

PASSWORD



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Cotton Plant

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Cotton: A Foundation of the Agricultural Economy

By Cameron L. Saffell, Ph.D.

*"The life of the El Paso Valley is cotton. Cotton is the biggest farm revenue producer.... It is the perennial 'cash crop' and the chief topic of conversation when two or more farmers get together. Cotton in the undisputed 'king' of the valley and is likely to keep that position."*¹



his 1940 statement by writer Murray Neal in the El Paso Herald-Post is an amazing comment on the rise and impact of cotton in the El Paso and Mesilla valleys, considering that commercial cotton production had barely existed for twenty years at that point. His prediction that

it would stay king held true for the better part of fifty more years. Whether it was the celebrations of cotton week and the annual fashion show at the Popular Dry Goods Store, the crowning of the Cotton Queen at the Fabens Cotton Festival, or the numerous cotton gins, oil mills, and textile outlets in the area that was a backbone of the agricultural industry, cotton was indeed a king in El Paso.

This issue of *Password* is the second of several the editors plan on the "Four Cs" that were the foundation of El Paso's economy: copper, cotton, cattle, and climate. The issue on copper has been published.

The heart of the cotton industry in the El Paso area extends from Caballo Dam north of Las Cruces to Fort Hancock in Hudspeth

¹ W. D. Outlaw, "Here's How King Cotton Has Grown in 14 Years," *El Paso Herald*, 13 December 1924; "Candalaria, Texas," Handbook of Texas Online web site <<http://www.tshaonline.com/handbook>>; Cotton production tables by county, Censuses of Agriculture (U.S. Census Bureau or Department of Agriculture), 1929-2007.

County. That definition, though, could just as easily be expanded to include the Mimbres River valley near Deming, N.M., the agricultural oasis of Dell City, the cotton farms of the Pecos River valley from Balmorhea to Roswell, N.M., and the lost fields of Candelaria on the Rio Grande in Presidio County. Indeed, the story of Candelaria, where sixteen bales of cotton grown in 1910 is believed to have been the first cotton commercial grown west of the Pecos and the site of the first trans-Pecos cotton gin three years later, is one almost lost in history, as there has been no cotton grown in Presidio County for almost forty years.¹ However, for the purposes of this issue, much of the focus will be on cotton production and byproduct industries in the El Paso-Las Cruces area.

We may think of cotton as the "fabric of our lives" or, when we see it in area fields, as all being about the same. Like your favorite varieties of apples, not all cotton is the same, so a brief primer is needed as an introduction. There are four domesticated types of *Gossypium*, which is the botanical designation for cotton. Though cotton fibers are measured and classified a number of ways—fiber strength, micronaire, color grade (the term "fair to middling" is a nineteenth-century cotton classification)—one of the most common and best understood ways is by the length of the cotton fibers.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley around El Paso grows two of the four major kinds of cotton. Egyptian cotton is a category based on plants raised in the country of the same name, but its genetic origins are from South and Central America. In fact, Egyptian cotton came from early Sea Island varieties grown on the East Coast in the early 1800s. *Gossypium barbadense* is almost always long-staple cotton with fibers around 1 1/2 inches long. Its *Pima* descendents are typically 1 3/8 to 1 1/2 inches long. This is also called extra-long staple cotton.



American Upland cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) is a term for a category of short-staple varieties from the United States with fiber lengths between 3/4 and 1 1/16 inches. The name originally applied to cotton grown in the Carolinas in the "upland," as opposed to the Sea Island type cotton grown along the coast. The cotton that Hernando Cortes found the Aztec Indians growing in modern-

day Mexico in 1519 was Upland cotton. The original *Acala* cotton, a variety introduced from Mexico in 1906, is a short-staple cotton, often crossed with Upland varieties, with fiber lengths of 1 1/16 inches. The *Acala* 1517 cotton grown in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is a slightly longer descendent of these early to mid-twentieth century breeding experiments.

Cotton production is a process of several stages to get from plants to items for consumption. Growing and harvesting the crop is the responsibility of the farmer and his fields. The farmer then delivers his harvest to a gin, where the seeds are separated from the fiber, which are packed into bales. These, along with developments in farming practices and breeding developments, are discussed in section I. Subsequent processing, whether it is removing oil from cottonseed and feeding the leftover cake material to livestock, or the repackaging of cotton bales at a compress and its journey to a cotton mill to be made into thread and basic textiles, is the subject of section II. That article also discussed marketing groups and cotton promotion, but a third article, section III, highlights the biggest cotton event of the year for the El Paso area, the Fabens Cotton Festival.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CAMERON L. SAFFELL has been Curator of History at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum since 1999. He completed his Ph.D. from Iowa State University in 2007 with a dissertation titled, "Common Roots of a New Industry: The Introduction and Expansion of Cotton Farming in the American West." His 1997 M.A. thesis from Texas Tech University was a material-culture study and history of cotton farming on the Texas South Plains. He is the grandson of two Northwest Texas cotton farm families.

I

Fiber From the Fields of the Río Grande Valley

Cotton has been a part of the Greater Southwest region for hundreds of years. Fragments of cotton thread have been found in Tularosa Cave as far back as 300 B.C. Cottonseed has been found in archaeological sites in Southern Arizona dating to between 700 and 1100. Closer by, archaeologists have found evidence of cotton consumption in the Organ Mountain foothills on the Doña Ana Range of Fort Bliss between 900 and 1450. Archaeologists believe cottonseed was being consumed as a food source high in oils and protein. Spanish explorers in the 1500s noted cotton fields in areas of northern Mexico, the pueblo villages of New Mexico, and the Middle Gila River region of central Arizona. Indian cultivation of cotton, however, declined after the introduction of sheep's wool by the Spanish and the increasing availability of commercial yarn and woven cloth to the point where there was no cotton in the Southwest by the late 1800s. It is unclear if cotton was raised in the El Paso area between the 1500s and 1891 by the Spanish or early American settlers, but if so it was only on a very small scale. There was no commercial cotton production until the 1910s.²

Through most of the nineteenth century, American commercial cotton production was limited to the American South and did not extend past the Blackland Prairies that range across Central Texas. The dawn of the twentieth century, however, brought changes in the traditional cotton growing areas and the introduction of new production areas in the American Southwest, from the Texas South Plains to California. The farms of the El Paso and Mesilla valleys served by the federal reclamation Rio Grande Project, irrigated with waters from the Elephant Butte Reservoir, were the last of these new production areas to begin raising cotton.

² Kate Peck Kent, *The Cultivation and Weaving of Cotton in the Prehistoric Southwestern United States*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series Volume 47, Part 3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1957), 467-69; Christine G. Ward, et al., eds., *Archaeological Investigations at Five Prehistoric Sites on the Eastern Flanks of the Organ Mountains, Fort Bliss, Doña Ana County, New Mexico*, Fort Bliss Project No. 07-53 (El Paso: Statistical Research, Inc., 2009), 290-303; Glen Staten, *Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons, 1926 to 1970*, New Mexico State University Memoir Series Number 4 (Las Cruces: NMSU College of Agriculture and Home Economics, [1971]), 5.

