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Mississippi Farm Trends 1950-1964

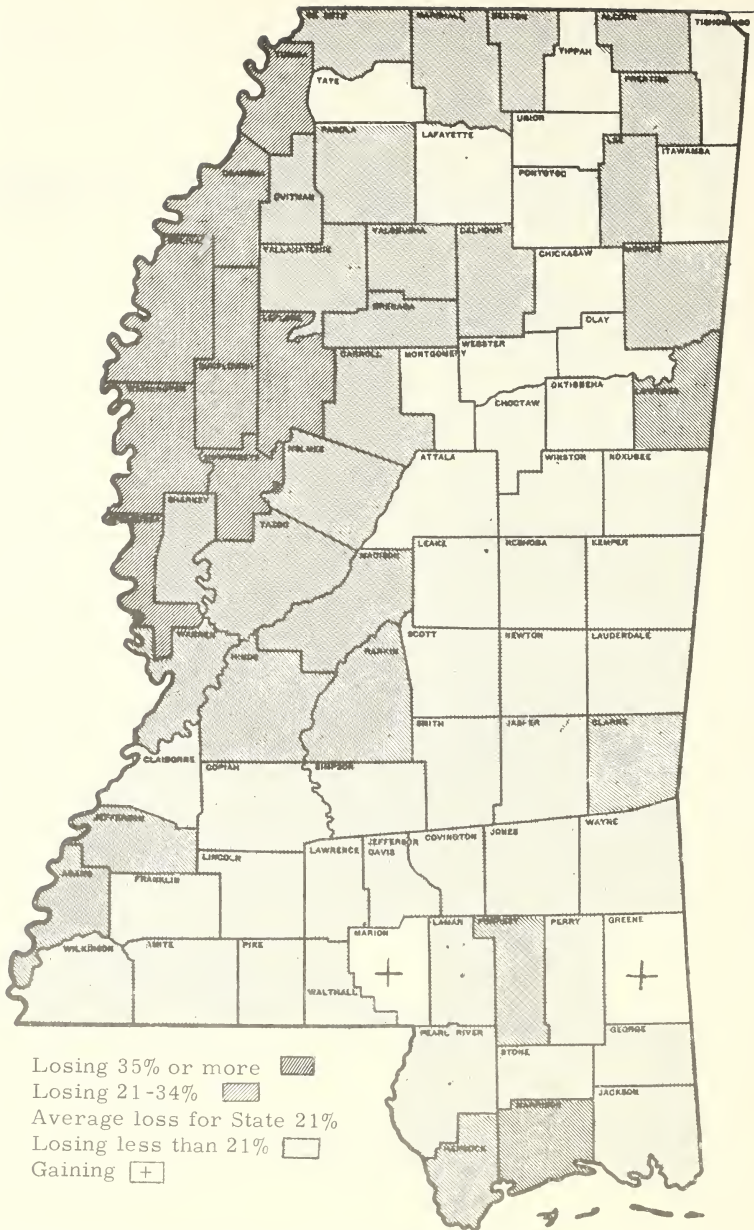
By

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Percent change in number of farms and farmers in Mississippi counties 1959-1964
 --the darker the county the heavier the loss.

MISSISSIPPI FARM TRENDS 1950 TO 1964

By ELLEN S. BRYANT and KIT MUI LEUNG*

Movement out of agriculture in Mississippi is slowing down but the state's farming enterprise continues to adapt to changing economic patterns. The trend is toward increasingly efficient, mechanized, large-scale farming industries and away from the pattern of small, economically marginal, family - operated units which once dominated rural life styles in Mississippi.

Final reports from the latest Census of Agriculture indicate that during the first half of this decade Mississippi experienced a period of continued losses of farms, farmers, and land areas farmed; but concomitant with these losses were readjustments in size of farms and the proportions in categories of ownership, part - time farming, off-farm work, off-farm residence, hired farm labor, and retirement farming.

