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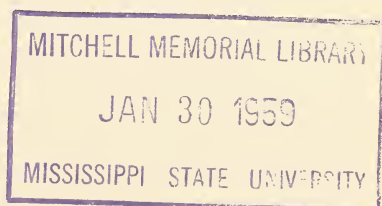
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***FARMERS  
MOVING  
OUT  
of Agriculture***



MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY  
AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

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# FARMERS MOVING OUT OF AGRICULTURE

By ANDREW W. BAIRD and WILFRID C. BAILEY<sup>1</sup>

The population of the United States has been characterized by a high degree of mobility between farm and non-farm occupations. In the past 35 years an average of more than two million persons have moved either to or from farms each year. In general the movement away from farms has been much greater than the movement to farms.

For the ten-year period between 1940 and 1950 a total of 8.6 million persons alive at both the beginning and end of the period migrated from farms. The net out-migration rate for the 1940 to 1950 period was 31 percent compared with 13 percent for 1930 to 1940. For the South, the region with the highest net farm out-migration, the rate was 36 percent. The farm out-migration rate for Mississippi was 35 percent, slightly below that for the South. The lowest rate, 21 percent, occurred in the northeastern United States.<sup>2</sup>

Information of a general nature is available on the mobility between farm and non-farm occupations. However, many questions may be raised concerning the individuals and land involved in this shift. What are the characteristics of the people who shift from farm to non-farm occupations? Is the shift a sudden one or are several steps or stages involved in the process? What happens to the land formerly operated by people who shift from farm to non-farm occupations?

It is the purpose of this article to ex-

amine some of these questions relative to data obtained in Alcorn County, Mississippi.

## Loss of Farmers in Alcorn County

In 1955 schedules were taken from a sample of 161 farm operators<sup>3</sup> living in six communities in Alcorn County. Three years later schedules were again taken from the same group of farmers. It was found that over the three-year period 52 (32 percent) of those farming in 1954 were either no longer farming or were farming in different communities. Nine farms were taken over by new operators resulting in a net loss of 43 farm operators in the survey communities.

The changes were grouped into three types as follows:

	Number	Percent
Moved to farm in other community	8	15
Retired	15	29
Obtained non-farm employment	29	56
Total	52	100

There is an indication that communities located in the poorer farming areas and which are the greatest distance from sources of non-farm employment suffer the greater loss of farm operators. The two communities in the sample having the greater number of changes, Brush Creek and Mathis, are both located in poor farming areas and are long distances from sources of non-farm employment

<sup>3</sup>Farmers included in this study had at least five acres of cropland, worked on the farm at least one-third of the time (approximately 100 days), lived on the farm in 1954, owned work power, and made their own decisions on enterprise. Schedules were taken in 1955 covering the 1954 crop year and the resurvey in 1958 covered the 1957 crop year.

<sup>1</sup>This report is part of a larger study conducted by the Department of Rural Life of the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station and the Tennessee Valley Authority in cooperation with the Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service and the Alcorn County Community Development Council.

<sup>2</sup>Gladys Kleinwort Bowles. *Farm Population: Net Migration from the Rural-Farm Population*. (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1956).

(Table 1). Brush Creek had a 53 percent change and Mathis 47 percent. Lovejoy, with a 36 percent change, is a long distance from non-farm employment and a poor farming area. However, many changes in this community occurred prior to 1954. Farmington and McGlathery are both located in fairly good farming areas but are near non-farm employment. Hinkle, the community with the fewest changes, 18 percent, is a long distance from non-farm employment but has some of the best farming land in the county. In each community non-farm employment accounted for the greatest change.

The place of residence of those no longer farming was as follows:

	Moved		Remained	
	No.	%	No.	%
Retired	1	7	14	93
Non-farm employment	11	38	18	62
Total no longer farming	12	27	32	73

The population loss to the communities losing farmers is not as great as it might appear. Although they stopped farming, the majority, 73 percent, are still living in the same community as when they were farming. Of those no longer farming only one-fourth (27 percent) moved from the community in which they were living in 1954.

Those who stopped farming and had gone into non-farm employment gave the following reasons for doing so:

Reason for going into non-farm employment	Number	Percent
Make more money	19	66
No help on farm	4	14
Help pay for farm	2	7
Disabled	2	7
No land of own	1	3
Other	1	3
Total	29	100

An interesting point is that several individuals stated that their non-farm jobs

were temporary. One said that as soon as his farm was paid for he planned to go back to farming altogether.