The American South was inexorably linked to cotton farming, from the plantation and slave era prior to the Civil War to the poverty and sharecropping of the postbellum period. The slow spread of the boll weevil from the Mexican border near Brownsville in 1894 across to Georgia by the 1920s was one factor in reshaping concerns about the longtime economic survival of the region. Agricultural scientists called for diversification by shifting to other crops and establishing a beef cattle industry in the South. Low cotton prices and depressed economic conditions in the 1910s shifted labor patterns throughout the nation, with sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and the unemployed (particularly African-Americans) leaving the region for industrial jobs in cities, resulting in a smaller pool of workers to help with farming cotton.³

The impact and economic importance of agriculture heavily influenced the thinking of politicians and officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the 1890s and early 1900s. Expanding and creating new farmland was a prime reason behind the passage of the National Reclamation Act in 1902. This legislation authorized the federal government to construct irrigation projects in sixteen Western states and territories. Each project would make water available to farms and would result in more irrigable farm land than would previously have been possible. Revenues from sales of those lands and subsequent fees paid by those farm owners would help pay the costs of the project, making reclamation a self-supporting enterprise.⁴ Once the dams and canals of a particular project were completed and land sales were underway, it became the duty of the USDA and state agricultural researchers to help identify what kind of crops could be produced to both entice settlers and to help generate the revenues to pay for the massive projects. Thus, the cotton investigations began on the reclamation projects of the American Southwest.

While the El Paso Valley along the Texas-Mexico border and the Mesilla Valley of Southern New Mexico had a number of small settlements which farmed with small irrigation systems based on Spanish *acequias*, the extension of railroads through the region in 1881 brought more settlers and increased demand for irrigation water. While a small, private irrigation system near Las Cruces

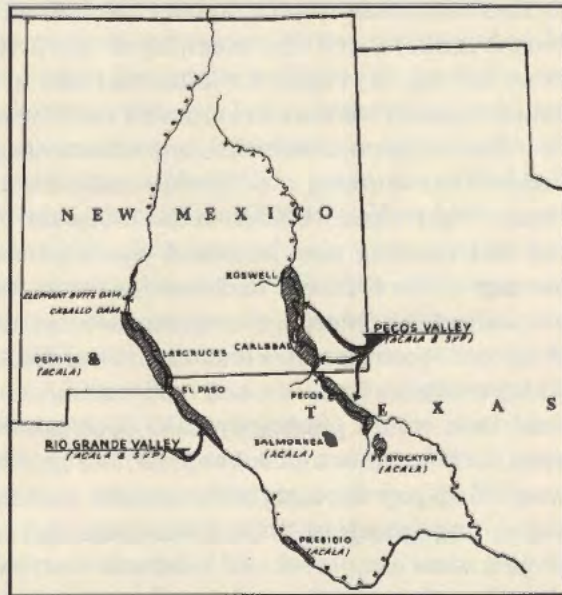
³ Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 96-101.

⁴ Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1.

began about 1908, the Reclamation Bureau subsequently took it over as part of the Rio Grande Project, one of its first projects anywhere in the U.S. The completion of the Elephant Butte Dam (marked on fig. 1) in 1916 established control over the periodic floods and dry periods, making agriculture a stable and profitable venture. The irrigated portions of the Rio Grande Valley includes 123,000 acres in New Mexico and 84,900 acres in Texas, all in a narrow strip 3 to 5 miles wide from the dam seventy miles north of Las Cruces to about sixty miles below El Paso.⁵

Figure 1.

Cotton growing areas in the Rio Grande and Pecos valleys.
 [Excerpted from map in Anderson, Clayton & Co., *California Acala* (Los Angeles, 1941)]



Shortly after it was created in 1904, the Reclamation Service identified objectives for the Rio Grande Project. Previous efforts to form irrigation districts in the El Paso and Mesilla valleys in the 1890s had caused much discord between officials of New Mexico Territory, Texas, and Mexico, all of whom pressed their water-right claims to the Rio Grande. Its final recommendation was to build Elephant Butte Dam to create a reservoir for irrigation water for the Mesilla, El Paso, and Juarez valleys. The United States government guaranteed Mexican water claims in the Juarez Valley

⁵ Edwin J. Foscue, "The Mesilla Valley of New Mexico: A Study in Aridity and Irrigation," *Economic Geography* 7(1) (January 1931): 1-9; A. R. Leding, *Community Production of Acala Cotton in New Mexico*, USDA Circular No. 314 (1934), 2; University of Texas Cotton Economic Research, *Cottons of the El Paso Area* (Austin: University of Texas, 1953).

from the project by treaty in 1906, and in the 1910s farmers on the American side formed water users associations to meet requirements of the federal Reclamation Act for water deliveries. The El Paso County Water Improvement District No. 1 coordinated irrigation for the El Paso Valley farmers in Texas, while the Elephant Butte Irrigation District included farmers in New Mexico.⁶

The key local agricultural institution was New Mexico's land-grant college, the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts near Las Cruces. Since the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station did not open a substation in El Paso until 1942, most all the scientific developments of interest to cotton farmers on both sides of the state line came from New Mexico A&MA. Opened in 1889, the college was also the home for the staff and research work of the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station. Scientists there included cotton among their test crops as early as 1891, but did little in-depth research until the mid-1910s after the successes of cotton experiments and commercial production became evident in Arizona and in the Pecos Valley near Carlsbad.⁷

The initial attention of USDA agricultural researchers in the early 1900s was on expanding production of long-staple cotton varieties, particularly the types raised in Egypt. Manufacturers preferred long-staple cotton because its longer fiber lengths were easier to spin into thread and stronger than many of the shorter-staple cottons then raised in the South. The United States had increasingly grown reliant on Egyptian cotton production, but its quality was deteriorating due to disease and cross-contamination in breeding. With rising political tensions in Europe that ultimately would lead to World War I, developing a domestic source of long-staple cotton, combined with the perceived threat of the South being wiped out by the boll weevil, prompted USDA officials to promote new areas for growing new types of long-staple cotton.⁸

Because of its similar climate and early successes in cotton experiments, the Egyptian cotton tests were concentrated at Yuma, Ariz., in 1904 and later expanded to the Salt River Project in Central Arizona in the early 1910s. Starting from three initial

⁶ Bärbel Hannelore Schönfeld LaMar, "Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley, New Mexico: Reclamation and Its Effects on Property Ownership and Agricultural Land Use" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1984), 35-38.

⁷ Staten, *Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons*, 5.

⁸ C. S. Scofield et al., *Community Production of Egyptian Cotton in the United States*, USDA Bulletin No. 332 (1916), 2-5.

Egyptian varieties in 1902—Mit Affi, Jannovitch, and Abbasi—the USDA developed a number of varieties, including Yuma and Pima, a selection of Yuma that was 1/8" longer in fiber length than its parent. Between 1915 and 1917 the value of American-Egyptian cotton production increased from \$129,660 to over \$6 million. The new variety became so popular that, despite later improvements in its genetic makeup, the term "Pima" became universally known as the generic term for all extra-long staple cotton.⁹

The start of World War I and the resulting loss of cotton available from Egypt caused market prices for long-staple cotton to rise sharply. By the late 1910s many farmers who had not grown it before were considering cotton as a way of making more money. This coincided with the experiments of several Lower Valley farmers to see if cotton would successfully grow in El Paso. Various individuals have been credited with growing the first cotton in El Paso. The earliest appears to be a Major W. S. Allen growing a small patch near San Elizario in 1889. One anecdotal story credits an unnamed emigrant from Waco who, in moving his family to Clint in the 1910s, made a cushion of cottonseeds to make his wagon seat more comfortable and tried growing them on a lark after they settled here.¹⁰

A review of period newspaper articles creates a clearer picture. One of the first serious experimenters was the future mayor Charles Davis, who reportedly put out eight rows of cotton from seed he acquired from Brazos County in 1914. Davis said some years later that, "Cotton was such a curiosity that passers-by tore it up and carried it away as souvenirs." About the next year, E. D. Brown of Clint encouraged several men, including M. N. Hudson from near Fabens, to try growing some Egyptian cotton seed from the Phoenix area. Also in 1915, Rio Grande Project superintendent L. M. Lawson distributed seed (probably from the USDA) for testing, with C. E. Kelly of El Paso and Charles Stevens of La Mesa, N.M., being among the large growers who

⁹ Thomas H. Kearney and William A. Peterson, *Egyptian Cotton in the Southwestern United States*, USDA Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin No. 128 (1908), 7; Joseph McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons* (El Paso, Tex.: Hill Printing Company, 1961), 58-65, 77. Yuma cottons had a fiber staple length of 1 5/8" to 1 3/4".

