



AGRICULTURE

Agricultural landscapes of Lane County fall into three distinct yet intersecting developmental phases, the agrarian (1846-1940), the industrial (1865-1940) and the commercial (1890-1940).¹

The agrarian period marks the time when agriculture was the dominant force in social, cultural, and economic development. It includes the period of initial Donation Land Claim settlement from 1845 to 1860, as well as the emergence of complete farms between 1850 and 1870.² Though the industrial revolution is primarily associated with manufacturing, it had a significant impact on agriculture as well. Mechanization made it possible to farm large parcels without large labor supplies, while improved transportation networks, especially the railroads, made it possible to reach nationwide markets.³ The collapse of grain markets in the 1890s, a shift of large-scale wheat and cattle farming to eastern Oregon, and the steady growth of urban centers and regional markets, ushered in the decline of industrial-scale farming ventures in Lane County. Smaller, more diverse farms characterize the resulting commercial agricultural phase. Row-crops, orchards, and dairies replaced large-scale grain farming, while the resulting produce was designated for regional rather than national distribution.⁴ It is this last phase that had a particularly broad impact on the River Road area prior to its suburbanization following World War II.

Pioneer Agriculture

The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 allowed pioneers to claim 320 acres, if single, or 640 acres, if married, with the condition that the land needed to be improved. In 1860, the Homestead Act reduced claim sizes to 160 acres and 320 acres, respectively. The popularity of the acts, as well as the desirability of land in the Upper Willamette Valley, resulted in the nearly complete settlement of the region by the late 1850s. What is now the River Road area would have been especially attractive to settlers because of its easy access to water and rich soils. In addition, its Prairie grasslands provided ideal pasture and required little effort to clear.

The 1857 Survey Map indicates that the primary landowners in River Road were members of the Davis family, with Joseph and Benjamin Davis each holding slightly over 640 acres, and L.E. Davis holding another claim of slightly over 300 acres. Their “neighbors” to the north, in what is now Santa Clara, included claims by members of the Pointdexter family, as well as James and Abraham Peck (a.k.a. Peek). The holdings to their west belonged to Parker Bryan, James and William McCabe, and Joseph Ogle. Prior Blair and Solomon Zumwalt settled south and southwest of the Davis’ farms.⁵

Settlers brought a variety of seed and livestock with them, initially planting approximately 20 acres of their claim to support themselves and their families.⁶ Cattle were often the first focus of farm expansion because the rich prairies of the Willamette Valley provided ample grazing in unfenced fields and because cattle were easier to transport to distant markets.⁷

Industrial-Scale Agriculture

The 1850s and 1860s saw much experimentation and solidification of agricultural technology and practices. In 1860, the Oregon State Agricultural Society was established, and in 1868, Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) was founded in Corvallis. The introduction of silos came in 1873, a sign of an emerging dairy industry.

The gold rushes in California and later British Columbia spurred further expansion of production for Oregon farmers. Though some Oregonians left for the gold fields, many more stayed behind and prospered by supplying miners with food and other goods. The 1870s and the 1880s saw a boom in wheat, which was further facilitated by improved transportation networks and farming technology. Though agrarian settlement patterns continued to exist into the twentieth century in the remoter reaches of Lane County, in the more central River Road area, small farms were replaced by larger scale industrialized agriculture by the 1870s.

The large scale of the Donation Land Claims lent themselves to industrialized agriculture. A single, unassisted family group could hardly cultivate a 640-acre, or even a 320-acre claim without the aid of hired labor and increasing mechanization. The results of expanded cultivation, large harvests, were also beyond the capacity of local communities to absorb, resulting in an increasing volume of exports.⁸

Though the advent of steamboat shipping aided the export of goods, the construction of railroad networks caused exports to explode. Profitability was such that some new crops, such as hops, were introduced in 1875-1900. Hop cultivation required the first intensive use of migrant labor. Evidence tentatively suggests that Native American migrant labor was especially associated with hop cultivation and harvest in the Pacific Northwest.⁹ A boom in hops between the 1880s and the 1920s collapsed with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which brought the "Prohibition" of alcoholic beverages in January 1920.¹⁰

