

## **Michigan Agriculture between 1800 – 1980**

The Lansing Area Agriculture and Natural Resources Club (formerly the Lansing Farmers Club) is celebrating its 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2021. As part of this celebration, planners desired to get some background information about conditions in agriculture that led to the formation of over 400 farmers clubs across the country in the pre-WWII era.

Wayne Bauer, one of the club's Planning Team members, shared that he and Stan Sherman teamed up with 8 – 10 ag industry leaders around 1980 and did research culminating in a book entitled ***Michigan Agriculture 1800-1980*** that captured many of the changes that took place in the agricultural sector in Michigan during that **180 years** between **1800 – 1980**. Their research emphasized country grain & bean elevators, along with farming in general.

Below is a brief of their findings that cover the late 1920's through 1945 when city-based business leaders who had invested in farmland during the depression of the 1930's in the Lansing area were contemplating starting the Lansing Farmers Club in 1941. Some of the key developments in the ag sector in those 15 – 20 years, leading up to the LAANRC being formed follows:

The **period in particular between 1935– 1944 was a turbulent time** for many in the ag sector, as they witnessed things like:

- Farms trying to regroup as many faced bankruptcy following the Depression when 25 – 30% of the farms went bankrupt
- The world was crying for more food during & after World War II (1939 – 46)
- Marketing groups were being formed within many of the commodity groups
- Mechanization on farms was growing quickly with introduction of tractors, combines, mechanical beet harvesters, etc.
- More serious use of fertilizers and chemicals on farms was introduced
- Transportation systems were being used more effectively to transport and ship raw ag products by truck, rail and ships
- Crop rotations were changing dramatically, as draft horses were no longer as important.
- Along with many other developments in marketing & technology.

**1920** > The Michigan Elevator Exchange (M.E.E.) was organized at the Michigan Agricultural College.

- **Draft animals** were at their peak in 1920, when there were **26 mln. horses & mules** on U.S. Farms.
- **Tractors were being introduced on U.S. Farms:**
  - 1910 – 1,000 on farms
  - 1915 – 25,000 on farms
  - 1919 – 158,000
- In 1920, tractors only appeared on **(6%) of the farms** in the corn belt. At one time, **186 firms** were cranking out tractors in the U.S.

**1921 – 1933** > Field investigations involving fertilizer were initiated by C.E. Millar in the Soils Section of Michigan State College. Between 1921 – 1933, all fertilizer was basically applied broadcast or in direct contact with the seed.

- **Corn prices:** Cash corn prices rallied to a high of **\$1.15 in 1924**, before crashing to a low of 20 cents in 1932.

**1926** > The Michigan State Farm Bureau divorced itself from all financial connection with the Extension Services.

**1929** > Selection of sugar beet seed carrying resistance to curly top virus was initiated by U.S.D.A. scientists.

- To improve the efficiency of operations within Farm Bureau, the Purchasing & Seed Depts were combined to form Farm Bureau Services, Inc.

**1930's** > Producers in Michigan started using general purpose row crop tractors.

- Beans were still “stacked” to mature & dry and were then threshed with “beaners”. Bean straw was frequently blown into the barn, which was a dusty, if not downright, dirty job. The straw was used for bedding & sheep feed.
- Mechanical corn pickers were introduced.

**1930 – 1940** > This era produced a number of government storage agreements, which regulated grain trade, including the New Deal Farm Programs in the U.S.

**1929 – 1933** > The **Great Depression** caused an unprecedented economic crisis in the farm sector. Prices received by farmers dropped 56% between 1929 – 1932, and net farm income fell more than 50%. This financial crisis prompted passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of

1933, which sought to restore agricultural commodity prices to the purchasing levels of 1910 – 1914 (**Parity Price Concept**). Thus, government began to take an active role in guiding production and regulating markets. Between 1930 – 1933, one American farm in every four (25%) had been sold as a result of debts and/or back taxes.

The – **Michigan Wool Pool** – actually was established right after World War I. This was one of the 1st. Commodity groups that Farm Bureau got active in.

**1932** > The Farmers & Manufacturers Sugar Beet Association was founded when the processors united with growers to promote the sugar industry.

**1934** > The Michigan Bean Shippers Association (M.B.S.A.) was incorporated as a non-profit association.

- Michigan Farm Bureau made a bad financial decision by trying to sell farm machinery & equipment.
- Eleven Michigan cooperative creameries merged with those of the Indiana Farm Bureau, thereby forming the Midwest Producers' Creameries.

### **Sugar Beet Industry:**

- The production of sugar in Michigan increased from 5.3 mln. lbs. in 1898 to 295.3 mln. lbs. in 1934. In 1934, it took more than 60,000 farmers to produce the beet tonnage, which was grown in the late 1970's by fewer than 4,000.
- The elimination of the Sugar Bounty Bill in 1900 was a crucial turning point for the sugar industry and Michigan experience the failure of many of its sugar beet factories.
- In 1934, there were (13) sugar beet factories, which were operational in Michigan, and (3) were idled.

