

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: AGRICULTURE'S ROLE IN OREGON

Oregon, historically, was a vast region dominated by many Native American tribes, and subsequently claimed by the Spanish (Balboa, 1513), the Russians, the English (Sir Francis Drake, 1600; Captain James Cook and others), and the United States (Captain Robert Gray, 1792; Lewis and Clark, 1804).

In 1819 Spain gave up its claim to all the land north of the southern boundary of the Oregon Country. In 1824, Russia also gave up its claims by treaties with the United States and England. In 1846, England and the US agreed on a boundary line between the two countries, giving Britain the northern part of the Oregon Country above the 49th parallel and granting the US possession south of that demarcation (current border with Canada).

Fur traders dominated the Pacific Northwest in the early 1800s. But by the late 1830s settlement in the Willamette Valley by farmers began to change the dynamics of the region. It was the recognition of this fertile valley as advantageous to agriculture production that drew thousands of settlers to Oregon to farm these lands.

Fertile soil, mild climate, level land, and seasonal rainfall brought thousands of immigrants to Western Oregon. Few other areas

in the US are so well suited to the growing of berries, tree fruits, and many other specialty crops. The Willamette Valley soon became noted for its cherries, prunes, pears, Loganberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, cranberries, and many other products. Orchards of walnuts and filberts (hazelnuts as they are now known) were staked out. Canneries and processing facilities sprang up in all areas of the valley.

In 1839 so many settlers had come to Oregon that a petition was submitted to Congress to organize a territorial government. Congress failed to act, and so the settlers organized a provisional government, lasting until 1846 when another petition was submitted. In 1846 Oregon was designated as a territory with a temporary capital established in Oregon City. Two years later the capital was moved to Salem.

In 1853 the territory of Oregon was divided, creating the present boundaries of the state of Oregon and Washington. In 1859 Oregon was granted statehood.

By the early 1900s many other commodities were cultivated in the Willamette Valley, including spearmint, peppermint, flax, wheat, other small grains, potatoes, other vegetable crops, hops, dairy cattle, sheep, and goats. Portland was well established as a port

Jeffersonian agrarian ideology

- *Agriculture is the basic occupation of humankind.*
- *A nation of small independent farmers is the proper basis for a democratic society.*
- *Farmers are good citizens and a high percentage of the population should live on farms.*
- *Farming should be a family enterprise.*
- *The land should be owned by the person who tills it.*
- *Anyone who wants to farm should be able to do so.*
- *A farmer should be his own boss.*
- *It is good to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before.*

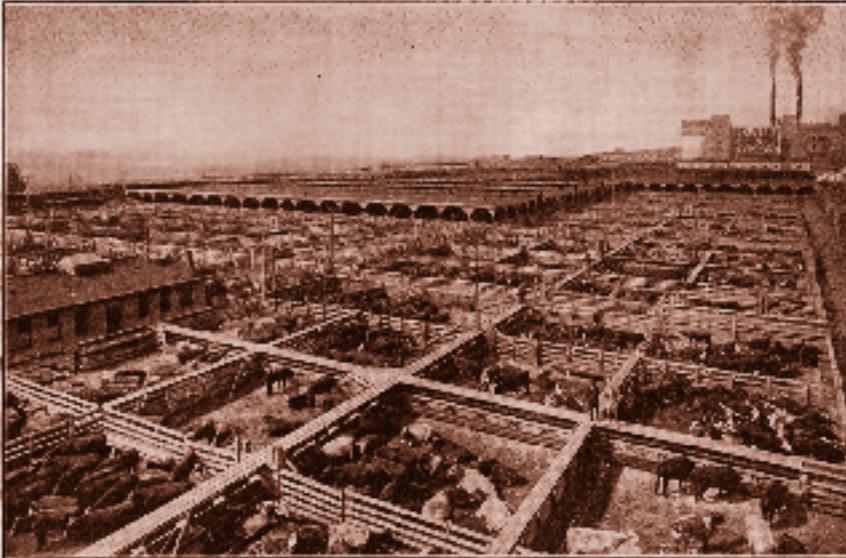


Figure 27. Part of the Union Stock Yard in Portland. Notice that the pens in the foreground are filled with cattle. Thousands of cattle, hogs, and sheep are handled through these yards every year. In the back-

ground is a packing plant in which the animals are made into meat and lard. Where does Portland find a market for its animal products? What other cities in the United States are important meat-packing centers?

