

COTTON GINS OF CALHOUN COUNTY

I. CONTEXT

Calhoun County was established in 1846 as part of the Spanish De Leon Colony. It started out mainly as a ranching community due to the abundant coastal prairie grasses. Before the Civil War, Calhoun County was not part of the plantation-based culture that dominated many Texas counties, so, consequently, cotton was not one of the major products. In 1860, there were only five bales of cotton produced in Calhoun County. However, at the turn of the 19th/20th century, land companies began offering mortgage loans that brought in an influx of small farmers, a lot of whom raised cotton. By 1930, there were some 574 farms in the county, and in 1940, there was a maximum county production of 10,570 bales.¹ From this time forward, on up until the 1970s, cotton was a very important cash crop in Calhoun County, and is still raised in the county today (2015). Along with cotton production came cotton gins which were an integral part of the different farming communities of the county. Most of the cotton farmers knew the gin owners, and the farmers and owners worked together to make cotton farming a success.

II. OVERVIEW

Early cotton gins in Calhoun County used in what was called a “continuous ginning system” developed by Robert S. Munger of Mexia, Texas, between 1883 and 1885. With this ginning process, the seed cotton was sucked from a “cotton wagon” via a pipe, or “telescope”, which was connected to a pneumatic suction system that took the cotton into the ginning system. The gin would then remove the seeds and trash, and compress the clean cotton into 500-pound bales for shipment.

After the cotton was ginned, the farmers sold their seed to the ginner to cover ginning costs, and their crop to buyers. Cotton buyers cut samples from bales, and classified the cotton according to grade, staple length, color and character (smoothness and cleanliness). This “classing” determined the quality, and thus the value of the cotton. Once the value and price were established, farmers settled their accounts with merchants and bankers. This was a prosperous period for the county.

In the early days, cotton was picked by hand and then hauled to the gin in “cotton wagons”. After World War II, however, mechanized “spindle pickers” became available to

cotton growers, and in Calhoun County, many farmers turned to this method of harvesting. Early models of these “spindle pickers” picked one row of cotton at a time (cotton picking machines today pick up to 6 or 8 rows at a time). This machine-picked cotton would be dumped into a “cotton trailer” and then hauled to the gin for ginning.

Then in 1971, Lambert Wilkes, working with the Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Service and Cotton Incorporated, authored the module concept of harvesting cotton. With this process, large “modules” (containing up to 12 bales) of compressed seed cotton are produced in the field, and then hauled to the gin in specially designed trucks. This type of harvest required an upgrade to the ginning process that included an enhanced cleaning method and the ability to turn out bales of uniform density and sizeⁱⁱ.

By 2007, combined module-builder cotton pickers were on the market, *John Deere* introduced an on-board round module builder on their machines that year. These round modules, weighing up to 6000 pounds, are wrapped in plastic and off-loaded on the ground in the field to be hauled to the ginⁱⁱⁱ.

At the gins today, high-volume instrument classing now grades cotton with more consistency, and marketing takes place by computer. However, the purpose of the cotton gin remains unchanged: to ensure the best quality fiber possible.^{iv}

There is evidence of cotton gins in Calhoun County as far back as the late 1800s. The earliest evidence in the county were two gins owned by the Michot brothers, Eugene and Jules. According to Katie Guidry in “Shifting Sands of Calhoun County”, during the late 1800s, Eugene Michot owned an early gin in old Long Mott (about 3 miles south of present-day Long Mott). The story goes on to say that Michot sold the gin to D.L. McDonald in 1913, and, at that time, McDonald had it moved to a location near the railroad tracks in present-day Long Mott. Eugene’s brother, Jules Michot, owned an early gin in Port Lavaca along the north side of what is today W. Main St. Jules bought the property there in 1895^v, and then sold the property, along with the gin on it, to the *Farmer’s Ginning Co.* in 1902^{vi}.

During the first half of the 20th century, with the increase in agribusiness, there were no fewer than 10 cotton gins in the county, including ones in Port Lavaca, Olivia, Long Mott, Seadrift, Green Lake and Clark’s Station. By the early-to-mid 1950s, as the City of Port Lavaca grew, the two existing gins in town, the *Farmers Gin* and the *Boyd Gin*, relocated to locations outside of town. “Port Lavaca, the county seat, became the trading center for the

hand pickers who purchased daily living items,” said Mary Belle Melcher, who sold lemonade outside her father’s hardware store^{vii}.

Cotton production did well in Calhoun County through the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, but “during the early 1970s, due to decreasing cotton prices and the increasing cost of insect irradiation, most of the farmers in the area stopped raising cotton, which, in turn, caused most of the area gins to close down,” explained farmer Joe D. Brett. The economic agricultural base was changed due to a natural disaster, cotton boll weevil infestation^{viii}.

Then, in the latter 1980’s, cotton came back to Calhoun County due to new technology, and in 2015, there is one cotton gin still in operation in the area, the *Moreman Community Gin Association*.

Steven Pamplin, *Moreman Gin* Manager, said, “the gin is not ginning cotton in 2015 due to the low amount of cotton acreage and the feasibility of operation. The market is down because of outside factors and the spring weather was unfavorable for cotton planting. The farmers who planted cotton lost the bottom crop due to weather, and now have to haul their cotton fifty miles to Vanderbilt for ginning.” Again natural forces were at work^{ix}.

III SIGNIFICANCE

Cotton gins in Calhoun County are historically significant because cotton was a very important monetary crop in Calhoun County during the 20th century and cotton gins helped make it all possible. The cotton gins served as community centers for the small farming communities and provided both economic and social support to the community. Cotton continues to serve as a large agribusiness for Calhoun County. The heavy 2015 spring rains affected cotton production and, in turn, Calhoun County farmers have economized to “weather” this growing season.

In order to continue to serve the cotton agricultural community, the *Moreman Community Gin Association* has other revenues to keep the gin solvent: Farm Supplies, Cotton Seed products, Fertilizer, Agricultural Chemicals, and Grain Storage. In the old days, Walter Spiller remembers a small store, just in front of the old *Moreman Gin* where his dad bought him a pop-sickle every time they brought a cotton trailer there^x. *Moreman Gin* has “tightened its belt” to stay afloat for the Calhoun County cotton farmers who depend upon its existence.

Today at least third generation cotton farmers continue to serve on the *Moreman Gin* board and they look to the future to plant their next year's crop.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

ⁱ Handbook of Texas "Calhoun County"

ⁱⁱ Handbook of Texas "Cotton Ginning"

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikipedia "Cotton Module Builder"

^{iv} Handbook of Texas "Cotton Ginning"

^v Calhoun County Deed Records Volume N, pg. 608

^{vi} Calhoun County Deed Records Volume R, pg. 431

^{vii} From a September 20, 2015 interview with Mary Belle Meitzen-notes on file at the Calhoun County Museum

^{viii} From an August 12, 2015 interview with Joe D. Brett-notes on file at the Calhoun County Museum

^{ix} A September 21, 2015 interview between Mary Belle Meitzen and Steven Pamplin. Notes on file at the Calhoun County Museum

^x Walter Spiller, "Area Gins", March 11, 2014, pg. 1