¹⁰ "Major Raised First E.P. Cotton in 1889," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 18 January 1974 (from the *Herald* of 20 December 1889); Paul C. Davidson, Interview by Patrick Quinn, 3 July 1973 (Interview No. 100, UTEP Institute of Oral History, El Paso, Tex.), Reel One.

tried it. None of these men, though, immediately launched into commercial production like a newcomer who had just arrived from the Imperial Valley of California.¹¹

"L. J. Ivey is known all over the cotton states as the Father of the Cotton Industry in the El Paso Valley," wrote one farmer in 1965. Before Ivey no cotton was more than a garden hobby. One of fourteen children born and raised in Central Texas, Louis and his brothers Robert and K. B. had moved to Callexico, Calif., in the early 1910s and began learning about the new cotton production experiments by the USDA in the area. In 1914 the Ivey Brothers gained some national notoriety when in mid-June they produced the earliest bale of ginned cotton—a time when farmers in other parts of the country had just planted their seed.¹²

It is not known exactly why, but Louis J. Ivey was persuaded to visit El Paso a couple of years later—perhaps to give his expertise on irrigated cotton growing. He was working with J. B. Dale and Dale's son-in-law, Will T. Owen. In 1916 they grew a few acres of cotton on two plots near Tornillo and Clint. Finding it successful, in 1917 a partnership called the Ivey-Dale Farm cleared 600 acres of bosque land, mixed

the assorted loam, clay, and sandy soils of the old riverbeds, and planted the first large-scale, commercial cotton crop, which produced 681 bales. In 1918 they built their first gin about a mile from Tornillo and their second gin a year later. The original Ivey-Dale farm paid for itself in four years. Before it was all over, Ivey had built 21 gins in the region and, rejoined by his brother K. B. in 1922, the Iveys built a small farm empire that by the 1950s included several thousand acres in the El Paso and Pecos valleys. Both

The original Ivey-Dale farm paid for itself in four years. Before it was all over, Ivey had built 21 gins in the region and, rejoined by his brother K. B. in 1922, the Iveys built a small farm empire that by the 1950s included several thousand acres in the El Paso and Pecos valleys. Both men helped establish the Tornillo Cotton Oil Company in 1928.

¹¹ "King Cotton Once Rarity," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 28 May 1936; "Back to 1910," *El Paso Times*, 18 February 1965; "Some Early History," *El Paso Times*, 26 February 1965.

¹² "Cotton in the Valley," *El Paso Times*, 17 February 1965; "Obituaries: [K. B.] Ivey," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 26 September 1977.

men helped establish the Tornillo Cotton Oil Company in 1928. Louis Ivey went on to become an expert on long-staple cotton and was the longtime manager of the Farmers and Merchants Association and later the El Paso Valley Cotton Association. Farmer Bob Skov recalls that Ivey practically left his farm in order to be a cotton lobbyist in Washington; "it was a struggle all the time." Meanwhile, his brother K. B. Ivey began building his own cotton empire, raising both long- and short-staple cotton with three of his seven children at farms near El Paso and Pecos. In 1955 the K. B. Ivey Family was recognized by *Progressive Farmer* magazine as a Master Farm Family for their outstanding accomplishments in farming, homemaking, and community services.¹³

With the success of the Ivey-Dale partnership and others like W. R. Burton and R. H. McConigal in the Clint/Fabens/Tornillo area, farmers throughout the region started trying cotton in their own fields, using a wide variety of seed procured from East Texas and Arizona. The first commercial cotton farmer in Doña Ana County was Lee Harlan. He raised a modest first crop in 1919 near San Miguel on twelve acres, but he had to send it to Tornillo for ginning and could not get his seed back, as was customary, because of federal quarantine regulations on interstate transport of fresh cotton seed. He had to elicit the support of the Farm Bureau to both lift the quarantine and to expand cotton farming in the area, including the establishment of the first growers association in 1920. By then the first gin was operating at Canutillo, making it that much more practical for Mesilla Valley producers to join the cotton craze.¹⁴

About this time the Agriculture Department of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce and the El Paso County Farm Bureau began courting new farmers to the area with its small brochure, "Cotton's Paradise: 'In the Valley of Plenty.'" Everyone agrees

¹³ "More About Valley Cotton," *El Paso Times*, 18 February 1965; Arthur Ivey, Interview by Richard Mason, 1 November 1983 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Tex.), Tape One, Side One; "Valley Farmers Own, Operate Own Mill," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 September 1952; "Cotton Grows From Infant to King in 37 Years," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 10 May 1954; Frances Segula, "Tornillo, Texas ... Only in Memory," *Password* 31(2) (Summer 1986): 112-13; "Rites Set For Louis J. Ivey," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 August 1967; Bob Skov, Interview by Richard Mason, 10 July 1984 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University), Tape One, Side Two; "Iveys Farm 1400 Acres in El Paso Valley, 1800 Acres in Pecos Section," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 12 March 1955; K. B. Ivey obituary.

¹⁴ "King Cotton Once Rarity," George M. Clark, "History of Cotton Industry in Doña Ana County...," *Rio Grande Farmer*, 16 December 1928; "Corset, Booze, Bible Found in Unclaimed Car," *El Paso Herald*, 23 September 1920.

"that the El Paso Valley produces as good or better cotton than any other section of the country," they touted. "This is the last of the cheap irrigated farm land in the Southwest for general farming." Further, cotton meant more people and more success for farmers of all types—wheat, corn, alfalfa, fruits, and commercial truck crops—as well as for dairymen and poultry growers. In the "Valley of Opportunity," how could one go wrong raising cotton?¹⁵

As discussed earlier, American-Egyptian cotton varieties like Pima were all the rage in the mid-1910s and were already known to grow well in the Southwest. However, this would not be the variety that El Paso-area farmers experimented with. Unbeknownst to most producers, the fight against the mighty boll weevil was what would finally shape the face of Western cotton production. USDA researchers as early as 1901 were seeking solutions to combat this emerging threat to the American economy and cotton industry. USDA biologists from the Bureau of Plant Industry spent several years searching for cotton varieties from Central America that were immune to the boll weevil. Of particular interest in their second trip to the region in 1906 was a single cotton plant, growing wild, that grew upright, had large bolls with unusually long fibers, and a natural resistance to the damage caused by boll weevils—a plant that they recognized was superior in almost every way to most every American Upland cotton variety. Further investigation found planted fields of this variety near the community of Acala, Chiapas—an area with a climate and elevation similar to Northwest Texas and Oklahoma. Within a few years experimental plots of these Mexican Acala cottons were being sampled from Del Rio to San Antonio to Victoria, Tex.¹⁶

The Acala varieties shared a long list of favorable characteristics that made it popular throughout breeding programs across the United States. The plants grew straighter and stronger than its Texas "big boll" counterparts. While the bolls were similar in size, it produced fibers 1 1/8" in length that had good spinning characteristics. Compared to other American Upland varieties, Mexican Acala cotton was superior for its shorter growing season, productivity, better growth in cooler weather, better ripening

¹⁵ El Paso Chamber of Commerce and El Paso County Farm Bureau, "Cotton's Paradise: 'In the Valley of Plenty'," circa 1920, in Agriculture Vertical File of the Border Heritage Center, El Paso Public Library.

