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Uvalde Has Remained An Agrarian Region Since It's Inception

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Agriculture is one of the most important industries in Texas, the U.S. and especially in rural communities such as Uvalde, which continues to derive its economic base from agriculture production since humans settled the region. As Uvalde County celebrates its sesquicentennial, artifacts discovered in various parts of the county indicate that people hunted and gathered in the future Uvalde County as long ago as 7000 B.C. The evolution of the Uvalde region from a grass savanna to the present day form of intensive agriculture parallels the evolution of Texas during the last 150 years, since the American Civil War.

The Edwards Plateau and the surrounding hills were the favorite hunting grounds of the Comanche, Tonkawa, and Lipan Apache Indians. History books state that Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was the first European to set foot in Uvalde County in 1535 on his way to explore what is now known as the High Plains region. Fernando del Bosque wrote of finding evidence of a permanent Indian village on the Leona River at a place south of the Fort Inge during explorations in 1675. After the establishment of San Antonio in 1718, the Uvalde County region was consistently traversed by Spanish soldiers, commercial packtrains, buffalo hunters, cattlemen, and mineral prospectors who depended on wildlife for part of their food.

Spain deeded Spaniard Juan de Ugalde, for whom Uvalde County is named, a large parcel of land around Uvalde. The Mexican government granted a huge tract of land around Uvalde to Irishmen John McMullen and James McGloin in the 1820s, but the county remained unsettled (except by Indians) until the late 1840s. Fort Inge was established in 1849 as one of many frontier forts commissioned to repress Indian depredations in the West.

Meanwhile Texas became a Republic in 1836 after the revolution which ended with the Battle of San Jacinto. Uvalde might have ended as a border town with Mexico, except that the U.S. annexed Texas

in 1845 and declared war with Mexico, largely to settle the southern boundary of Texas (Mexico claimed the Nueces River; the U.S. claimed the Rio Grande River). The U.S. won the war and the Rio Grande was declared the border.

Thereafter, the U.S. established a series of forts to deal with Plains Indians. U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who later became President of the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee and many other famous figures were involved in establishing forts to tame the West.

So, what does this have to do with agriculture? Agriculture continues to provide the economic base. From a grassland prairie where forage was the basic food source for bison, antelope and other wildlife species which were used to sustain the Indian population, along with other primary products, such as pecans, to the current form of agriculture, which still largely depends on wildlife as its economic lifeline. White tailed deer, which now provide the economic backbone to a vast amount of our rangeland, did not exist in sufficient quantities when the Indians occupied most of Texas. Our native population managed the grass savanna with frequent fires, which, in turn supported grazing by bison, and pronghorn antelopes. As the West was tamed, the military, fencing, overgrazing, shortages of water, pests, migration of Europeans and other changes transformed the region to what it is today. As Europeans moved West, agriculture evolved in Texas and in the U.S. from that basic grass prairie, agrarian base, which supported a sparsely populated Indian population to an intensive crop based agriculture. U.S. farmers provide 300 million Americans with food of the highest quality and purity. And they do so with such efficiency that Americans spend less for food than any other nation in the world, spending only 7.4 percent of their disposable income for food consumed at home and 4.5 percent for food eaten away from home.

The sesquicentennial began with severe political unrest in the U.S. over the role of slavery, a devastating Civil War and an extensive move westward by Europeans following the Civil War. The last 150 years have come and gone with U.S. agriculture undergoing a remarkable transformation in production efficiency.

Initially more than 80 percent of the U.S. population lived in a rural setting operating over 5 million farms, yet barely able to produce enough food to feed the U.S. population. Half of the U.S. family's disposable income was used to buy food.

The 20th century started with a coal and later a petroleum-based energy system. This facilitated the rapid industrialization of the U.S. economy, which reached all the way to rural America where it was

applied to greater agricultural production efficiency.

Tractors replaced horses, providing a quantum leap forward in the amount of land that could be worked by a farm family. Mechanization also reduced the acreage of farmland that had to be devoted to the production of feed for horses. As a result, oats acreage has declined substantially. Soybeans, which were virtually nonexistent in 1900, have now increased to about 75 million acres.

Agriculture provided the economic base for the U.S. 150 years ago and continues to provide the economic base for a large portion of rural America, such as Uvalde County. Mechanization, extensive agricultural research developments by the land grant system since 1876, readily available commercial fertilizer, agrochemicals, hybrid seeds, genetically modified organisms (GMO's), very rapid information exchanges through the land grant system then the internet and many modern value-added production systems have all permitted a single farmer to boost yields and farm more ground. Now, less than 1.8 percent of U.S. the population is involved in farming and ranching, operating about two million farms in the U.S. and making the U.S. the most agriculturally productive nation in the world.

These same, expensive, intensive farming systems are causing change in rural America. High energy costs, the shortage/re-allocation of water and the changing nature of basic resource use are transforming agriculture. High energy costs and shortages of water are threatening more intensive forms of agriculture, especially in outreach regions such as southwest Texas. While livestock production drove the basic range resource use up until the early 90's, now wildlife, either through hunting or nature tourism, drive the range resource use in a large part of Texas.

A French proverb says basically: "The more things change, the more they stay the same." The sesquicentennial began with vast range resources producing bison, antelope and other wildlife species which the native population used to sustain themselves. Now, those same vast range resources are being used to produce white tailed deer and many other wildlife species which provide a significant economic base to local inhabitants through hunting, nature tourism and many other forms of entertainment. Bison are even being reintroduced in some areas.

What will the future bring? What will the region look like 150 years from now? What will form the economic base for much higher projected densities of population? The jury is still out on this subject. Probably the only thing that is certain is that things will be different. Change is happening at an ever-increasing rate.