Trends in Rate of Loss

The total loss of farms and farmers¹ since 1950 amounts to more than 142,000 or 56.6 percent. Nearly 30,000 of this number were removed from farming during the last reported five-year census period. While this latest loss, which amounts to an average state 21 percent decrease, is sizeable, it is considerably less than the 80,000, or 36 percent, of farmers lost during the preceding census period (1954 to 1959), and even slightly less than the 35,000 or 14 percent, leaving agriculture during the first half of the 1950 decade. Thus while losses continue, the peak in outmovement seems to have been reached in the latter part of the 1950's and losses are now beginning to level off.

Peaking of loss rates in the 1954 to 1959 period characterized the trends for both the owner and tenant groups. How-

ever for part-time farming the trend was reversed. For this group, the 1954 to 1959 period was one of growth rather than heavy loss. Similarly, this period saw a reversal from loss to gain in the number of hired farm laborers. The contradictory trends demonstrated by these two latter categories indicate that part-time farming and day labor may operate as residual, or adjustment categories which absorb some of the farm population involved in the off-farm movement.

Loss of farm units has, of course, to some extent been counteracted by increases in the average size of units staying in production. The average acreage has in fact doubled from 82.4 acres in 1950 to 162.6 acres in 1964. However the proportion of the state's land area used for farming has also decreased — from 68.5 percent in 1950 and 1954 to —61.6 percent in 1959 to—58.8 percent in 1964, representing a net removal of 850,000 acres from agriculture during the last five years and 3,000,000 acres since 1950.²

County Differences

While the state averaged a 21 percent loss of farmers during the 1959 to 1964 period, county losses varied considerably. As the map in Figure 1 illustrates,

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¹In the Census of Agriculture, the number of farms and the number of farmers are always identical. Each farm has one operator, by definition.

²Of the approximate 30 million acres of land area in Mississippi, 20.7 million were in farms in 1950; in 1964, about 17.7 million acres were still in farms.

losses of better than 35 percent were sustained by most Delta counties and by Lowndes and Harrison counties. In Leflore, Sunflower, Tunica and Washington counties, losses hovered at or close to 50 percent. Losses of between 21 and 35 percent occurred in counties bordering the Delta and in many of those having recent and outstanding population growth. Included are several northeastern counties as well as Forrest, Hancock, Adams and Hinds counties. In all, 36 of Mississippi's 82 counties had farmer losses at or above the state's average. Below average losses seem to have occurred in many highly rural hill counties. Two counties in southern Mississippi even recorded a slight net gain of farmers.

Proportional Growth of Owner Groups

Losses have been spread throughout all tenure groups but the sharpest reductions have occurred in the farm tenant group. Over 100,000, or two thirds, of those lost in the 15-year period since 1950 were tenant farmers. As a result; the farm - owner - operator group has grown from a minority status of 48 percent in 1950 to a dominating majority of 76 percent in 1964. The trend away from a predominance of the tenant status to a predominance of the owner status can be traced back to 1930 when less than 30 percent of Mississippi's farmers were farm owners.

Heaviest loss in both owner and tenant groups, as mentioned above, occurred between 1954 and 1959 when approximately 25,000 owners and 55,000 tenants left farming. While loss rates have decreased for both groups since 1959, the two-to-one ratio of tenant to owner loss has continued into the 1960's. The ratio of tenant to owner loss was even higher during the early 1950's when six tenants were leaving farming for every owner-operator lost.

The sizeable losses of farm owners dates back only to 1954. Between 1925 and 1950 gains in the number of farm owners were recorded by every Agricultural Census, and, in the years following World War II, close to 15,000 were added to ownership categories. Apparently, the competitive nature of modern agriculture first affected the marginal tenant farmer but is now also forcing inefficient owner enterprises out of operation.

Farming in Mississippi is becoming less and less a way of life and more and more a business industry. The five-year losses of farm owners for each of the three successive census periods since 1950 have been 5,000, 25,000 and 10,000 respectively.