¹⁶ O. F. Cook and C. B. Doyle, Acala Cotton, A Superior Upland Variety from Southern Mexico, USDA Circular No. 2 (1927), 7-11.

of late bolls, and a greater resistance to unfavorable conditions, particularly the threats posed by the boll weevil. While pure Mexican Acala did not perform well in the traditional Old South cotton belt, it was almost ideal for raising in the new production areas of the West.¹⁷

Young enthusiastically favored Acala over any other variety. By 1919 he had moved from Tornillo and cleared a large farm adjacent to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks about thirteen miles south of town just across the Hudspeth County line. He also built a cotton gin by the highway that soon sprouted into a little town.

A number of farmers favored Acala and started growing and promoting it. Among them was a relative newcomer to farming named W. T. Young. Although he had first come to El Paso in 1904, he did not start farming until after he moved to Tornillo in 1917. Young enthusiastically favored Acala over any other variety. By 1919 he had moved from Tornillo and cleared a large farm adjacent to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks about thirteen miles south of town just across the Hudspeth County line. He also built a cotton gin by the highway that soon sprouted into a little town. Taking its name from the cotton variety, by 1925 Acala had fifty residents and a post office. Young began breeding and improving the Acala seed and owned a small seed business

supplying other farmers, personally making all the sales calls as far away as the Texas South Plains. Louis Ivey was also said to be a big booster of Young's Acala.¹⁸ Among Young's clients was W. J. Stahmann, a former Wisconsin buggy maker, who had settled near Tornillo and began raising cotton and tomatoes. Stahmann later joined the Iveys and several others in establishing the Tornillo Cotton Oil Mill before he moved with his son Deane to a new 2,900-acre farm near La Mesa, N.M. By 1925 almost every little town from Doña Ana to Acala had a cotton gin—

¹⁷ Cook and Doyle, *Acala Cotton*, 2-5, 11-15.

¹⁸ Louise Lovelady, Interview by Richard Mason, 1 November 1983 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University), Tape One, Side One; "W. T. Young, Valley Seed Breeder, Dies," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 8 April 1935; T. Lindsay Baker, *More Ghost Towns of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 3-4; "Acala, Texas," Handbook of Texas Online; Skov interview, Tape One, Side One. Lovelady was W. T. Young's daughter, raised on the Tornillo farm, although she recalls much about the heyday of Acala, Tex.

some forty in all—and area farmers were producing almost 80,000 bales of cotton.¹⁹

For many years researchers at the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station (NMAES) grew, tested, and developed several Upland cotton varieties, including traditional Texas varieties that many area farmers were familiar with from their previous homes and progenies of Pima and Acala provided by the USDA Bureau of Plant Industry. The Durango variety was initially most favored by farmers, but NMAES research from 1921-1927 showed that Acala was consistently the highest yielding variety. In 1926 the USDA directly joined the breeding efforts, opening a cotton substation at Las Cruces. Together the NMAES and USDA began developing Acala cultivars for New Mexico and Far West Texas under the direction of university agronomist G. N. Stroman. The first native-produced cultivar, developed from a California breeding line, was released in 1930 and called College Acala.²⁰

Concurrent to the research developments at New Mexico A&MA, USDA officials urged producers to organize themselves. One of the first of these organizations was the Mesilla Valley Cotton Growers' Association in 1924, whose initial members were mostly from La Mesa and Chamberino. The group's purpose was to form a "pure seed association" with the aim of creating a district where only one, designated variety of cotton would be produced. Working in conjunction with the college and USDA, the group wanted to handle only Acala variety cotton and to recruit one or more gins that would agree to process only Acala cotton. The group also agreed to help

*Together the NMAES and USDA began developing Acala cultivars for New Mexico and Far West Texas under the direction of university agronomist G. N. Stroman. The first native produced cultivar, developed from a California breeding line, was released in 1930 and called College Acala.*²⁰

¹⁹ "Our History in a Nutshell," Stahmann's Pecans web site <<http://www.stahmanns.com/pages.aspx?id= &docid=93>>, accessed 10 January 2011; "Expansion of Cotton Oil Mill Costs Nearly \$500,000," *El Paso Times*, 21 September 1952; *Cotton Production in the United States: For the 1925 Crop Year* (GPO, 1926).

²⁰ C. Wayne Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development in the United States," in *Cotton: Origin, History, Technology, and Production*, edited by C. Wayne Smith and J. Tom Cothren (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), 149-50; Staten, *Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons*, 5-7.

breed out experimental seed plots for certified seed for future years. The Association expanded into other parts of Doña Ana County by the late 1920s and in 1928 allied itself with the New Mexico Crop Improvement Association. In the decades since, this organization has been responsible for helping spread and maintain newly issued varieties of Acala cotton in New Mexico, and in turn into El Paso.²¹

In those early years, western Upland cotton varieties like College Acala got a bad reputation among cotton buyers in the South, even though the grades and staple lengths were very good. For whatever reason, it simply ran through the cotton mills poorly, which the buyers and spinners blamed on irrigation. As a result, "irrigated cotton" became synonymous with poor milling quality. Part of the solution was the formation of a cotton marketing cooperative. Following the lead of a number of state and regional organizations in the early 1920s, nine El Paso and Doña Ana county producers formed the Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers Association (SWIG) in 1926.²²

"I'll bet that within three years this association controls the cotton of the valley," said SWIG President Gowan Jones in 1927. And while it ultimately controlled a large part of the market for several decades, SWIG's ultimate success lay in the twin goals of gaining its grower-members better market prices and of promoting their product to change opinions among buyers and cotton mills. Within a few years it was highly successful at both.²³

With a vehicle available for marketing cotton in place, the emphasis now was on improving cotton quality and overcoming the bad reputation that developed in the 1920s and early 1930s. NMAES researchers continued doing extensive testing and improvements, often exchanging seed with local growers like Deane

²¹ *Leding, Community Production of Acala Cotton*, 4-16. The Acala growers group had been preceded in 1920 by the Mesilla Valley Cotton Growers' Association, which tried several times to bring agreement on a single cotton variety, starting unsuccessfully with Durango. The one-variety community model that New Mexico implemented was based on a number of other similar endeavors throughout the cotton belt; only California's was as successful, where the practice was required (and protected) by state law.

²² Staten, *Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons*, 7.

²³ Jones quote from an article [title cut off] by H. S. Hunter, *El Paso Herald*, 22 October 1927, copy in the El Paso Vertical File: Cotton Mills, El Paso Public Library; Otis T. Weaver, *SWIG: South-Western Irrigated Cotton Growers Association, El Paso, Texas*, USDA Farmer Cooperative Service Circular No. 29 (1962), 26-31. For more about the history and activities of SWIG and other cotton-related endeavors in the El Paso-Las Cruces area, see the section II.

Stahmann of La Mesa and W. T. Young. The next major commercial seed release from NMAES in 1935 was a selection from Young's Acala variety, which was more directly descended from the original Acala brought from Mexico. Acala 1064 produced higher yields and longer fibers with a shorter growing period than College Acala, and it quickly became the new standard for the region.²⁴

Stroman quickly followed Acala 1064 with two selections significant to the El Paso/Mesilla valleys: 1517 and 1450. Acala 1450 produced longer cotton fibers, but NMAES elected not to release it as a commercial variety. Instead, Stahmann acquired 1450 and developed it further in his own breeding program. This produced the locally known Mesa Acala and Mesilla Valley Acala varieties, some of the longest fiber-length cottons derived anywhere in the U.S. from Acala stock.²⁵

Stroman's selection of Acala 1517 in 1940 became the germ-plasm foundation for all future lines of New Mexico cultivars, all of which have carried the Acala 1517 label in its titles. By 1946 it was said that New Mexico's Acala cotton was superior in spinning quality to any other cotton of the same staple length, and in some tests could produce yarn of the same strength as longer length cotton varieties. The poor reputation of the 1920s had finally been overcome. Later improvements after World War II introduced improved wilt resistance, stronger fiber strength, blight resistance, and bolls suitable for the spindle-picker mechanical harvester. Today Acala 1517-09 (meaning the 2009 commercial release) is considered by NMAES as the standard variety for El Paso and Las Cruces cotton producers. One writer said Acala is "the Cadillac of the short-staple cottons."²⁶

The significance of the New Mexico breeding program extends well beyond the Mesilla and El Paso valleys. Acala 1517 proved to have great genetic diversity. With its favorable fiber quality and

²⁴ Carl Moosberg, Interview by Richard Mason, 11 November 1983 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Tex.), Tape One, Side One; Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 149; Staten, Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons, 7-9. Young's Acala later became an important genetic addition to the California Acala varieties because of its high fiber strength.

