

Changes in Agriculture in post World War II Tennessee

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Essential Question: How did agriculture change in Tennessee after World War II?

The changes to agriculture in Tennessee began before the war with programs of the New Deal. By the 1930s, erosion was a serious problem in the Tennessee Valley due to traditional farming practices such as hillside farming. Much of the land was bare and dusty and farm yields dropped year after year. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created first and foremost to build dams to control flooding and generate electric power. However, TVA engineers soon found that tons of topsoil were filling their reservoirs. The National Emergency Council found that the South was losing three hundred million dollars worth of topsoil each year. TVA began a program of demonstration farms to teach farmers scientifically proven methods of farming. Farmers who volunteered for the program were given phosphate based fertilizers to use on their land. They were also instructed in how to create terraces on steep hillsides to prevent erosion as well as planting cover crops to protect the soil. When neighboring farmers saw that the changes worked, they started implementing the new practices as well. By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, thousands of farmers had improved their crop yields using the scientific farming methods.

While TVA certainly helped farmers, the building of dams and reservoirs also flooded thousands of acres of farmland and displaced families. While some of the families moved to other farms, many chose to try city life instead. As the United States economy began to recover from the Great Depression, many men left the farm to work in factories instead. Even before the United States officially entered World War II in 1941, the lend-lease program had created a boom in manufacturing jobs in northern cities like Detroit, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio. Thousands of Tennesseans moved north to take advantage of the job opportunities. For many, it was the first time they had lived in a house with running water and electricity.

When World War II ended some of the transplants stayed in the North, while others returned to Tennessee. However, young men and women who had traveled far from home for work or in military service were not content to go back to traditional farm life. In 1945, Tennessee had two hundred and thirty-five thousand farms. By 1960, the number had dropped to one hundred and twenty two thousand. At the same time manufacturing grew from a value-added of nine hundred thirty-two million to a little over 3 billion. The movement of people from farms to urban areas was apparent in the 1960 census which revealed that a majority of Tennesseans lived in urban areas.

While the overall number of farms decreased, Tennessee's remaining farmers continued to modernize. In 1940, there were twelve thousand tractors in Tennessee. By 1960, the number had increased to one hundred thousand tractors. The change was so complete that the USDA census stopped recording the number of draft animals in 1959. Another important change was the types of crops grown. By 1960, corn, soybeans and tobacco had become Tennessee's leading field crops. Cotton was no longer king.

Families that did choose to stay on the farms did not have to sacrifice the comforts of modern life. Cheap power provided by TVA meant that not only could they have electric lighting and radios, but also labor saving devices such as electric irons and washing machines. TVA employed men to travel throughout the south in a sort of traveling circus of electricity demonstrating the new devices which were especially popular with women.

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Student Activity

Directions: Use the graphic organizer to compare Tennessee agriculture before and after World War II. Then answer the question that follows.

Before World War II

After World War II

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Overall, were the changes agriculture Tennessee experienced positive or negative?