Would anyone today remember Portland's agricultural history and stock yards teeming with cattle and the Swift processing facility in the background?

"The State of Oregon," 1931 school textbook, Ginn & Co.

city, and both raw and processed products from the region were exported to the world.

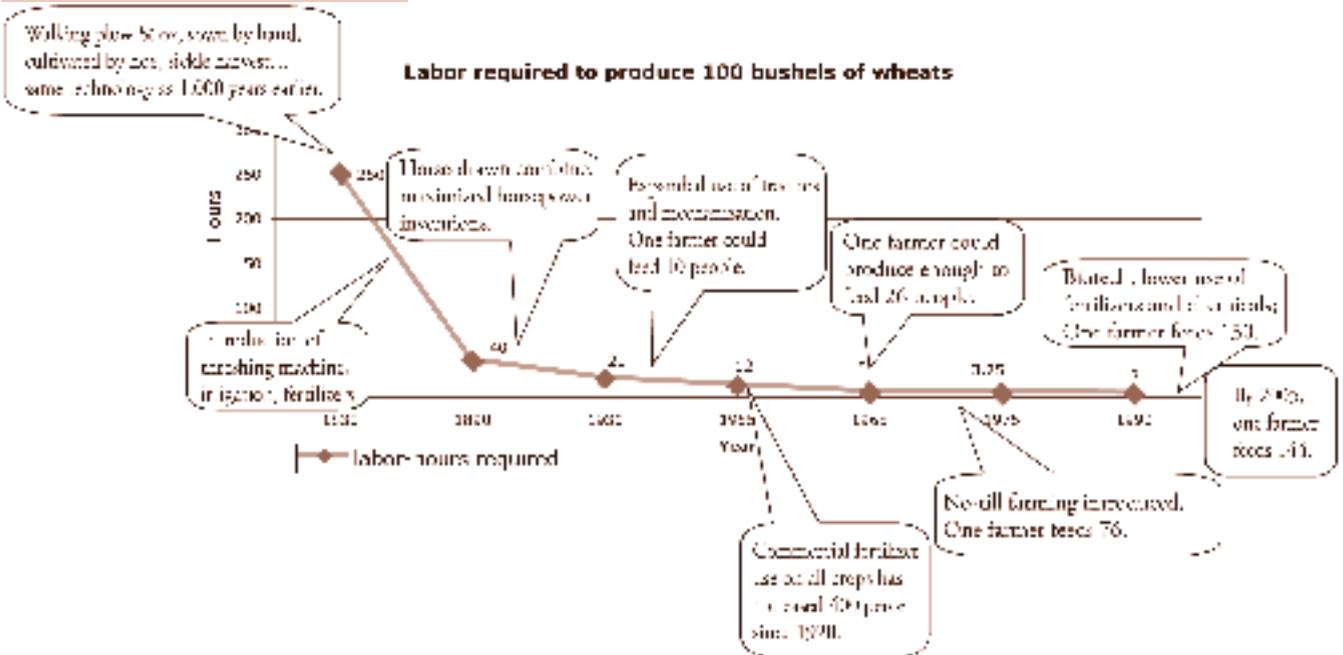
Portland also became a manufacturing center for machinery used in timber and farming operations, including engines, tractors, pumps, and food processing machinery. Portland was also a significant livestock

center and had considerable meat packing facilities. Next to Boston, Portland became the largest wool market in the US, boasting many textile mills, knitting mills, and clothing factories. Linen mills in the Willamette Valley used the long-fiber flax grown largely in Marion County for producing cloth, ropes, and fiber.