²⁵ Mesilla Valley Acala was one of the parents of the Del Cerro variety, which exhibited similar fiber characteristics as the long-staple Pima varieties developed in Arizona. Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 150-51. At this same time Strom selected Acala 1517A, which has been the parent variety for cotton grown in the Pecos Valley of New Mexico and Texas.

²⁶ Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 151-53; Clayborne Wayne, "New Mexico Cotton is King of Cottons," *New Mexico Ag Journal* 1(7) (September 1946): 9; Ken Flynn, "Cotton Still King in El Paso," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 2 July 1980.

verticillium wilt tolerance, the 1517 seed stock (called germplasm) spread throughout the U.S. cotton industry. According to a 1996 study, over 45 percent of the cultivars issued between 1970 and 1990 in the U.S. included Acala 1517 germplasm in their genetic pedigree. Thus, Acala 1517 became the largest genetic contributor to modern cotton varieties coming from public breeding programs in the U.S.²⁷

By the 1940s the Far West Texas/Southern New Mexico region was regularly producing over 100,000 bales of cotton each year

After the federal Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 was passed, which included mandatory cotton acreage reduction, county groups like the El Paso County Cotton Control Association formed to determine the most equitable means of meeting the new federal regulations.²⁸ The groups that got the most attention, however, were those that helped deal with labor issues in cotton farming.

from about 70,000 acres of farm fields. Of the forty or so gins, only a couple had closed or been replaced with newer facilities. While several corporations owned a handful of valley cotton gins, where the fiber is separated from the seed and baled, a few of them were farmer-owned cooperatives. Growers also organized a number of other organizations to meet a variety of purposes. For example, the Clint One-Variety Cotton Association organized in the late 1930s to obtain high-bred seed as cheap as possible and promote the growing of the same exact variety across a larger area. One extension writer noted that the Southern Mesilla Valley Cotton Growers' Association had organized to build more gins, but had expressed little interest in subsequent steps for marketing or warehousing their

cotton. After the federal Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 was passed, which included mandatory cotton acreage reduction,

²⁷ Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 153-54; Daryl T. Bowman, O. Lloyd May, and D. Steve Calhoun, "Genetic Base of Upland Cotton Cultivars Released Between 1970 and 1990," *Crop Science* 36(3) (May-June 1996): 577-80.

²⁸ Compiled statistics from annual publication *Cotton Production in the United States* (GPO, 1940-1950), "Plan Distribution of Cotton Seed," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 28 September 1939; W.F. Smith, "Cotton Growers in Southern Part of Doña Ana County Organize," *Rio Grande Farmer*, 8 March 1923; "Headquarters Named for Acre Reduction," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 17 January 1934.

county groups like the El Paso County Cotton Control Association formed to determine the most equitable means of meeting the new federal regulations.²⁸ The groups that got the most attention, however, were those that helped deal with labor issues in cotton farming.

Until the last fifty years, cotton growing required a great deal of labor—particularly at harvest time. While row-crop equipment and the occasional tractor could help plow and plant fields, workers were needed to hoe weeds and to pick the cotton out of the bolls as they opened in the fall. Much of this was seasonal labor, and except for some of the farm families who had previous experience in other parts of the cotton belt, there was not always a large populace that knew what to do.

Working in the cotton fields was not limited to men. Women and children were just as likely to be in the fields. A 1935 newspaper report made mention that 250 school children were turning out in the fields. "When a child has to help the family earn a living, what can we do?" asked El Paso county school superintendent H. C. Hinton. Although Louis Ivey said in the same article that child labor was not as extensive in El Paso as in other parts of the country, it was certainly prevalent.²⁹

Where it happened, women worked similar hours to those of men—eight to twelve hours a day. In some areas women were reportedly ashamed to admit they helped with plowing or cultivating crops, as those tasks were usually identified as strictly male activities. Their help at harvest time, though, was definitely expected. A Texas study suggested that Anglo American women worked an average of 4.1 months in the fields, while Mexican women worked 4.3 months. This is consistent with a harvest period each fall that lasts about three or four months.³⁰

Like their mothers, children did much of their time in the fields during cotton harvests. "Child labor was a form of apprenticeship," particularly among Mexican American laborers. By age eight most children picked cotton in the fields beside their parents and older siblings. Many children also worked in the fields as part of their after-school chores. Seventy percent of the children

²⁸ "250 Children Out of School to Pick Cotton," *El Paso-Herald Post*, 27 September 1935.

³⁰ Cameron L. Saffell, "Common Roots of a New Industry: The Introduction and Expansion of Cotton Farming in the American West," (Ph.D. dissertation, Iowa State University, 2007), 127.

in a 1924 U.S. Department of Labor study indicated they had chopped cotton, 14 percent had helped plant, 15 percent had run a cultivator, and 10 percent had done some form of plowing. Children's labor typically added up to about four months a year, with 60 to 75 percent of that time devoted to harvesting. Boys tended to work slightly more (4.5 months) than girls (3.7 months). By 1951 a Presidential commission reported that child labor had virtually disappeared, except in agriculture. Particularly in areas where wages were suppressed because of high numbers of migrant or Bracero laborers, "the entire family must work in the fields in order to sustain life." This was such a pervasive problem that one contractor reported that if someone suggested that the children "have got to go to school," many families simply packed up and moved on.³¹

As cotton became better established, farmers in the Western cotton belt needed more laborers to keep up with increasing production. Their hired laborers, prior to and during World War II, represented many different ethnic groups, particularly in California and Arizona. The vast majority, even after the war, were Mexican or Anglo-American migrants or contract workers. Even a few African Americans migrated to the Southwest to work in the cotton fields. The *El Paso Herald* took note in 1920 that the county's first school for blacks was opening at Tornillo. "It was necessary to have a negro school on account of the negroes who have been attracted to the valley on account of the interest in the cotton growing."³²

Native and migratory Mexican Americans were likely the largest part of the work force in this region. Those from across the border were threatened with deportation as a means to keep wages depressed. Growers also favored Mexican laborers because they tended to travel and work as families, often with grandparents or other relatives, who as a whole tended to be a stable and useful work force.³³

In the late 1930s it became evident to many people that the United States might be forced to enter World War II. In many parts of the Cotton West, particularly in New Mexico and Arizona, the traditional patterns of local and migrant labor began disappearing. Some rural workers answered the call of military service. Other former cotton laborers moved to industrial and manufacturing

³¹ Saffell, "Common Roots of a New Industry," 127-28.

³² "Lunch Facilities and Baths Installed in County Schools," *El Paso Herald*, 28 August 1920.

