Family Farms to Corporate Organizations:
Changing the Face of Eastern North Carolina Agriculture
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Rural farm life of the 1950s throughout Eastern North Carolina was a family operation that required dedication from all members of the household to produce a strong yield of crops, maintain healthy livestock, and efficiently run the home. Before the 1950s, small family farms required a large number of hands for labor that was usually accomplished with the help of a mule that was used for both plowing and transportation. Due to the demanding work and the fact that most family farms were self-supplying, the size of the farm only grew with the addition of family members who each had tasks they were required to complete. My great-grandfather, who began farming in 1924, was a small, family farmer in Greene County who produced flue-cured tobacco, soybeans, corn for grain, and wheat for grain on his 20 acre farm. One purchase he was most proud of was a small, one row plow tractor that is still sitting under my grandfather's shed. Although this machine appears insignificant in comparison to the advanced farming equipment, such as the combine used today, the tractor was a beneficial invention for the farmer that significantly reduced the time spent in the field.

But at the turn of the decade, industries were introduced to the region and caused a significant decrease in the number of family farms, as many farmers' children saw industry work as their escape from the farm. As farmers grew older and lacked the much needed help of their children, small family farm owners were forced to sell their land to larger farmers creating what is known today as an agribusiness. From improvements in technology and farming habits to changes in the cost of living to the institution of industry, these alterations in the field of agriculture caused a significant shift from small family farms to large corporate organizations which resulted in an increase in productivity and stability, while minimizing the close knit family based farms of the 1950s.

Advances in technology and farming techniques caused a significant decrease in the number of small family farms by reducing the amount of labor that was required in the fields. This decline triggered the movement of many farmers to obtain nonfarm work in industries (North Carolina's New 14). In 1950, there were over 73, 000 tractors which decreased the number of mules and horses used on farms by 22,000; yet in 1954, the number of tractors increased to nearly 126, 000, and many farms also utilized other farm equipment such as corn pickers, grain combines, pick up hay bailers, and trucks (North Carolina's New 19). These additions to farms significantly increased the need for electricity with the demand only increasing as more farms added feed handling tanks, milking machines, and other machinery requiring the use of electricity. With the help of science, other machinery, which increased production and quality, was developed that reduced drudgery and was capable of processing farm products (North Carolina's New 31). Furthermore, research provided farmers techniques for promoting the growth of desirable crops, along with controlling problems such as disease and insects (North Carolina's New 3). In 1950, a new program to maintain and improve the soil was enacted that would allow for maximum yields through proper liming, fertilization, crop rotation, and management (North Carolina Accepts 26). By testing the soil for appropriate lime levels and using the recommended fertilizer, farmers could more than double the yield of wheat and increase the yield of corn by almost 58 percent, and crop rotations would "add fertility, improve soil structure, reduce erosion, and help control disease and insects" (North Carolina Accepts 26). With these improvements to farm equipment and supplies, the cost of living and managing a family farm rose to new heights and threatened the existence of the family farm itself.

In the mid 1950s, the cost of living began to increase significantly, influencing people to seek better paying jobs off the farm. The demand for electricity on the farm and other "luxury" items, such as automobiles, telephones, freezers, and television, meant the farmer assumed more debt. In 1950, only 49 percent of farms had automobiles, 76 percent had electricity, 1 percent had television, 8 percent had phones, and 6 percent had freezers (North Carolina's New 28). Life on the farm became a little easier with these amenities, and by 1955, 61 percent had automobiles, 97 percent had electricity, 55 percent had television, 25 percent had telephones, and 22 percent had freezers (North Carolina's New 28). In 1956, the farmer's income was exceedingly low compared to farmers in other states. A North Carolina farmer's average per capita income was $1,305, which was more than $600 less than the average American farmer (North Carolina's New 32). Nonfarm employees, on the other hand, averaged $1,500 per capita income, which was also less than the nation's average nonfarm workers (North Carolina's New 32). With the cost of living comfortably on the farm rising, many farmers sought full or part time jobs in nonfarm work which would provide a higher income than that of a small family farmer.

Due to these factors, the size of farm businesses began to grow larger as many small farmers left their land because of the need for a more substantial family income (Nikolitch 530). In hopes of maintaining or improving their standard of living, small farmers began selling out (in fact, more than two million farmers left their land between the 1950s and 1970s (Costello 1)) to other farmers who wished to stay in the business, forming what is known as a larger-than-family farm (Nikolitch 530) or agribusiness (Costello 2). This new institution differs from family farms in that hired labor is involved (Nikolitch 530). These larger farm operations had the ability to produce a higher crop yield than small farmers and could increase their productivity through the use of modern equipment and technology. Furthermore, with more capital and the knowledge to mechanize, irrigate, and use pesticides, large farmers had an advantage above small farmers that also resulted in higher production and yields (Costello 3). According to Radoje Nikolitch, an economist with the Economic Research Service, changes such as these – "the race toward a larger business size, the dropout of many units during this race, the increasing dependency of farm production on nonfarm industries and of farmers on nonfarm income and nonfarm employment"- significantly altered both "the structural organization of farm production and the farmer's job itself" (530). With this change, farms became "increasingly specialized-concentrating on specific crops and livestock" (Nikolitch 544). Likewise, as farms decreased in number, they became larger and more mechanized and thus more expensive to own and operate (Costello 1).