Salem and Eugene had some of the largest fruit and vegetable packing and cold storage facilities in the Northwest. Creameries, woolen mills, flour mills, and wood mills turned the raw materials of farm and forest into manufactured products, supplying jobs and other economic development to the region.

Other settlements were established around the state, and agriculture and timber were again the mainstays of Oregon.

The Umpqua River Valley became known for production of grains, grasses, vegetables, berries, and tree



fruits. Poultry, especially turkeys, were raised in the region.

The Rogue River Valley required irrigation and proved suitable for grains, vegetables, hay, livestock, and dairies. The valley became best known for its fruits, particularly pears.

Nearly all the cities in Southern Oregon—Ashland, Medford, Grants Pass—had significant fruit production with fruit-packing plants, storage, and canning facilities. Hundreds of trainloads of fruit were shipped from this region to other parts of the US.

The Coast Range and the Cascades force the clouds and winds to give up their moisture before weather systems reach the Columbia Plateau. Farming adapted to these arid conditions and dry-land wheat production became dominant. Alfalfa, oats, barley, and some fruit and vegetable farming also developed. Sheep and cattle grazing dominated the areas unsuited for cultivation, and Pendleton became noted for its woolen mills. With production of regional alfalfa, dairies also flourished. Irrigation development expanded production of potatoes, peas, onions, and other crops.

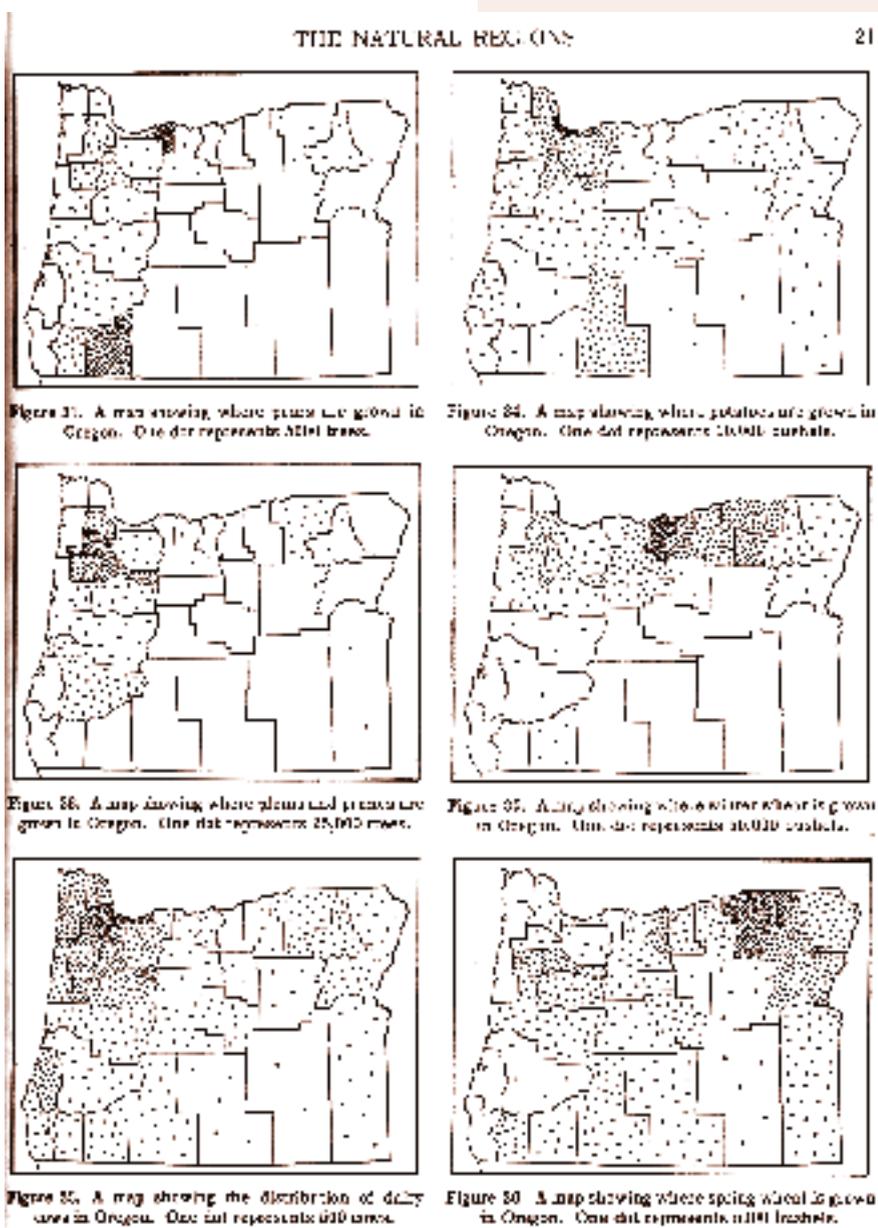
The Hood River Valley became a center of fruit production—apples, pears, cherries, and even strawberries were grown there.