³³ Saffell, "Common Roots," 130-31.

jobs in large cities, attracted by higher wages and steady, year-round work. These events marked a sharp turning point in the sources of labor used in cotton. By 1942 the lack of local labor was declared a full-blown crisis in the El Paso area. Desperate growers, whose cotton was needed more than ever before for the war effort, were suffering an estimated \$1 million in losses from crop deterioration and damage. Church women and 180 Las Cruces schoolchildren, plus another dozen who came all the way from Taos, turned out to help harvest the crop in Doña Ana County while officials of the U.S. Employment Service scrambled to import workers from other parts of the country. With federal agencies efforts canceling each other out, Congress stepped in and established the national Emergency Farm Labor Program within the USDA in early 1943.³⁴

The overall mission of the Emergency Farm Labor Program was to recruit laborers and get them in the field to help farmers. The Victory Farm Volunteers sought non-farm youth between ages fourteen and seventeen to work on farms. Similarly, the Women's Land Army recruited women, mostly living in their own homes and being trucked to and from the farm each day, generally for seasonal work. In addition the Emergency Farm Labor Program coordinated the placements of several groups of foreign workers.³⁵

An unusual coincidence of local need and a U.S. Army dilemma came in the form of German and Italian Prisoners of War (POWs). Starting with the successful North Africa campaigns in late 1942, the Allied powers suddenly had large numbers of POWs. The U.S. Army decided to send many of their captured POWs to detention camps in the United States. According to the terms of the Geneva Convention, prisoners had to be housed in camps of a similar climate as where they were captured. Thus, several large base camps were established across the Southwest to hold the prisoners from the AfrikaKorps.³⁶

The Geneva Convention permitted the holding power—in this case the United States—to make enlisted men available for work

³⁴ "Chaparral," "First Imported Cotton Pickers Assigned Farms," "Dozen Women of Church Circle to Pick Cotton," and "Taos Pupils Pick Cotton in Valley," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, 16 November 1942; Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics Agriculture Monograph No. 13 (1951), 13-34, 41-46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105, 135-36.

³⁶ Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, Md.: Scarborough House, 1996), 1-42.

outside the camp under certain conditions. With the shortage of agricultural labor, many areas of the country appealed to have POW camps placed in nearby areas so farmers could hire these men as workers when local labor was not available. Farm organi-

zations in El Paso and Las Cruces were among them.³⁷

The first prisoners in the region were Italian POWs at a camp in Las Cruces, joined a few days later by camps at the El Paso County Coliseum and in Fabens. The Doña Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau, the El Paso County Cotton Association, and the Farmers and Merchants Association acted as the agents for farmers in their respective areas to help arrange for housing POWs and then for transporting them to farmers.

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cotton. With many POWs having never seen cotton before, their work was not all that great, but as one farmer said, "They got the job done." While the farmers had to pay the Army the same wage they would have paid local laborers (called the "prevailing wage rate"), the POWs themselves earned 80 cents a day.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., 79-94; Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program*, 96-99.

³⁸ "War Prisoner Contract Signed by El Paso Farmers," *El Paso Times*, 14 August 1943; "Italians Expected in Valley Next Week," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 8 September 1943; "Italian War Prisoners Prepare for Arrival of Additional Men," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 20 September 1943; Wolfgang T. Schlauch, "Harvesting the Crops: Axis Prisoners of War and Their Impact on Doña Ana County during World War II," *Southern New Mexico Historical Review* 9(1) (January 2002): 30-37; and *New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum, Prisoners of War in New Mexico Agriculture during World War II Research Project, 1999-2002*, and the resulting exhibit, "To Get the Job Done." For more about a German POW's perspective picking cotton in Las Cruces, see the autobiography of Walter Schmid, *A German POW in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

The lack of farm laborers was a concern even after V-E Day. Farmers and farm groups throughout the country aired their concerns to President Truman, led by the Doña Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau, asking that German POWs be retained through all of 1946. Truman agreed only to keep them through the 1945-46 harvest, which got El Paso and Las Cruces farmers through. Their replacements would come from the other group of non-native laborers during the war—the Mexican workers who became known as the Braceros.³⁹

Following the government immigration restrictions imposed on Mexican laborers in the early 1930s, cotton growers in Arizona and New Mexico were among the first to question their continuation in the early 1940s. The Doña Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau requested Congress modify or rescind immigration laws for their area specifically to permit Mexican laborers to chop or pick cotton. A reluctant Mexico finally agreed to institute an agricultural labor importation program as part of its contribution to the Allied war effort in July 1942. The international agreement was based on the initial Congressional legislation authorizing the Emergency Farm Labor Program—Public Law 45 (April 1943)—which became the hallmark reference for the Bracero program.⁴⁰

Despite the early interests expressed by New Mexican, Arizonan, and Texan cotton producers, Mexican farm workers were rarely employed in these states the first few years. Mexico specifically excluded Texas as a possible destination in the first several international labor agreements because the Mexican government was concerned by widespread reports of discrimination against its citizens in that state. The lack of contracted workers probably does not mean that Mexican citizens were not laboring in cotton fields; more likely, growers in these states utilized “illegal entrants” or a group of 2,040 non-contract workers who were able to enter the United States at El Paso in May 1943 to work for one year in New Mexico or Texas.⁴¹

The organizations that helped farmers procure POWs simply shifted gears to get the services of Mexican nationals starting in 1946. About the only significant change was a name, when in 1950

³⁹ Schlauch, “Harvesting the Crops,” 34-36. In New Mexico some of the smallest branch camps were closed by January, with the last of the larger branch camps closed in March 1946.

⁴⁰ Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program*, 199-202, 41-46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 219-26.

the El Paso Valley Cotton Association (EPVCA) organized to replace its predecessor organizations in El Paso and Hudspeth counties. The Immigration and Naturalization Service opened a large center at Rio Vista near Socorro, which became a major center for U.S. processing of Bracero workers.⁴²

Unlike the POWs, who were mainly available only for the cotton harvest, the Braceros could be employed on year-round contracts. "In this part of Texas cotton growing is a 13-months-a-year job" said George Spence of the EPVCA. The Braceros generally were expected to work all day in the fields unless they had a special task like fixing machinery. They worked an average of 9 hours a day, five and a half days a week, earning \$27 a week. At harvest time they could earn \$3 to \$4 for every hundred pounds of cotton they harvested. A good Bracero on a one-year contract could earn \$1,500. Farmer Bob Skov recalls that their previous Mexican laborers had a lot of experience and lived just across the Rio Grande. The Braceros, however, had to be drawn from economically depressed areas of Central Mexico and knew very little about cotton. Some of the border laborers traveled to Central Mexico to work under a Bracero cotton contract until the rules were changed to prohibit Mexican laborers from having any choice in where they went to work.⁴³

In addition to the legalized Braceros came a large influx of illegal Mexican workers, the so-called "wetbacks" because they had to swim across the Rio Grande to enter the U.S. This traffic grew stronger as labor demand increased after World War II, particularly during the Korean conflict. Farmers encouraged it, as they needed the workers and did not mind that their presence helped keep the wage rates they had to pay down.⁴⁴

Mechanical cotton harvesters first came to the region after World War II, but were not very popular. Farmer Arthur Ivey said the first one bought for K. B. Ivey's farm in 1952 "didn't work worth a hoot." He admitted years later that they mainly got it as a prop to keep the Braceros from asking for more money.⁴⁵

⁴² Memo from Louis J Ivey to "All farmers and ranchers in El Paso, Hudspeth, and Culberson counties," in Thomas Family Papers, MS 400, UTEP Special Collections, El Paso, Tex.; "2000 Valley Laborers Will Be Re-Hired," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 18 January 1950.

⁴³ Larry Neibergall, "There is Something to Do Year Around for Braceros on Valley Farms," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 June 1957; Skov interview, Tape One, Side Two.

⁴⁴ Saffell, "From Common Roots," 137.

⁴⁵ Skov interview, Tape One, Side One; Ivey interview, Tape One, Side Two.

