

# Black Farmers: Why Such a Severe and Continuing Decline?

*This is a revised version of a talk given at a Black History Month program, sponsored by the Farmers Home Administration. Beale sees the precipitous drop in the number of black farmers since the 1950's as stemming from both implacable circumstances and subsequent rational economic choices by the black farm population. He notes steps taken by Congress in 1987 to foster farmland acquisition by blacks (and other minorities). Beale then concludes by reminding us that black farmers, like other farmers, form just one part of rural society, and efforts to deal with their problems must also take account of the rest of the rural economy.—Ed.*

A flurry of journalistic focus in the last year on black farmers and their problems leads to these reflections on their situation and the essential factors in its evolution. Thirty-three years ago, after I had been at USDA a few years, I was asked to give a talk on black farmers at a meeting at Prairie View A&M College in Texas. I remember the trip well; it does not seem all that long ago. But, when I look at the data in the paper I wrote, it might as well have been a century ago in terms of the stark differences between then and now in the participation of blacks in the operation of farms. The most recent census then (1954) showed 472,000 farms with black operators. Our last farm census (1987) counted 23,000 black-operated farms, a loss of 95 percent. This, to me, is one of the most remarkable social and economic transformations in the history of our country.

One should point out that the definition of a farm was more restrictive in 1987 than it had been in 1954, and note also that the Census Bureau acknowledges some undercount of black farmers. But these are minor footnotes

to the record of the dramatic exodus of blacks from farming.

Even the 472,000 count of 1954 represented nearly a 50-percent decline from the highest count of 926,000 black-operated farms in the 1920 census. In that year 5.1 million black people lived on farms, a number that, unbelievably, is larger than the entire American farm population of all races today (4.6 million in 1990).

What caused the huge loss of black farmers after 1920? The following reasons seem most important to me.

## The Predominance of Tenants

Throughout their history, the majority of black farmers had no ownership of land or independence of operation. Before the Civil War, over 90 percent were held as slaves, and after the war there was no land distribution to them, with very minor exceptions. The fabled "40 acres and a mule" never materialized. Most had to make their way as tenants, renting land from white farmers. At the peak of black farming, at the time of World War I, three-



Photo © Margaret Butler

Tobacco, the prototypical cash crop of black farmers, has been undercut by consumer health concerns.

fourths of all black farmers were tenants. Only one-fourth had managed to become landowners. The largest group of tenants were "sharecroppers" who provided only their labor and depended on the landlord for everything: housing, equipment, work animals, seeds, and credit. Although essentially hired hands, they worked for a share of the crops and thus had an incentive to do a good job and remain through the end of the season. The system itself was not bad, if run in good faith, but it provided many temptations for landlords to exploit an impoverished and uneducated population. And without land of their own, there was no place for tenants when the time came that their labor was no longer need.

## Dependence on Cotton

Before World War I, 99 of every 100 black farmers were in the South, and cotton was king. But a series of events curtailed the growing of cotton in the old South. First the boll weevil, a new pest, overran the entire Cotton Belt by 1921. Some areas never recovered, such as the Black Prairie in Alabama and Mississippi, and shifted to other crops that did not require large amounts of tenant hand labor. Then, large upland areas from South Carolina to Alabama became so badly eroded and depleted from misuse that cotton farming was widely abandoned there in the 1920's. And, both at this time and later, new irrigated cotton areas developed in the West that were highly productive, creating new competition for the South.

After World War II, production of cotton became mechanized and chemicalized and all the jobs of plowing and planting and thinning and weeding and picking that made every member of a farmer's family useful were suddenly being done with tractors and sprays and mechanical harvesters. And as if that were not enough, cotton lost some of its major markets to synthetic fibers. Tenant farmers by the tens of thousands were displaced. Equally important, other thousands simply pulled out on their own, attracted to the cities by word of better jobs and living conditions available there.

## Smallness of Farms

But what of the blacks who owned their farms? Could they not mech-

Calvin Beale is a demographer with the Agriculture and Rural Economy Division, ERS.

anize, as so many white farmers had, or shift from cotton to the new southern emphasis on livestock, soybeans, and grain? No, not very well. Black-owned farms averaged only 59 acres in 1950, less than half of the 130-acre average for white owners. The typical black farm owner did not have the acreage to use modern machinery efficiently or to earn adequate income from types of farming that did not bring as much money per acre as cotton. He would have to expand. But where was the security for a loan? There was not much, for the average black-owned farm was worth only three-eighths as much as the average white-owned farm. Some black farm owners made the transition, but over time most turned to other work, even if they stayed in the community. Most of those who remained in farming continued to have low incomes and found that their children had no interest in succeeding them.