Corporation-owned enterprises also threatened, and continue to threaten, the survival of many family farms, and with their entry (Costello 1), the government had to make revisions to subsidy allocations, tax rules, and price ceilings (Costello 10). Generally, the government tends to favor larger farm operations over small individual farmers due to the large farmer's ability to produce higher yields of crops and livestock at lower costs. In most cases, corporations work with the landowners and lease the land or contract for crops (Costello 1). With the introduction of corporations and other forms of big business farms, those small farmers who chose to stay in the business found that cooperatives were their saving grace and only chance of survival. Some cooperatives are controlled by businessmen who contract with individual farmers for their products (Costello 10), while others are made up of farmers who pool their resources to increase volume in order to obtain the highest prices possible. As a result of these changes in the structure of farming, it became increasingly evident that family farms and larger-than-family farms could no longer coexist in their same traditional region (Nikolitch 545).

Because of the improvements in agricultural efficiency and the shift toward larger farms since 1950, crop yields, production, and acreage have all greatly increased. This rise in production is a direct result of the change in the number of laborers on today's large farms, as well as more technologically advanced equipment, and larger acre farms that are no longer confined to a general area around the farmer's home. In North Carolina in 2006, the yield per harvested acre was 132 bushels of corn for grain (Agricultural 45), 2,090 pounds of flue-cured tobacco (Agricultural 59), 59 bushels of wheat for grain (Agricultural 61), and 32 bushels of soybeans (Agricultural 55), as opposed to the 37 bushels in 1950, 1,348 pounds of tobacco, 14.5 bushels of wheat, and 32 bushels of soybeans (North Carolina Accepts 72). Livestock production also increased over the years. Between 1951 and 1956, over 3,000 farms added beef cattle and hogs which was a milestone since livestock on farms had previously only been utilized for food on the farm rather than for income enterprise (North Carolina's New 17). In 1950, the number of cattle was 670,000, the number of hogs was 1,177,000, and in 1951, the total number of broilers was 32,606,000 (North Carolina's New 17-18). In 2006, the total number of all cattle was 850,000 (Agricultural 28), hogs and pigs totaled 9,500,000, and the number of broilers was 749,000,000 (Agricultural 32-33).

In 2002, there was a total of 53,930 farms made up of an estimated 168 acres and averaged $129,087 in production per farm. Family or individual farms made up 48,672 of those farms, over 3, 000 of the farms were partnerships and almost 2, 000 were corporate farms (2002 120-121). In contrast, there was a total of 3,705 farms in 1959 (Nikolitch 543), with a total of 1,123 million acres. Fifty-three percent of that farmland was operated by the owner of the land itself, while 38 percent was operated by renters, and the remaining 9 percent was tended by paid management (Nikolitch 541). Although family farms continue to be the more prevalent than corporations, cooperatives, and larger-than-family farms, they are much larger than the traditional rural, family farms and are more efficient and mechanized, and employ many laborers who were not family members.

If my great-grandfather were still alive today, he would be dumbfounded by the evolution of agriculture since he purchased his first tractor 58 years ago. Rural life on a small family farm in the 1950s was a way of life. Every individual knew the true meaning of family; they worked together, prayed together, ate together, and most importantly, stayed together. Advances in technology greatly changed the farmer's life and his family's, decreasing the amount of time spent in the field, and enhanced farming techniques produced a higher yield of crops and increased profits. These factors, along with rise in the cost of living and introduction of industry to the area, caused a major shift from family farms to corporate organizations. Although many family-owned farms still exist today, they are far different than the family farms of the past. The small farmer's survival has been tested through the entry of corporations and their dependency on industries, yet farms that exist today have proven to be more efficient and more stable than the farms of decades long ago. From a small tractor, to larger, more advanced equipment, such as the harvester, of today, the evolution of agriculture is evident to those traveling along the old, dusty country roads of Eastern North Carolina during the hot days of tobacco season. No longer are a few laborers seen in the fields topping, suckering, and priming the tobacco by hand. Instead, large machines, which have increased the productivity, quality, and yields of the modern day farmer, that are performing these same difficult, time consuming tasks giving the farmer more time to sit on his porch and enjoy a cold glass of lemonade.

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