Nonwhite Losses

Racial differences in farm and farm-tenure loss trends are also apparent. Over half of the total number in farming since 1950 have been white and; by 1964, white farmers were outnumbering nonwhite farmers by nearly two to one, indicating that loss rates of nonwhite farmers have exceeded those for whites by enough margin to affect the racial composition of the farming population. Over 60 percent of the farmer losses during the 1950's were nonwhite; since 1959 this proportional loss has dropped to about 55 percent.

The chief concentration of nonwhite loss has been in the tenant category. Here, nonwhite losses have made up about 80 percent of the total, or 80,000 farmers, during the 15-year period. Nevertheless, in spite of the heavy loss of nonwhites in the tenant category, the proportion of the tenant category which is nonwhite has hovered between 73 and 74 percent since 1950.

In the ownership categories, the largest losses have occurred in the white

population. In the first half of the 1950's there was a five to one ratio of white to nonwhite losses; in the second half a three to one loss ratio occurred; in the first half of the 1960's the loss ratio was still two to one. However, the rate of loss, while higher for whites during the 1950's has been higher for non whites since 1960. The racial composition of the owner groups has continued at about two-thirds white during the entire fifteen-year period.

Part-Time Farming

Part-time farming has long been considered a path out of farming. Presumably, a farmer begins his migration out of farming by supplementing his farm income with an off-farm job. His new work obligations then lead him to reduce farming operations to a part-time basis. As he becomes proficient in his new skills and obtains a degree of security in a nonfarm occupation he may close down his farming operation altogether or even sell his property and move to town.

The recent Agricultural Census does not contradict this possibility. During the 1954 to 1959 period when losses of farmers was most severe, there was an increase in both the number and proportion of part-time farmers in the state. Thus, while some farmers who were faced with a need for economic adjustment may have made a direct transition from farm to nonfarm life, others may have resorted to the part-time enterprise as a means of experimenting with off-farm work or of maintaining a preferred but economically insufficient rural life style.

The table shows that, after increasing during the latter years of the 1950's, part-time farming has decreased, both numerically and proportionally, since 1959. This indicates that some of those who entered part-time farming in the earlier period probably did use it as a

means to achieve ultimate separation from an agricultural occupation.

A further indication of the progressive gradual readjustment of the farming enterprise to general economic and social change can also be had from the statistics on commercial classes of farms. Proportionally and numerically, commercial farms³ increased between 1950 and 1954, but decreased in the latter half of the decade when part-time farming increased. Since 1960, commercial farming has increased proportionally (although not numerically), while part-time farming has decreased. Presumably, the first decrease of commercial farms came when less efficient units shifted to a part-time basis and then increased proportionally as these marginal farmers completed the second stage of their move out of agriculture.

On the other hand some farm operators leaving either rented or owned farms may not be leaving agriculture. The hired farm labor force, while decreasing in the first half of the 1950 decade, has been growing since 1954. In fact the 32,000 regular hired workers, employed 150 days or more a year, counted in 1964 represent an approximate numerical recovery of the 1950 work force size.

The number of farms using hired labor has also increased, from 2.3 percent in 1954 to 5.1 percent in 1959 and to 6.8 percent in 1964. Some of Mississippi's former farmers may also be entering the migratory farm labor streams which

³In general all farms with a total value of products sold amounting to \$2500 or more are classified as commercial if the farm operator was under 65 years and (1) he did not work off the farm 100 or more days during the year and (2) the income received by the operator and his family from nonfarm sources was less than the value of all farm products sold.

follow the crop from Florida to New England and provide needed seasonal farm labor. Approximately 5000 entered this stream from Mississippi in 1965, according to the Employment Security Commission in Jackson.

Evidence of a trend toward integration of town and farm life can also be found in the Censuses of Agriculture. The proportion of farmers working-off-their farm 100 days or more has been steadily increasing. From a slight 8 percent in 1950, the proportion rose to include 34 percent in 1964. If those doing some, but less than 100 days, off-farm work are included, the 1964 percent reaches nearly 50.