### Characteristics of the People Who Shift from Farming to Non-farm Occupations

Part-time farming is often a transitional phase. For some it may serve as a means to becoming a full-time farmer in the future. In Alcorn County part-time farming is most often a step toward full-time non-farm employment. There is an indication that the transition from full-time farming to non-farm employment involves three steps: (1) The farmer obtains non-farm employment to supplement his farm income; (2) later the farm income tends to supplement the non-farm income, and (3) the final step is to stop farming altogether. The supporting data for these three steps are presented below in the characteristics of the people involved.

Seventy percent of the sample farm operators still farming in 1957 were full-time farmers in 1954 (Table 2). Thirty percent had non-farm employment to supplement their farm income. In contrast, 50 percent of those who quit farming were part-time farmers<sup>4</sup> in 1954. So a greater percentage of those who stopped farming had non-farm employment in 1954. But what about the 1957 occupation of those still farming? Sixty-five percent of those farming in 1957 were full-time farmers and 35 percent had non-farm employment. This suggests that more Alcorn County farmers are in the process of shifting to non-farm employment.

A comparison of income for those no longer farming and those still farming provides further evidence that part-time farming is a step toward full-time non-farm employment (Table 2). Eighty percent of the families no longer farming in 1957 had non-farm income in 1954. In con-

<sup>4</sup>For purposes of this article a farmer having any non-farm employment is considered a part-time farmer.

Table 1. Loss of farmers, 1954-1957.

Community	Total number of farmers, 1954	No longer farming in same community, 1957	
		Number	Percent
Brush Creek .....	19	10	53
Mathis .....	30	14	47
Lovejoy .....	11	4	36
Farmington .....	25	9	36
McGlathery .....	25	6	24
Hinkle .....	51	9	18
Total .....	161	52	32

trast, 63 percent of the families still farming in 1957 had non-farm income in 1954.

Those dropping out of farming also had a higher net family income and a higher family non-farm income. However, they had a lower gross farm income in 1954. This indicates that the man no longer farming first obtained a non-farm job to supplement his farm income. Later, as his non-farm income increased the farm income became supplementary to the non-farm income. The final step in the transition was to stop farming altogether.

A comparison of age shows that farmers are losing in numbers from both ends of the age limits (Table 2). The median age in 1957 of those working at non-farm employment was 41 and that of retired farmers was 70. The median age of those still farming was between the two, or 50 years. The median age of the entire group was 49 years.

It should be pointed out that between the two survey periods, 1954 and 1957, farmers became eligible for Social Security. This influenced both the age and number of farmers retiring. In the future it would be expected that a smaller number of farmers would retire during a three-year period. Also, they would be expected to retire at an earlier age.

Farmers who had gone into non-farm employment had the lowest number of years in school, the median number being seven (Table 2). Retired farmers and those still farming in 1957 had been to school a median of eight years.

Table 2. Comparison of those still farming with those who left farming.

	Still farming	Left farming
OCCUPATION		
1954 (percent)		
Full-time farmer	70	50
Part-time farmer	30	50
1957 (percent)		
Full-time farmer	65	—
Part-time farmer	35	—
INCOME (median dollars, 1954)		
Net family	541	679
Gross farm	1,351	1,009
Family non-farm	250	750
AGE (1957 median)		
Still farming	50	—
Non-farm employment	—	41
Retired	—	70
EDUCATION (1957 median)		
Still farming	8	—
Non-farm employment	—	7
Retired	—	8
FARM PRACTICE SCORE (1954 average)		
	6.2	5.1

A survey in 1954 on the knowledge and use of 12 recommended farm practices found that the average operator was using about half of the practices applicable to his farm.<sup>5</sup> Those not farming in 1957 were poorer operators in 1954 than were those who remained in farming (Table 2).

Operators who quit farming had had an average adoption score of 5.1 while those still farming had a score of 6.2.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert A. Aurbach and Harold F. Kaufman. "Knowledge and Use of Recommended Farm Practices," *Mississippi Farm Research*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (June, 1956).

### What Has Happened to the Land

In 1954 a total of 16,690 acres were operated by farmers included in the study (Table 3). Of this 5,605 acres was in crop. The men who left farming between 1954 and 1957 operated 5,009 acres of which 1,495 acres (29.8 percent) was in crop. The farmers remaining in production operated 11,681 acres in 1954 and had 4,110 acres (35.2 percent) in crop. In 1957 the same farmers operated 11,762 acres of which 4,076 acres (34.7 percent) was in crop. The question then is what happened to the pattern of land use?

