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Revolution in Cotton Harvest

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Harvesting cotton during the 1980's is a lark. No more three months of human bondage to the duck sacks and all their ramifications. Numerous \$70,000 machines are rolling through Oklahoma's 570,000 acres of "white gold" in thirty counties this autumn, sucking up two to four rows at a time.

Even though their speed is only two and a half to near three miles an hour, the machines gather a bale of 1,500 pounds in a relatively few minutes, depending on the abundance of yield.

Engineers bask in air conditioned or heated cabs, according to the weather, as they sit on cushioned bucket seats and watch through mirrors as "white gold" pours into baskets behind. Furthermore, they can listen to the radio or tapes of their favorite musicians.

With lights, engineers can operate into darkness until the air gets damp. After that, cotton becomes too tough to gather.

When bins are full, operators dump the loads into trailers, which transport several bales at a time to the gins. In some instances, the newer module builders replace the trailers to catch and compress up to twenty bales at once. The modules stand like rows of rectangular icebergs until trucks move in, hoist them aboard and take them to the gins.

With such robots these days, one person can farm thousands of acres and gather hundreds of bales each season, never touching the cotton. The sad news is the falling prices.

In 1980, cotton reached 77 cents a pound. October 1, 1981, it reached 53.95 cents, with the overall price ranging between 36 and 45 cents. Even with a 15 percent reduction in acreage, members of the industry are not projecting an increase in price. They are hoping it doesn't continue to drop.

Regardless of the market, the yields become the farmers' "mother lodes." Of some 30 counties producing cotton, Jackson ranks first, according to Oklahoma Department of Agriculture for 1980, with Tillman and Washita ranking second and third. Tillman, Washita, and Kiowa plant more acres than Jackson, but get less yield.

The picture was different in the "old days," prior to the 1940s. Almost every farmer in the southern part of Oklahoma and some farther north raised a few acres of cotton. Practically all members of the households went to the fields, where babies were placed on shaded pallets or pulled on the sacks.

Cont. on p. 11

linda fickling

illustration by

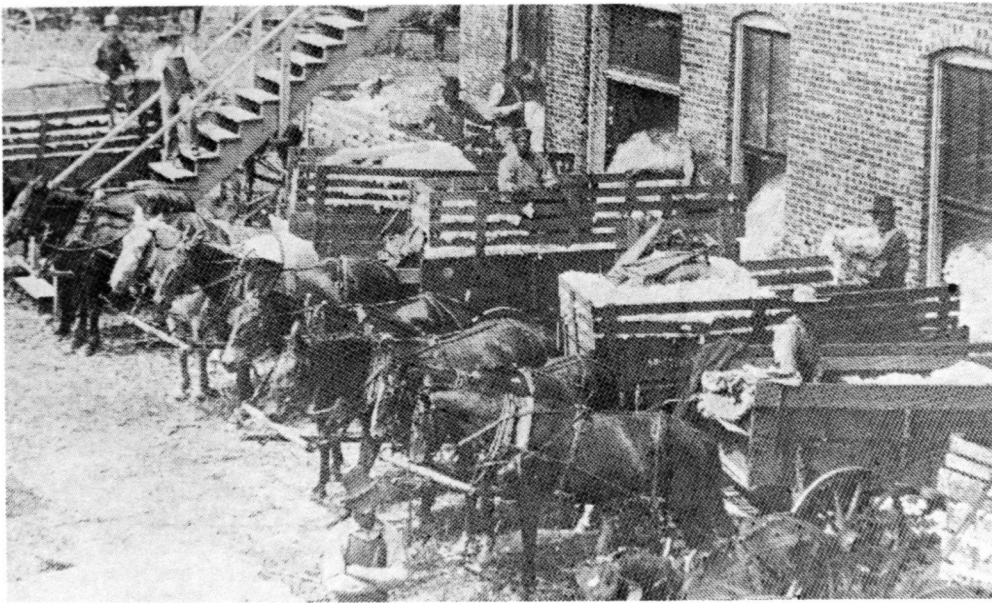
olution in cotton harvest

BY

OPAL HARTSELL BROWN



PHOTO — COURTESY OF KIOWA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Farmers lined up with cotton in Lone Wolf, OK to dispose of their cotton during the early part of this century

"Cotton Revolution," cont.

Up and down the rows pickers bent or crawled, plucking one or two bolls at a time from sticky burs. Their backs ached and their knees smarted until they became calloused. Their fingers sore and sometimes bleeding, they occasionally succumbed to "dew poison."

When pickers' sacks were full, they hoisted them upon their shoulders and trudged half a mile to the scales for weighing. .40, 50, 60 pounds. The sacks were lifted up the wheels and over the sideboards of the wagons, emptied, and the cotton packed by trampling. Children delighted in that job.

An average family of four could pick a bale in about a week, and what fun it was to dress in "Sunday clothes," climb aboard a wagon, and settle down on a white heap to rock away to town. They had "killed a buffalo," and it was time to "feast" soul and body.

Prices were better then, in accordance with the rest of the economy, than they were in 1981. In 1905, a first bale of the season sold for 12 cents a pound. By 1907, it was 15 cents, and in 1923, it was 23 cents. Those prices were lower for most of the remaining seasons, but enjoyment was the same.

The cotton ginned and sold, the heads of households paid debts and rent on farms, bought necessities, and saved a little for winter clothes. They distributed a few nickles for luxuries: ice cream, coconut topped cookies, chewing gum. . . . On rare occasions, they all saw a sideshow: a two-headed calf, a spider woman, a circus.

They rattled home in an empty wagon, their hearts singing because they had a store-bought loaf of bread and some fresh sausage for supper.

By 1923, a considerable number of farmers could go home in automobiles. One state paper listed Ford touring cars at \$298, F.O.B. Detroit, and Dodges at \$1,600.

The last bale of every season gathered and sold, the families sat before crackling fireplaces to browse through mail order catalogues, choosing winter clothes: shoes, hats or caps, and early in the century long underwear. If there had been good crops and not too many debts, the order included a strip of velvet for the womenfolk and a suit for each of the men.

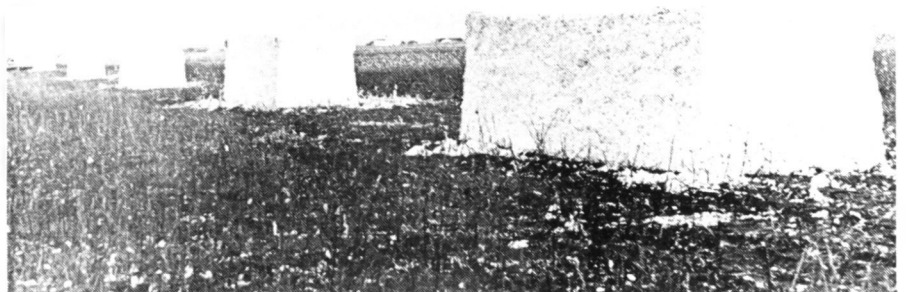
Receiving that order near Christmas helped enhance the community tree. Besides colored net sacks of fruit, candy, and nuts, there was sometimes a toy for each child. And all from the "buffalo" in one way or another.

Yes, the mechanical monsters get the job done in a hurry and without physical pain, but the fortunes made and spent in cotton production today seem impersonal and less satisfying than the meager rewards gained the hard way in by-gone years. Those who remember say cotton was fatness to their souls.

But they wouldn't go back.

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF ALTUS TIMES-DEMOCRAT



Modules lined up in a field near Altus