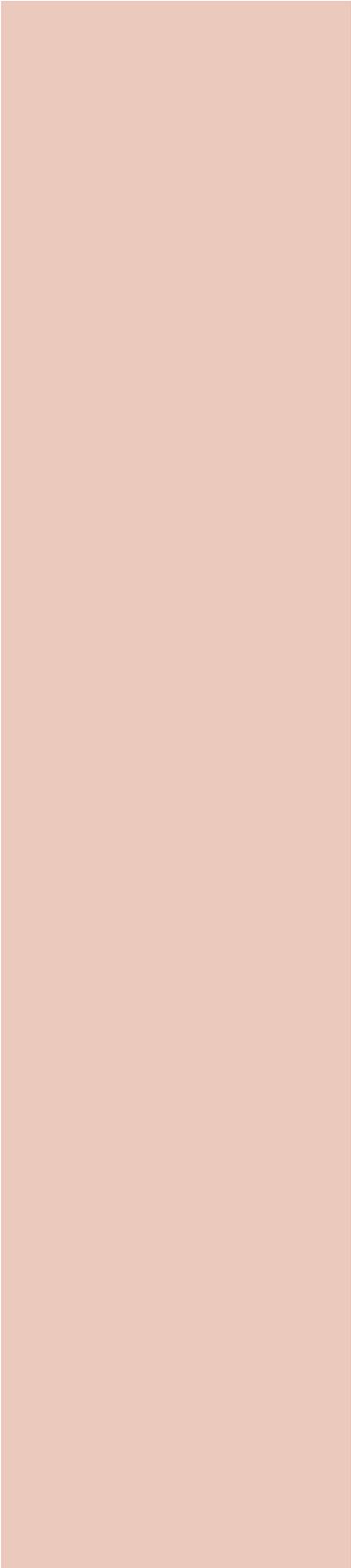
The Willowa River Valley was conducive to raising livestock and general farm crops. Dairy became an important industry. Through irrigation and dryland farming, alfalfa, potatoes, barley, oats, corn,

other vegetables, and fruits were produced.

The Grande Ronde Valley in Union County became home to acres and acres of wheat and alfalfa, apple orchards, vegetable farms, and chicken ranches. Grant County was the center of livestock production—cattle, sheep, hogs, turkeys, and chickens. Baker County's dominant output was hay, potatoes, wheat, fruits, cattle, sheep, and dairy products.

These regional production graphs from a 1931 school textbook depict principal commodities and their growing regions. Pears, potatoes, wheat, prunes and plums, and dairy cattle are plotted by production significance. The 1930s represent the mid-point between statehood and present day agriculture.





Klamath, Harney, Lake, and Malheur counties became home to thousands of sheep and cattle. Hay, potatoes, wheat—and with irrigation—even some berry and vegetable crops were established.

These early roots of settlement and the economic ties with the land forged the history of Oregon and laid the foundation for all other development as productivity increased and allowed more of the population to work off the farm.