The men who stopped farming between 1954 and 1957 had a smaller percentage of their land in crops in 1954 than those who stayed in farming. This along with their lower farm practices score and

Table 3. Farm land, 1954-1957.

	1954	1957
Still farming 1957		
Acres operated	11,681	11,762
Acres of crop	4,110	4,076
Percent in crop	35.2	34.7
Left farming after 1954		
Acres operated	5,009	—
Acres of crop	1,495	—
Percent in crop	29.8	—
Total		
Acres operated	16,690	—
Acres of crop	5,605	—
Percent in crop	33.6	—

greater dependence on non-farm income and non-farm employment suggests the gradual reduction of the farming operation. With the large acreage going out of production, the remaining farms only added a total of 76 acres, or less than an acre per farm, and at the same time they reduced the total cropland by 34 acres.

Men on 52 farms cultivating 1,495 acres of cropland in 1954 were no longer farming in the survey communities in 1957. What happened to their land? (Table 4).

About 883 acres from 21 farms were farmed by someone else. Nine of the farms had new operators, four farms were consolidated with other farms, and 379 acres from portions of eight farms were rented out. Thirty-six farms (69 percent) had land that was either idle or in the Soil Bank. This represented 31 percent of the 1,495 acres of cropland. The usual pattern was to let the land go idle or put it in the Soil Bank, and in some cases rent out some of the better land for cotton or corn.

The data seem to suggest that some of those who stayed in farming let some of the poorer land go and replaced it with some of the better land formerly used by men who had quit farming. As a result the decrease in the number of farmers has not provided the remaining farmers

Table 4. Use in 1957 of cropland formerly operated by men no longer farming in the survey communities.

	Acres		Farms	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Worked by someone else				
Whole farm .....	368	25	9	18
Consolidated with other farms .....	136	9	4	8
Portion of farm rented out .....	379	25	8	16
Total ..	883	59	21	42
Not farmed				
Idle ..	278	19	14	27
Soil Bank .....	183	12	22	42
Total ..	461	31	36	69
Use not known .....	151	10	4	8
All farms .....	1,495	100	*	*

\*Adds up to more than 52 farms and 100 percent because some farms fall into more than one category.

with a larger land base. The land remaining in cultivation is probably the more productive. However, further reajustment is necessary before those who continue to farm achieve the optimum pattern of land utilization.

In 1954 there was a total of 54,300 acres of cropland in Alcorn County. This was a decrease of 13,100 acres, or 3.9 percent per year, since 1949. In the six survey communities there has been a loss of 546 acres of cropland, or 3.2 percent per year. If this is representative, the loss for the whole county would be estimated at 5,290 acres. Similarly during the period between the 1949 and 1954 agricultural censuses there was a decrease of 20 percent in the number of farm operators, 4 percent per year. Between the two survey periods, the net loss of farmers was 27 percent, or 9 percent per year. This would indicate that the loss in cropland was not as great during the last three years as during the previous five but that the loss of farm operators was higher.

### Implications

The transition from farming to non-farm employment in Alcorn County has both economic and social implications. From the economic standpoint, part-time farming in this area appears to be a stage in the shift from farming to full-time non-farm employment. Not all the land formerly operated by men who went out of farming is being utilized by those remaining in farming. Although they are

no longer farming they have retained much of their land. Some look upon their non-farm employment as temporary and expect to return to farming during periods of high farm prices or unemployment. This poses several problems for the various agricultural agencies.

Because of terrain and soil conditions much of the land in Alcorn County should not be in cultivation. To what extent has the occupational shift resulted in the poorer land going out of cultivation and has the better land been taken over by the remaining farmers? Is there need for a program directed at maintaining land withdrawn from production so that it can be put back into cultivation at some future time? What about use of idle land for grazing or timber development? Such programs would of necessity require a low labor and capital input.

At least three aspects of the occupational changes have social implications. The median age of the rural residents is rising because the younger men are turning to non-farm occupations and they are the ones who are most likely to leave the community. The rural communities are losing population as men move to other areas to find employment. Finally, many of those who retire or find non-farm employment continue to live on the same land but are classified as rural non-farm. Thus the occupational pattern of the rural community is shifting. These changes are having an impact on the structure of the community and on its role in the lives of its residents.