It is, of course, not only the part-time farmer who does off-farm work. Another pattern which is increasingly in evidence is a farmer's having a residence which is not on the farm operated. The proportion following this pattern has increased from 2.9 percent in 1950 to 7.5 percent in 1964. While some of the off-farm residences may be rural, some are no doubt town residences. The necessity for a farmer to live on the farm he operates may be rapidly becoming a characteristic of the past. Part-time farming may be a way of getting out of farming but residing off-the-farm may be a way of adopting an urban life style without giving up a profitable agricultural operation.

Retirement Farming

A noteworthy proportion of Mississippi's farms are also operated by retired persons.⁴ Between 1959 and 1964 the proportion increased only slightly, but nevertheless the retention of 15 to 16 percent of farming units by retired or semi-retired persons implies that the next 10 to 15 years will see a further reduction in farming units of at least this proportion, unless, of course, farm youth can be recruited into entering farm occupa-

tions. This does not seem to be occurring to any sizeable extent at present.

The average age of Mississippi farmers has been getting consistently higher since 1950, increasing by about 5 years to 52.8 years over the 15-year period. Thus, unless there is recruitment of youth into farming, half of Mississippi's farmers will be past retirement age in about 12 years. Currently 20 percent are 65 years old or older, and, as noted above a substantial proportion of these are already at least partly retired.

Farm Life Style

Improvements in the average farm family's economic and social levels are also noticeable in figures from the 1964 Census of Agriculture. First, educational levels are increasing. The average number of years of school completed by members of farm households has increased from a low of 4.5 years in 1950 to 8.6 years in 1964. Second, the average size of household decreased from 4.4 in 1950 to 3.7 in 1964, a figure which closely approaches the national average. Third, average farm family incomes are increasing. The general population census gave \$711 as a median family income of the farm population in 1950. In 1960, this same source gave \$1,653 for the median farm family income. The Agricultural Census, including for the first time data on the farm family income, sets the average at \$1,925. Some of this latter increase may result from methodological and sampling differences in the two types of censuses, but it seems reasonable to assume that most of the improvement is real.⁵

Lastly, there have been sizeable improvements in mechanization and use of

⁴Operator 65 years old or over; sales \$50 to \$2,499.

⁵1950 and 1960 data on education and household size are also from the general Census of Population.

electrical home appliances by the Mississippi farm family. Between the years 1954 and 1964, the percent of farms equipped with automobiles nearly doubled; the percent having telephones tripled; the use of home freezers quadrupled, with 16.8 percent having this item in 1954 and 66.4 percent having it in 1964; and the percent possessing television sets increased nearly six-fold to roughly 80 percent at the last census.

Summary and Conclusion

The dominant demographic trends in Mississippi agriculture in the recent past can be summarized, chronologically, as follows:

1. A back to the farm movement occurred during the depression of the 1930's when increments accumulated in both owner and tenant categories. The State had a total of about 312,000 farmers in 1930 and 1935.

2. Since the depression there have been continuous declines in the total numbers of farmers in the state.

3. However, during and immediately after World War II, the state seems to have experienced a limited back to the farm movement which was expressed by numerical growth of ownership categories. In 1950 there were 120,000 farm owners in the state, as compared with approximately 85 to 90,000 during the depression years.

4. Since 1950—the period analyzed by this report—movement out of farming has proceeded more rapidly and the total number of farm operators has been reduced by more than 55 percent between 1950 and 1964, from 250,000 to 109,000.

5. Outmovement since 1950 has occurred among both owners and tenants, but losses of the latter have been much more severe. The ratio of tenant to owner loss was six to one between 1959 and 1954, and since then has been at a two to one loss ratio. Eighty percent of the losses of farm tenants has been nonwhite.

6. Heaviest farmer losses have been in the nonwhite group resulting in a change in the racial composition of farmers from slightly over 50 percent in the white group in 1950 to about 66 percent in 1964.