Commercial Agriculture

In the 1890s a significant shift occurred. The previously exuberant grain markets collapsed, forcing many farmers to sell all or part of their holdings.¹¹ Donation Land Claims were often split among the children of the original claimants or were sold to new arrivals. While the average farm size in 1860 was 388 acres, by 1900 it had diminished to 170 acres.¹²

Improved irrigation techniques and large open tracts of land shifted cattle ranching and wheat farming towards eastern Oregon.¹³ As a result, the average farm size declined in the western portion of the state, while the number of farms in operation increased. Willamette Valley farms also became more diversified, increasing the production of row crops and orchards that could supply local markets. During this time, local markets expanded as more and more laborers arrived to work in new industrial endeavors. Simultaneously, improved road networks further facilitated the development of regional markets.

The greater quantity and smaller size of the new farm forms attracted new farmers, some lured by advertising campaigns. In the early 1900s, small-scale farming was promoted as healthy and virtuous, an expression of the Jeffersonian idyll. Willamette Valley land was promoted by boosters, such as the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Sunset Magazine Homeseeker's Bureau, and the Eugene Commercial Club.¹⁴ The Willakenzie area, whose agricultural and residential development parallels that of River Road, was promoted by George Melvin Miller, among others, who advertised "Miller's Little Farms," in the *Morning Register Industrial Edition* in 1907. Miller offered lots ranging from 4 to 20 acres, along with very specific instructions for maximizing profit from walnuts, peaches, berries, and potatoes.¹⁵



Orchards and Row Crops

The newer settlers from the Midwest and East Coast states brought new crops with them, as well as new techniques such as crop rotation.¹⁶ Though the first grafted fruit trees were imported into Oregon in 1847, horticulture did not become a significant force in agricultural economics until the late nineteenth century. Flax had a similarly delayed acceptance, arriving in the state in 1844-1850 and remaining a minor crop until the war efforts of the 1940s.¹⁷



Fruit tree production at Woodruff Nursery on River Road. Photo by Kennell-Ellis courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (KE887)

Market gardens flourished between 1900 and 1940, with new focus on cherries, walnuts, filberts, and apples. Field patterns were generally composed of equal sized

parcels of orchards and row crops.¹⁸ The trend toward an increased quantity of farms of smaller size continued. Some could be as small as 20 acres, but ranged up to 200 acres. Grain fields persisted, but no longer dominated. Cattle and other livestock also continued to be kept, but were often for home use, rather than for commercial purposes.

The annual value of fruit production in the Northwest nearly doubled between 1880 and 1900, fueled in part by improved transportation networks and processing facilities such as prune dryers. By the 1920s, prunes became the number one fruit, with apples running a close second.¹⁹ In 1903, George Dorris began to grow filberts commercially in the Springfield area. Gas-powered equipment introduced between 1914 and 1940 further speeded up planting and harvesting. Oregon agriculture boomed during World War I. The following Great Depression saw the collapse of the independent family farm and consolidation into commercial operations, though smaller scale market gardens persisted, especially in urban areas.²⁰

Dairies

Another agricultural development between 1890 and 1930 was the emergence of dairy farms. In addition to improved transportation networks, technological innovations associated with the proliferation of dairies include the development of the cream separator in the 1890s, and slightly later, the introduction of electricity, initially in the form of generators.

In the River Road area, dairies were primarily associated with the Danish community. Neils Johansen (1852-1927) and Jans Elgaard (1858-1938), both Danebo Danes and River Road residents, were also dairy farmers and founders of the Eugene Farmers Creamery (the predecessor to Darigold) in 1914.²¹

Land, markets, machinery, and crop varieties determined the scope of operations. Labor was often in short supply, especially during the two World Wars, which meant that family-based labor remained significant. Nevertheless, labor shortages between 1910 and 1940 resulted in the conversion of some dairy operations to orchards or chicken farms.²²



Arps' Dairy farm on River Road, c.1910. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN7035)



Social and Professional Organizations

Some organizations also served as outlets for information, as lobbies, social centers, and as ventures for the sale of produce, such as the Lane County Agricultural Society, which existed between 1859 and 1908.²³ Granges served a similar function. Though the Oregon State Grange and the Springfield Grange were established in 1873, it was not until the twentieth century that granges were established near the River Road area. These include the Willakenzie Grange (1913),²⁴ the Santa Clara Grange (1918),²⁵ and the Irving Grange (by 1940).²⁶ The construction of Eugene's first cannery in 1891 boosted the export values of fruits and other row crops.