Only in tobacco farming did black farmers succeed for a while in retaining a significant presence in agriculture. Tobacco did not require much land, and continued to make use of hand labor. By the 1970's, tobacco farming had become the leading single type of commercial farming by blacks. Here, too, though, mechanization and

enlargement of operations eventually took place, and the number of black tobacco farmers fell sharply. Furthermore, black farmers have suffered the irony that their most successful crop has been shown to be detrimental to health and is in declining demand.

### Where Do We Stand Today?

Two points are essential to note about black farmers today. First, although some are commercial-scale operators, most still have very small operations. Nearly half of them (46 percent) yielded less than \$2,500 of products for sale in 1987, often just a steer, a calf, or a couple of pigs. Such operators usually either work full-time off the farm or are retired. Another 43 percent of black farmers sold between \$2,500 and \$20,000 of products, an amount that, with few exceptions, would not yield enough net income for a family to live on. These farmers, too, are likely either to be working heavily off the farm or to be basically retired. Off-farm work has been critical to permitting many families to remain in small-scale farming, rather than to leave it.

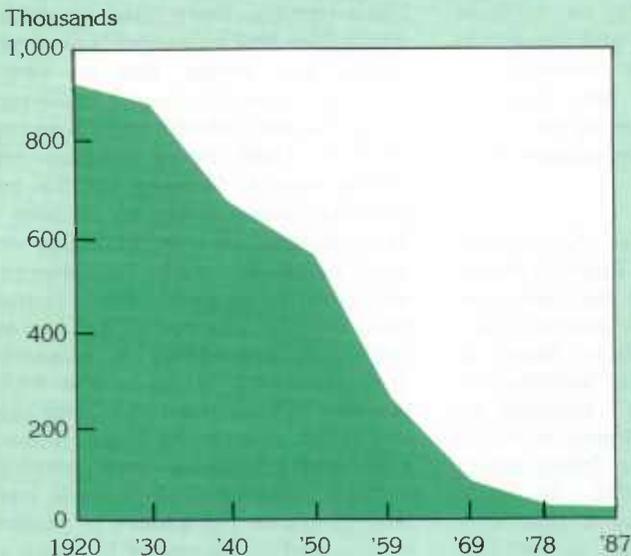
The second point that is so significant for the future of black farmers is their advanced age. Their median age in 1987 was 57.9 years compared with a

median for white farmers of 52.8 years. Among white farmers there were 63 who were under 35 years old for every 100 who were 65 years and over, while among black farmers only 17 were under 35 for every 100 at 65 and over. The extraordinarily low ratio for younger black farmers is the mark of an occupational group that is dwindling rapidly because of its failure to attract young people. Black farm families have had a higher than average birth rate and no shortage of heirs, but usually their children have either had no interest in farming or felt that conditions were too unfavorable to try. It must be acknowledged that, given their situation in farming, most such young people and the many thousands of black farm families who left agriculture in the past acted in an economically rational way by getting out.

I want to emphasize that there is absolutely no hope of stabilizing the number of black farmers in this country without a major increase in the number of young blacks who enter the business and who enter it soon. The annual loss today through death and retirement is several times greater than the number of young entrants.

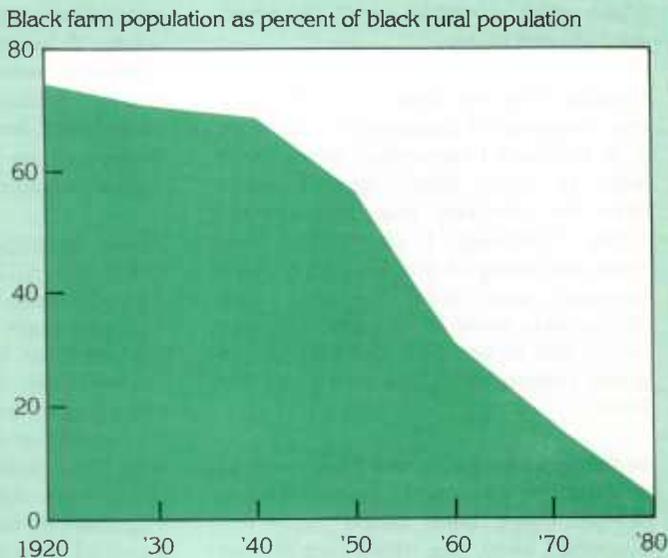
Given the legacy of slavery, the failure to redistribute land to blacks after the

