way since then with everything neatly packaged, wrapped and weighed. I don't think the phrase “boneless and skinless” existed back then, and if we were still doing things the old way, food would cost us a fortune, and the number of choices would be a fraction of what it is now.

Interestingly, before my time the vast majority of all land use was for ranching, and what farming was done was dry land farming with the high probability of poor years with too little rain. Now the land is almost all farming and not all cotton and sorghum but many other crops, especially corn and soybeans. While oil is still important in the area, even farming is encroaching on that business as 40% of all corn grown is converted into ethanol.

Until next time...

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