In 1908, the Lane County Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association was established. Eighty growers founded the association with \$5,000 in capital and a small warehouse.²⁷ In 1912, the association became the Eugene Fruit Growers Association, later to be known as Agripac. (Jerry Beebe owned a farm at the corner of North Park Avenue and Beebe Lane, and was an early member of the association.) This organization would grow to become extremely influential in agricultural practice and business throughout Eugene and the surrounding area.²⁸ They undertook to can their produce and make it more available to a greater market. Packaging anything from green beans to dried fruits and nuts, the Eugene Fruit Growers Association grew steadily through the years, and its "Diamond A" brand of canned goods became well-known throughout the West. In 1940, the Association reported handling more than 42 million pounds of produce, which in turn accounted for approximately \$500,000 in revenue.²⁹ This agricultural organization was no doubt lucrative for the farm-focused community around River Road and contributed to the commerce of the area.

Suburbanization

Though the suburbanization of the River Road area began in the 1920s and 1930s, after World War II its pace speeded up considerably. Development often leapfrogged, taking advantage of less expensive land just beyond current boundaries of development, resulting in a mixed pattern of residential enclaves and farmland. Fringe farms, 10-acre farmettes located on the Urban Services Boundary (USB) became popular between 1950 and 1980, especially in the less-developed Santa Clara area. The average farm size continued to decline between 1900 and 1974 (though less drastically than from 1860 to 1900) from an average of 212 acres to 166 acres.³⁰ However, total farmed acreage has continued to plummet in the area. The 1987 *Santa Clara Urban Facilities Plan* noted that the approximately 500 acres of agricultural land remaining in River Road/Santa Clara constituted a "productive interim land use."³¹

Agriculture Endnotes

¹Forster, Thomas B., ed. et al. *The Cultural and Historic Landscapes of Lane County, Oregon*. (Lane County, OR, 1986).

²Forster, 60.

³Forster, 73-74.

⁴Forster, 81-82.

⁵1857 Donation Land Claim map.

⁶Wilson, Jeffery Scott. *Farming the Urban Fringe*. University of Oregon Thesis, Department of Geography, 1981, 33.

⁷Wilson, 34.

⁸Forster, 74.

⁹Library of Congress photo of hop picking near Moxie City.

¹⁰Speulda, Lou Ann. *Oregon's Agricultural Development: A Historic Context, 1811-1940*. (Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, 1989), 9.

¹¹ Wilson, 37.

¹²Johnson, Maura. *Willakenzie Area Plan Historic Context*. (Eugene Planning & Development, 1989), 7

¹³Johnson, 5.

¹⁴Johnson, 8.

¹⁵Johnson, 10.

¹⁶Forster, 84.

¹⁷Speulda, 8.

¹⁸Forster, 85.

¹⁹Speulda, 18.

²⁰Speulda, 15.

²¹Hall, Katherine. "Notes on the Johansen-Moody House." unpublished.

²²Hall, Katherine.

²³Carter, Elizabeth and Michelle Dennis. *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*. (Eugene Planning & Development,1996), 71.

²⁴Carter, 42.

²⁵“Santa Clara Land Use Plan,” 1975.

²⁶Carter, 105.

²⁷Johnson, 12.

²⁸Sims, Mike. “River Road History Survey.” Unpublished correspondence, 6/13/05, 13.

²⁹Moore, Lucia, Nina McCornack, Gladys McCready. *The Story of Eugene*, 220-221.

³⁰Wilson, 43.

³¹“Santa Clara Urban Facilities Plan,” 1987, Sect. 2-17.