Figure 1.  
**Number of black farm operators in sharp decline since 1920...**



Source: Bureau of the Census, Censuses of Agriculture.

Figure 2.  
**...as is the percentage of the rural black population living on farms**



Source: Bureau of the Census, Censuses of Population.

Full-time farmwork is seldom any longer an attractive or viable option for young blacks. A healthy nonfarm economy and off-farm work are essential to these small-unit farmers.



USDA photo

Civil War, and the quick return thereafter to conditions of white dominance and black political, economic, and social suppression, it was inevitable that black farmers would lose out once farming in the South was altered by modernization and the decline in cotton. The tenants had no control over their fate, and the strivers who had acquired a hard-earned but modest stake of land found that it meant little in the modern age if they lacked education, political equality, access to additional land to rent or buy, and credit to expand. Further, in the most recent generation, many owner families have lost their land through lack of wills, forced partition sales to satisfy the many heirs who are now city folk, the greater buying power of white bidders when sales occurred, and, at times, outright chicanery.

I realize that my tone is somber and my viewpoint is pessimistic. Perhaps it is because I remember when there were so many black farmers rather than the relatively few who are left today. Certainly I understand that there are many of the remaining black farmers who love farming, who desperately want to remain, and who would like to see their children have a good reason to follow them on the farm.

In this connection, it needs to be kept in mind that although white southern farmers have been much more advantaged, they, too, have steadily left the business. The number of white-operated farms in the South did not

peak until 1935 at 2,600,000, but had fallen to 800,000 by 1987.

Most of the publicity about the farm crisis of the 1980's focused on the Midwest. But, the net loss of farms between 1980 and 1988 was actually somewhat greater in the South (13.5 percent) than it was in the rest of the country (11.2 percent), and was especially large in those 10 States where the remaining black farmers are concentrated (16.3 percent). It has become very difficult, in general, to sustain the number of farmers in the South under recent conditions. For white and black farmers alike, the best prospects for survival in the South for small and medium-size operators seem to be in part-time farming, with substantial dependence on off-farm work. A healthy rural and smalltown nonfarm economy is essential to farmers whose units, like those of most black farmers, are far too small to provide an adequate income from agriculture alone.

Since passage of the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987, the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) has been able to make loans at below-normal interest rates for the purchase, lease, or improvement of farms by "socially disadvantaged individuals" (defined as black or other ethnic minority farmers) who lack sufficient or "reasonable" credit from other sources. Of equal importance, the agency is also empowered in this program to earmark for sale or lease to minority borrowers some of the farms to which it has ac-

quired title (such as through foreclosure). Black farmers have often felt they have been denied on racial grounds the opportunity to bid on land in the commercial market. FmHA will provide farm management advice to the borrowers. Thus far, the total number of black borrowers has not been large, perhaps 150-200 through 1990, and most are not younger farmers. But a start has been made. Only a subsidized and persistent initiative of this nature is likely to change the terms under which qualified blacks attain a future in farming. Lower interest rates for these farmers may be extended to include operating loans under provisions of the 1990 farm act.

Although the subject of this article is black farmers, there must be greater recognition that only 2 percent of rural blacks any longer live on farms. About 4 million blacks still live in rural areas, but only 88,000 were farm residents in 1989. Some nonfarm rural blacks work in farming, but the vast majority have nothing to do with it. They depend on manufacturing, service industries, trade, construction, and government work. Black farmers need specific help from USDA and the land-grant universities in preserving their remaining farms to the extent feasible. Yet, we must also keep sight of the fact that, in the larger sense, a continued substantial black presence in rural America now depends overwhelmingly on the welfare of nonfarm people and on the extent to which we meet our broader rural development responsibilities.

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