The end of the Bracero program in 1964 brought a sudden halt to the availability of cotton laborers. Although growers feared the end—the cotton industry had been responsible for 60 percent of Bracero employment—the successful mechanization of cotton harvesting by the 1960s largely eliminated the need for any seasonal laborers. Area farmers made the transition somewhat grudgingly. Perhaps lacking the financing to purchase new harvesting equipment, the EPVCA continued for a couple of years to solicit school children and other laborers to help pick cotton in the fall.⁴⁶

The El Paso Valley Cotton Association had come a long way from its roots in 1941 as a small local organization. After reorganizing in 1943 with the stated purpose “to bring together the farmers for the purpose of moving collectively on all farm problems,” it became more than an organization that handled Bracero contracts. It also helped lobby to remove ginner penalties against irrigated cotton, fought the quarantine discrimination rules regarding the pink bollworm in the 1940s and '50s, and became an information center for youth programs, insurance, insect control, and public relations. Most significantly, though, EPVCA became the principal lobbying organization for state and national cotton farming matters. It became so powerful that EPVCA was one of only three interest groups who could select the producer delegates to the National Cotton Council.⁴⁷

Until 1937 nearly all of the nation's extra-long staple, Pima cotton was raised in Arizona. The Pima variety represented this production until 1935, when a new cultivar called SxP was produced. SxP was earlier maturing, produced larger bolls, and resulted in 10-20% more lint, which made smoother, more uniform, and slightly stronger yarn than the Pima variety. SxP quickly became the new standard for extra-long staple growers, including in the early 1940s for a few growers in Southwestern New Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley. As with the original cotton introduction in the late 1910s, the choice to grow extra-long staple cotton was due to higher market prices, as demand increased from industries associated with national defense associated with World

⁴⁶ Saffell, “From Common Roots,” 137-38; “Principals Asked for Students,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, 6 October 1965.

⁴⁷ Harry Moore, Interview by Jeff Townsend, 25 January 1974 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University), Reel One, Side One; “History of El Paso Valley Cotton Association,” circa 1964, in News Clippings folder, El Paso Valley Cotton Association Records, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University.

War II. The brief wartime boom, however, crashed when prices collapsed and the extra-long staple industry nearly came to a complete end in 1947.⁴⁸

Through the 1930s El Paso-area growing of long-staple cotton beyond an experimental scale was unprofitable because it lacked suitable ginning facilities. Up to that time, all the gins that had been built were saw gins which pull seed off the fuzzy seed of *G. hirsutum*, Upland-variety cottons. Long-staple cotton like Pima requires a roller gin to separate the lint from the slick *G. barbadense* seed. A saw gin damages Pima cotton because the saws tangle and break the longer fibers. Up to 1940 any locally grown Pima cotton had to be sent to Arizona to be ginned, but this problem was overcome with the building of the area's first long-staple gin at Canutillo in 1940. The brief wartime boom in Pima production, both locally and nationally, crashed when Pima cotton prices collapsed and the extra-long staple industry nearly came to a complete end in 1947.⁴⁹

Within a couple of years, though, the Pima cotton industry reemerged. Demand and market prices stabilized, in part anticipating the possibility of another war in the looming Korean conflict. Meanwhile some cotton growers in the Mesilla Valley and the Trans-Pecos farming areas of Texas switched from Acala to Pima because the variety had better tolerance to verticillium wilt, which was emerging as a significant obstacle to the region's cotton production. By the late 1950s domestic American production was strong enough to result in the first ever exports of Pima cotton.⁵⁰

In the meantime, new varieties were introduced. Pima 32 and then Pima S-1 was developed and released in Arizona, which helped further stabilize the extra-long staple cotton industry and consistency of product during the 1950s. Pima S-1 also became a

⁴⁸ McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons*, 123; Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 160.

⁴⁹ As Ed Hughs from the USDA Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory at Mesilla Park, N.M., describes it, a saw gin works like plucking a chicken, but a roller gin works like shucking corn. "Long Staple Gin Will Be Put in Valley," *El Paso Times*, 27 February 1940; McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons*, 123; Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 160. The first roller gin at Canutillo was built by White Gin Association. It was followed in 1953 by another gin in Canutillo by the Lone Star Gin Company. "Long Staple Gin Brings Increased Upper Valley Premium Cotton Crop," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 21 November 1953. The total 1947 production of extra-long staple cotton was 163 bales, all in Arizona.

⁵⁰ McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons*, 123-25; "Long Staple Gin Brings Increased Upper Valley Premium Cotton Crop," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 21 November 1953.

more viable competitor to American upland cotton, including Acala 1517. Meanwhile, researchers at the new Texas A&M extension research station in El Paso, opened in 1947, began developing its own extra-long staple cotton variety germplasm. This seed stock eventually was the parent contributor to Pima S-3, a variety that did best at elevations above 2,000 feet, including the entire Texas-New Mexico production areas. The El Paso station also began doing extensive research to develop strains of Acala cotton that were resistant to verticillium wilt, which had become a major threat to area cotton production in the early 1940s.⁵¹

In light of the stability and increasing production of the American Pima cotton industry, Southwest Pima growers met in 1954 to form the SuPima Association of America, with its headquarters in El Paso.

SuPima was organized primarily to promote the extra-long staple cotton industry and to focus attention on government regulation and agricultural research. While produc-

tion ebbed and flowed over the decades, Pima cotton always produced at least 60,000 bales nationwide per year. Supporting its local members, SWIG started a marketing pool for extra-long staple Pima cotton in addition to its usual Upland variety sales; for several years in the 1970s SWIG was the largest handler of Pima cotton in the United States. SuPima branched into the seed business between 1978, when it merged with the Arizona Cotton Planting Seed Distributors, and 1993 when that division was sold to commercial seed company Delta and Pine Land Company. The latter also marked the end of the USDA development of extra-long staple cotton varieties, with its final release called Pima S-7. In 1993 SuPima (now Supima) moved its corporate offices from El Paso to Phoenix.⁵²

With the rapid changes in the cotton industry, not just in the Southwest but nationwide, the U.S. Department of Agriculture



The SuPima Logo

⁵¹ Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 160-62; McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons*, 42; "Valley Laboratory Asked to Produce Wilt Resisting Strain of Cotton," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 8 January 1945.

⁵² McGown, *History of Extra-Long Staple Cottons*, 42-43; "SWIG Again the Largest Handler of Pima Cotton in United States," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 19 September 1975; Jesse W. Curlee, "Supima Association Changes Bring Growth in Recent Years," *Western Farm Press*, 5 April 2003; Smith et al., "History of Cultivar Development," 162-63.

decided that additional research facilities were needed to investigate cotton ginning. In the 1930s there were more than 19,000 gins nationwide, each costing about \$10,000 to build. By the 1950s there were only about 7,000 that now cost about \$100,000 each. The first gin lab opened in Mississippi in 1930, but twenty years later the USDA opened a Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory at Mesilla Park, N.M., adjacent to the New Mexico A&MA campus. The gin serves to investigate issues related to cotton production and ginning of both Pima and Acala varieties in the irrigated farm areas of the Southwest, which are different from the rest of the cotton belt due to the arid weather conditions. Its goals today are the same as sixty years ago: increasing lint production and its value; preserving the quality of cotton fiber; and reducing the air pollution associated with cotton ginning, all at minimum cost to the farmer and the gin operator.⁵³

The cotton industry in the El Paso and Mesilla valleys reached its peak during the Korean Conflict in the early 1950s, with annual production approaching 200,000 bales. The numbers eased back for a few years and then seriously fell off about 1964. Since the late 1960s the region has only grown about 100,000 bales per year. With the addition of several roller gins for Pima cotton, the total number of cotton gins in the area peaked at 50 in 1951. Many held on until the 1970s because everyone still had to harvest at the same time and only so many trailers were available to haul the crop from fields to gins. Eventually, though, equipment began improving in speed and quality and the backlogs at the gin began to clear. With profit margins becoming thinner, the ginning industry began to contract. By 1992 the last gin in Hudspeth County had closed, and only six remained in El Paso and eight in Doña Ana counties (including the USDA gin lab's two roller and saw gins). The once powerful El Paso Valley Cotton Association had largely given up lobbying and was little more than a cooperative selling fertilizer to farmers.⁵⁴

⁵³ *The Work of the United States Cotton Ginning Research Laboratories*, USDA Miscellaneous Publication No. 731 (1956), 2-7; USDA Agricultural Research Service, *The Southwestern Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory: Mesilla Park, New Mexico* (Mesilla Park: SCGR Laboratory, [ca. 1992]), 2-3; "Cotton Ginning Research Laboratory," *New Mexico Extension News*, 37(3) (March 1957): 6-7.

