

From Borden Milk to Borden Crossing

Landscape is a powerful indicator of both where a place has been, and where it's headed. And a drive across rural Oktibbeha County tells an overlapping story with two sets of characters. The characters in one story are fading grain silos, fence rows and rolling hillsides. While another more updated story is a one of housing tracts and office buildings.

In a recent talk to the Starkville Rotary Club, Mississippi Horse Park Director Bricklee Miller said, "I feel that there's a great agricultural root that runs deep through here (Oktibbeha County.)"

She's right. Agriculture throughout the decades, since settlers first took to the region's rolling hills, has been a constant companion tying Mississippians to the land. And one of the key agricultural ties is dairy farming.

It all began with one of Starkville's early leaders, William Montgomery, who brought dairy cows to the area and helped establish dairy production and research at Mississippi State University.

"Having established the *Southern Livestock Journal* in 1875, Montgomery was also a promoter of livestock and dairying for the county and the College, where he influenced

the building of the college herd and the founding of the Dairy Husbandry Department," reads a synopsis of the Montgomery family papers held with the Consortium for the History of Agriculture and Rural Mississippi.

"In addition to operating his own dairy farm, Montgomery took an interest in the College textile school and was instrumental in bringing the Starkville Cotton Mill to Starkville," the statement adds.

But what jolted dairy farming in the region into high gear was the construction of the Borden Milk plant in Starkville.

When the Borden Milk plant in downtown Starkville closed about a year ago, it closed the chapter on more a than half-century of dairy farming in the region, and the loss of a downtown institution since 1926.

"I would say there were maybe more than a 1,000 fair-sized dairy farms," said Bill McKell, a 43-year employee of Borden, remembering the company's heyday.

"But you have to understand, back then everybody farmed something, even if you lived in town, so everyone would have a few dairy cows that they'd milk," added McKell.

Others who have followed dairy farming say the county topped at 1,250 dairy operations. "Some of them may have had just had one can on the side of the road and it wasn't always

full,” said O.F. Parker, a longtime resident of Starkville and former agent with the county extension office in the late 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

The “cans” Parker refers to were metal five-gallon cans used by dairy farmers to transport milk. Each can was labeled with the farmer’s code, and Borden collection trucks made their way across the county picking up or dropping off cans.

“These were common jobs for boys at the university and other people,” said Ruth Morgan a historian at the Oktibbeha County Heritage Museum.

At its height, Borden in Starkville, which when it opened in the 1920s, was the company’s only plant in the South, employed about 80 people directly, but bought milk from thousands of others.

“It didn’t matter if you just had a couple cows tied to a tree, everybody had dairy cows and you had a milk can on the side of the road,” said Oktibbeha County Extension Director Ed Williams.

Borden along with A and M Creamery, which was begun by MSU, would mark the beginning of Oktibbeha’s movement into the industrial economy.

“These two plants opened up, and created more jobs, and this was really the start of industry in the area,” said McKell.

Starkville’s Borden plant was unique in that it was the only facility in the country to produce the company’s line of canned sweetened condensed milk, popular for baking and other uses.

And Borden’s recipe for making the sweetened milk was simple, said McKell.

“It was half and half, so that’s a lot of sugar,” he added.

“I can remember when I first started, we’d get boxcars of sugar in, filled with 100-pound sacks, and these had to be unloaded. That was a real job,” said McKell.

Today, the dairy industry in Mississippi is only a shadow of its former self, say agriculture officials.

“I can remember in 1981, we had 25 grade-A dairies in the area, and 12 grade-C dairies,” recalled Williams. “Now, we’re down to the MSU dairy and one more.”

As the cost of production continued to rise through the 1980s, farmers left the industry or were bought out by the Federal Government’s Dairy Buyout Program.

Since that time, small farms have fizzled out, while mega-farms in places like Florida and most recently arid regions, such as Idaho and New Mexico have grown, said Williams.

“The cost of production was just higher than the going price of milk,” said Williams, charting the decline of small family farms.

Since the opening of Borden in Starkville on March 12, 1926 which called for two days of celebrating and brought out thousands of people and a parade of more than 60 floats, according to The Starkville News -- the region has found new industries and economies to tap, turning to technology and research generated by MSU, as well as industry, such as the steel mill start-up company SeverCorr.

And with new and increased industry, Borden also has a new owner, Johnny Arnold, who is transforming the site into an adaptive reuse project, renovating the old milk plant into a mixed-use development with climate-controlled storage, loft condominiums and retail space, which he is calling Borden Crossing.

The area alongside the factory site, or where the old factory manager's house sat until a few days ago, when it was torn down, will be Montgomery Junction, a project to develop eight homes on a little more than a half acre at the corner of Worley and Hogan streets as a zero-lot line cluster development of 1,400-square-foot residences.

"These will be of an architectural integrity to meet the surrounding neighborhood," Arnold told the Starkville Planning and Zoning Commission last month, noting the homes will be priced around \$160,000.

This project represents another chapter in the evolving story of Oktibbeha County and how the region is leaving its agricultural roots

behind and retrofitting its architecture and landscape to new uses.

And while agriculture, Mississippi's bread and butter for so many years, seems to be if not disappearing -- it is surely struggling.

"It's an industry that has been in decline, and it's all due to economic pressures," added Williams. "But certainly, there's been a long and rich dairy history in Oktibbeha County."

References:

Interviews with Bill McKell, O.F. Parker, Ruth Morgan, Ed Williams Bricklee Miller, and Johnny Arnold. Also, the Montgomery family papers held with the Consortium for the History of Agriculture and Rural Mississippi.