

## CHANGES IN AGRICULTURE (MID-20TH CENTURY)



### Changes in Agriculture (mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century)

Agriculture has always been critical to the Arkansas economy. In the Arkansas Territory (1819 – 1836), over 90% of the Arkansas population worked on the land as farmers or farm workers. When Arkansas was admitted to the Union, agriculture continued to dominate the state's economy. Although over time mechanization (use of machines and technology), urbanization (growth of cities), and the emergence of multiple other sectors of the economy contributed to the decreasing impact of agriculture on the US and Arkansas economies, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, around 45% of Arkansans still live in rural areas. However, while in the past nearly all residents of rural areas were engaged in agriculture, today many of them commute to work in towns and cities or are employed in other sectors of the economy. Despite that, agriculture is still Arkansas' largest industry.

For the first 150 years of Arkansas history, not much changed in how people cultivated land and run farms. Although certain inventions had an important impact on agriculture in the late 18<sup>th</sup> (1700s) and in the 19<sup>th</sup> (1800s) centuries (e.g., cotton gin, cotton harvester, grain elevator, etc.), agricultural workers used the same basic tools and followed the same farming practices, especially on small farms. That changed rapidly and dramatically in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (1900s). According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, "In 1940 [in Arkansas], tenants or sharecroppers cultivated more than sixty percent of the land, and more than ninety percent of farmers used horses or mules as draft animals. By 1964, the statistical importance of tenant-sharecroppers, and the number of horses and mules, had been reduced to the point that federal officials no longer collected data on them." With the advancement of technology and population growth, fewer farms were run just to feed farming families. Farms became bigger, more industrialized, and more business-oriented.

In this activity, you will explore some changes in Arkansas agriculture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through the lens of statistics (numerical data).

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steadily increased. Following national trends, farm consolidations have resulted in larger farms and greater investments in farms and equipment. The expansion of urban land uses on the fringes of the urban areas has resulted in increased land values per acre. Table 3 shows the changes in the agricultural base during the 1949-59 period.

TABLE 3 — CHANGES IN FARM CHARACTERISTICS  
ARKANSAS RIVER REGION, 1949-1959  
(000 Current Dollars)

	1949	1959	Change	
			Number	Per Cent
Number of farms	55,502	28,662	-26,840	-48
Average size (acres)	113	180	67	59
Average value	\$ 5,221	\$15,699	\$10,478	201
Value per acre	\$ 49	\$ 87	\$ 38	78

Source: U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1949 and 1959.

The total land in farms dropped seventeen per cent from 6,058,373 acres in 1949 to 5,044,021 acres in 1959. However, the value of farm production increased by twenty per cent. Gains in the value of field crops, mainly cotton, accounted for one-half the gain, but livestock and livestock products also accounted for one-half the gain. Table 4 shows the changes in farm production during this period.

TABLE 4  
CHANGES IN VALUE OF FARM PRODUCTS  
ARKANSAS RIVER REGION, 1949-1959  
(000 Current Dollars)

	1949	1959	Change	
			Number	Per Cent
Field Crops	\$ 87,444	\$100,403	12,959	15
Livestock products	43,389	56,389	13,000	30
Total	\$130,833	\$156,792	25,959	20

Source: U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1949 and 1959.

During the 1949-59 period, the value of field crops increased moderately in Central II and Central III Subregions, but declined sharply in the Western Subregion and Central I Subregion. Substantial gains occurred in livestock and livestock products in Central I Subregion with lesser gains in the Western and Central II Subregions. The value of livestock products decreased in Central III Subregion. The number of farms in the Arkansas River Region dropped forty-eight per cent during this ten-year period. Consolidation of farms probably accounted for the bulk of the decrease but expansion of urban land uses and abandonment of cotton farming were also factors. The impact of these changes on farm employment is reflected in the changes in farm labor. The shifts in types of farming released a large portion of the agricultural labor force to find jobs in other economic activities. Table 5 shows the changes in farm labor in the 1949-59 period.

TABLE 5 — CHANGES IN FARM LABOR  
ARKANSAS RIVER REGION, 1949-1959

	1949	1959	Change	
			Number	Per Cent
Family workers	67,250	33,087	-34,163	-51
Hired workers	10,085	13,694	3,609	36
Total	77,335	46,881	-30,454	-39

Source: U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1949 and 1959.

In summary, it is apparent that the agricultural export base of the Arkansas River Region has progressively declined in importance. The shifts in agricultural production indicate that agriculture in the eastern part of the Arkansas River Region is still tied to the production of cotton, soybeans and rice, but will progressively become more oriented to serving the demands of urban markets in the future.

## MINERAL INDUSTRIES

The mineral industries in the Arkansas River Region provide some employment opportunities in eight of the 25 counties, but are more important to Pulaski and Saline Counties where bauxite and sand and gravel operations are found. In 1958, the last year detailed census data are available, mineral industry establishments provided a total of 1,484 jobs in the region. Table 6 shows the past trends in employment and output.

TABLE 6 — CHANGES IN MINERAL INDUSTRIES  
ARKANSAS RIVER REGION, 1954-1958

	1954	1958	Changes	
			Number	Per Cent
Employment	1,900	1,484	-416	-22
Value added	\$13,684	\$17,165	\$3,481	25

Source: U. S. Census of Mineral Industries, 1958.

Since 1958, there has been little change in the mineral industries in the Arkansas River Region. While there has been a considerable expansion of manufacturing firms and building materials, mineral industries have increased production without adding new employment.

## FABRICATING INDUSTRIES

Fabricating industries include manufacturing and construction. Manufacturing is the most important basic activity.

## MANUFACTURING

Manufacturing is the largest single basic activity in the economy in terms of employment, output and income. In 1963, the latest year detailed census data are available, nearly 55,000 were employed in the Arkansas River Region; value added in manufacturing exceeded \$448,000,000 and manufacturing payrolls totalled some \$237,000,000. Table 7 shows the post-war trend in manufacturing in the Arkansas River Region.

The gains in productivity during the post-war period reflect steady technological improvements, mechanization and innovation in the manufacturing sector. In the Arkansas Valley region, value added per production worker increased from \$6,859 in 1954 to \$10,807 in 1963, a gain of 58 per cent. However, the net gain of \$257,838,000 in value added was actually accomplished adding some 18,610 workers. Thus, on a net gain basis, new value added per additional employee was about \$13,800. Manufacturing is clearly the main generator of economic activity in the Arkansas River Region. Indications are that growth trends since 1962 have continued in line with past trends. The 1965 Department of Labor estimate of manufacturing employment was 57,423. This would indicate that in 1965 value added by

Arkansas State Commission, "Arkansas River Region Comprehensive Development Plan 1980," 1966, page 10 (Metropolitan records)

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### Questions:

1. Examine statistical data in Table 3 and a short summary under the table. How did farms change in the Arkansas River Region between 1949 and 1959?
2. Examine statistical data in Table 4 and a short summary under the table. How did the value of farm products change in the Arkansas River Region between 1949 and 1959?
3. Examine statistical data in Table 5 and a short summary under the table. How did farm labor change in the Arkansas River Region between 1949 and 1959?
4. Write a short summary of changes in agriculture in the Arkansas River Region between 1949 and 1959 based on these three tables. How did agriculture change in Arkansas in only 10 years?
5. What do the data in the three tables tell us about trends in agriculture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century?