7. Substantial loss in the ownership categories dates only to 1954. Between 1954 and 1959, 25,000 farm owners left farming. The preceding five-year period saw only about 5,000 leave. The only other recent period during which there was a sizeable net loss of farm owners in Mississippi was between 1920 and 1925, when about 10,000 left.

8. Concurrent with the peak losses of farm tenants and owners between 1954 and 1959, there was an increase in the numbers in categories of part-time farming, farm labor, and migratory farm labor. The inference is that these categories absorbed people who were leaving self employment on the farm but who nevertheless either preferred or were forced to remain in some type of agricultural work.

9. While the number of farmers and the actual land in farming has decreased, the farm units remaining in farming are increasing in size and becoming more mechanized.

10. Farm family living is rapidly becoming urbanized in terms of using convenience appliances and having higher levels of education and income.

In conclusion, there seems to be three patterns of social organization developing within the farming complex in Mississippi. First, agricultural production is being increasingly dominated by large scale, mechanized, efficiently managed white farmer enterprises. Second, supporting these enterprises is a growing group of wage laborers, mostly Negro, which has been displaced largely from inefficient tenant units. Third, there is a growing group of semi-farm, semi-urban

people who are augmenting the blending of town and country life styles. These consist of two subtypes, those who live in town and operate farms and those who live on the farm but have primarily urban occupations.

There is no reason not to expect a continuation of all these patterns. Roads, radios, cars, schools and television, along with an increasingly efficient and grow-

ing industrial economy are urbanizing the aspirations of a large proportion of Mississippi's farm youth. The day of the marginal tenant farmer is in its twilight. That of the small, relatively self-sufficient farm owner is rapidly drawing to a close. The aspects of rural family life that are preserved may well be those that are tied to a blending of urban and rural occupations and residences.

Characteristics of Mississippi farms, farm operators and farm households, 1950 to 1964

Characteristic	1964	1959	1954	1950
Farmers				
Number	109,141	138,142	215,915	251,383
Percent decrease per 5-year period	-21.0	-36.0	-14.1	4.6
Owners				
Percent of total	76.1	67.1	53.7	48.0
Percent white	77.0	75.7	76.1	76.0
Percent nonwhite	23.0	24.3	23.9	24.0
Tenants				
Percent of total	23.5	31.6	45.9	51.6
Percent white	27.5	26.0	26.1	27.5
Percent nonwhite	72.5	74.0	73.8	72.5
Percent 65 and over	20.1	18.0	15.2	13.1
Median age	52.8	51.2	48.2	46.2
Percent working off their farm	34.0	29.9	20.3	8.0
Percent residing off farm operated*	7.5	5.0	4.3	2.9
Regular hired workers**				
Number of workers	31,889	24,817	17,740	33,195
Percent of farms using hired workers	6.8	5.1	2.3	3.3
Farm Households***				
Number of persons per household	3.7	4.4	NA	4.4
Median family income, dollars*	1,925	1,653	NA	711
Median years of school completed, 25 years & over	8.7	8.1	NA	4.5
Farms				
109,141	138,142	215,915	251,383	
Percent state land area in farms	58.7	61.6	68.5	68.5
Average acres per farm	162.6	134.9	95.9	82.4
By Economic class				
Percent commercial	56.6	53.1	68.8	62.3
Percent part-time	26.1	31.3	12.8	NA
Percent retirement	16.7	15.5	NA	NA
Percent with				
Telephone	40.2	26.7	13.8	6.5
Television	79.1	NA	13.7	NA
Home freezer	66.4	42.6	16.8	4.5
Automobile	65.1	52.8	39.1	26.8

*Published in the preliminary reports.

**Employed 150 days or more.

***Data on Farm households for years 1950 and 1959 are from the 1950 and 1960 U. S. Censuses of Population and apply to the periods for which data was gathered.

Sources: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Agriculture, 1964 Statistics for the State and County Mississippi; Idem., U. S. Census of Population, 1960 and 1950; Idem., Preliminary Report of the Census of Agriculture, 1964, Mississippi.