### **Grain shipped by M.E.E.:**

**1935** > Michigan Elevator Exchange (M.E.E.) handled a total of 6,102 box cars of Michigan grain & beans. Volume handled broke down as follows:

2,588,534 bu. – Wheat

940,593 cwt. – Beans

948,267 bu.– Oats

836,484 bu. – Barley

606,102 bu. – Corn

355,871 bu. – Rye

- **Until 1935**, the American Sugar Beet Industry was entirely dependent on seed imported from Europe.

- Up to 1935, only (27%) of the Michigan farms enjoyed the availability of electricity. The R.E.A. helped change the situation.
- In 1935, corn yields averaged on 25 bu./A

**1937 / 38** > The Michelite bean variety was released.

**1937** > Farm Bureau established the Farm Bureau Fruit Products Company.

**1938** > The following were some of the largest grain elevator firms in Michigan:

- Michigan Bean Company with (18) country elevators
- Wallace & Morley Company with (11) country elevators
- Bad Axe Grain with (11)
- Charles Wolohan, Inc. with (6)
- Hart Brothers with (4)

**1939** > The sugar factories started using beet pilers, which required farm trucks with side dumping capabilities. Prior to this, sugar beet deliveries were limited to loads put directly into the factory flumes.

- Alfred Roberts started as manager of the Cooperative Elevator Company in Pigeon and served in this capacity until 1967.
- Napoleon Feed Mill, Inc. was formed when Orin Heselschwerdt bought a converted railroad depot to sell coal, limestone, and other farm supplies to customers in Napoleon.

**1940 – 1946:**

- Research data on crop rotations and bean yields & yield responses from fertilizer were discussed with growers for the first time in the Thumb & Saginaw Valley areas.
- World War II saw the development of chemicals for use as defoliants to expose gun positions in the jungles on Pacific islands. These chemicals, which included **2-4 D**, were later used as herbicides to control weeds in crops.
- Anhydrous ammonia was introduced in Michigan and actually used on beans.
- During the war, much of the field work in the sugar beet fields around the Sebawaing & Caro areas was performed by German prisoners, who were kept in Caro and came in groups of 20 with a guard to local fields. ( Mechanical sugar beet harvesters emerged on the market between 1946 – 48.)
- Between 1941 – 1945, Minnesota entered the edible bean market as a supplier of navy beans. Their bean production was phased out between 1946 and 1971, however they returned as a key competitor to Michigan in the early 1970's.
- The Michigan Allied Association was created.

- Combines started replacing tractor drawn binders.
- In 1940, the State Commission of Agriculture revoked the elevator storage licenses in certain places like Evart, Chesaning and other places. There was a great deal of confusion about the type of grower receipts required within the industry.
- The David Stott Flour Mills, Inc. of Detroit went into receivership.
- Perry Hayden started his “**Dynamic Kernel**” **tithing demonstration**, which ran for six years at Tecumseh, Michigan. Many interested parties showed up to witness this over that six year period, including Henry Ford and Charles Figy the State Commissioner of Ag.

### **1940 – 1946** (continued) :

- **1941** > Michigan Farm Bureau owned & operated (23) retail outlets, which were designated by the bureau as “management contract branches”.
- **1941** > Dry bean regulation rulings and orders issued by the Michigan Dept of Ag in 1941, included (Ruling No. 843) that provided for compulsory inspection of colored beans, which were previously excluded.
- **By 1942** > Practically all the sugar beet seed used in Michigan was now grown in the U.S., instead of Europe, which was the case prior to 1940.
- **Early in 1942** > John L. Lewis with the United Mine Workers attempted to organize Michigan dairy farmers.

### **1943 – 1947** :

- Between **1943 – 46**, Michigan bean growers increased their bean production dramatically with responses for more food requirements around the world, as a result of World War II and its aftermath. In 1942 alone, 828,000 acres were planted to beans in Michigan, which was a 38% increase over 1941, and 2.6 mln. acres were planted in the U.S.
- In March of **1945**, the Big Prairie Farm was sold to a group of (13) local farmers for \$265,000, but the government did not step out of the picture completely, until 1948. By 1960, (21) independent farmers were farming 7,400 acres on the Big Prairie Farm.
- **1946** > Farm Bureau began work on a fertilizer factory in Saginaw, which was completed in 1948.
- **1947** > The Wicke’s giant **pink neon – “Bean Bunny”** on the west side of Saginaw was erected to honor the Jack Rabbit brand for **Michigan Bean**, which took over the elevator from Saginaw Milling. This icon was torn down in July of 2021.