⁵⁴ Compiled statistics from annual publications *Cotton Production in the United States* (GPO, 1950-1970), *Cotton Ginning in the United States* (GPO, 1972-present), and the U.S. Census of Agriculture (about every five years, 1950-1992); Skov interview, Tape Two Side One; "E.P. Valley Cotton Assn. Faces Financial Collapse," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 1 December 1962.

In 1979 one writer said that "King Cotton may not even be a crown prince in the El Paso area this year." With domestic use of cotton down from 50 percent in 1966 to less than 25 percent by 1980, the signs of decline were starting to show. Fully half of the 1978 area cotton crop went to mills in Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, when almost none of it had been shipped abroad a decade before. In a bit of irony, *El Paso Herald-Post* ag writer Ken Flynn said in a headline at the beginning of July 1980 that "Cotton Still King in El Paso," but by the end of the month he was reporting that "Cotton [Is] Not King Anymore." In the latter article Flynn wrote about how in the previous year cotton and cotton products (18%) had been surpassed by commercial vegetables (25%) as the top commodity in the El Paso Valley's \$200 million agricultural production. Though not king, cotton was not gone. "I think it's here to stay," said farmer Robert Skov. "As long as we've got the land, it's one of the more profitable activities."⁵⁵

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the regional cotton industry has shrunk and settled to a new norm. SWIG, the longtime cotton marketing cooperative, sold most of its assets to its west coast counterpart, Calcot, and dissolved in 2006. The final few privately-owned gins closed, leaving the farmer-owned cooperative Valley Gin at Tornillo and Mesa Farmers Gin at Vado, N.M., as the last public cotton gins in the region. The loss of area gins was so profoundly felt that in 2009 the Doña Ana County Historical Society named "The Cotton Gins of the Mesilla Valley" as one of its Old Timers Award recipients, denoting a historically prominent cherished object or cultural tradition in the area. Meanwhile, a smaller group of cotton farmers still raise their precious crop. As they have for about the last three decades, year in and year out they plant cotton on about fifty thousand acres and produce about 100,000 bales of cotton. While it is still marketed as "the fabric of our lives," cotton is no longer the influential, talked about crop that it used to be in El Paso and Las Cruces. While no one expects it to disappear completely, much of its heritage in this area is now relegated to the pages of history.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "Crop Disappoints Area Cotton Producers," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 25 November 1979; Ken Flynn, "Cotton Still King in El Paso," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 2 July 1980; Ken Flynn, "Cotton Not King Anymore," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 31 July 1980.

⁵⁶ Ed Hughs, USDA Gin Lab Director, personal communication; Doña Ana County Historical Society newsletter, May 2010; Compiled statistics from annual publication *Cotton Ginning in the United States* (GPO, 1980-present), and the U.S. Census of Agriculture (1997, 2002, and 2007).

II

Cotton From Field to Feed and Fabric: The El Paso Cotton Subsidiary Industries

"Industries sprout where cotton grows." This title from a 1954 article in the *El Paso Herald-Post* provides a historic perspective on the cotton industry in the El Paso and Mesilla valleys. Whether it was part of the process of shipping cotton to textile manufacturers, marketing and sales, or byproduct industries associated with cottonseed, the cotton industry included many more people than just farmers and their ginner.⁵⁷ Like the cotton growers, examples of each phase of the industry arose in El Paso and became longtime institutions. Together, the growers and these byproduct industries make up the "Big C" of cotton in the regional economy.

Early Compresses

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when gins completed the processing of harvested cotton, the result was large cotton bales weighing about five hundred pounds each. The gin's press, however, could only generate a certain amount of pressure, so the cotton bale that came out was a fairly large and bulky object. Over time as cotton started being shipped by railroads, it became more important to make the bales as compact as possible. The more bales you could get in a single railroad car, the cheaper the cost of transporting each individual bale—usually a savings of at least \$5 per bale. So shortly after ginning the bales were taken to a cotton compress, where a very large steam- or hydraulic-powered press applied additional weight and "compressed" the cotton to a smaller, more dense bale about one-third of its original size. A box-car could hold 30-40 bales from a typical West Texas cotton gin. After compressing, 130 bales could fit in the same space.

Compresses did not change the weight, only the density and overall size of the cotton bale. Most compress units were so large that they could condense to one of two different sizes: standard density was 22 pounds per cubic feet for shipping to domestic mills

⁵⁷ "Industries Sprout Where Cotton Grows; Gins, Mills Compressors Rise," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 24 April 1954.

in the U.S., while high density of 34 pounds per cubic feet was used for international shipments. Each compress facility usually had several large warehouses to store bales as they came in from the gin and again after they were compressed as they awaited shipment to the coast. Each warehouse was heavily outfitted with sprinkler systems and often had its own water tank to protect against the biggest threat—fire. A hint of flame in any bale could easily destroy the entire warehouse of tens of thousands of bales.⁵⁸

The first compress in the region was that of the El Paso Compress and Fumigation Company, which started with a large \$200,000 plant in the Cotton Addition of El Paso in 1924. Over the next several years, it built a second facility in Las Cruces and acquired the Big Spring Compress & Warehouse. By September 1929 the company's assets had been acquired by the Federal (later Union) Compress and Warehouse Company in Memphis.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most fascinating story is associated with the first compress built in Fabens. The story began in January 1927 when Britton Davis, Frank Pickrell, and Haymon Krupp began quietly organizing a venture to handle all the valley's cotton business, including providing financing to farmers, buying and selling cotton, gins, compress, and oil mills. With each man committing \$5,000 to the first venture, the new Farmers Cotton Finance Company was born. Their first year saw over \$1 million in financing, netting profits of nearly \$200,000. By fall Davis suggested that they build a compress at Fabens and incorporate their company. While the financing operation fell apart in early 1928, the compress business continued to boom and earned 20 percent profits. The partners went in to Las Cruces, as the Farmers Compress Company, and opened a new, competing facility near the Union compress.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Harry Bates Brown, *Cotton* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1927), 348-49; "Fabens Expects Boost in its Cotton Income; Better Crop Predicted in Valley Town," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 6 November 1939; "To Increase Storage Facilities at Compress if Bumper Crop," *Deming (N.M.) Headlight*, 15 May 1958; "Lucile Anderson, "Cotton in the Mesilla Valley," *New Mexico Stockman*, 11(5) (May 1946): 52.

⁵⁹ "Compress for El Paso," *Brownwood (Tex.) Bulletin*, 5 August 1924; *El Paso Post*, 27 September 1924, as cited by "In Old El Paso," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 September 1934; "Buy Compress," *Lubbock Morning Avalanche*, 14 January 1928; "45,000 Bales Compressed at Las Cruces Plant," *Roswell Daily Record*, 28 January 1929; Warrant Deed, El Paso Compress & Fumigation Company to Union Compress and Warehouse Company, 27 September 1929, El Paso County Clerk Deed Book 522, Pages 193-194.

⁶⁰ "Million Dollar Business From \$15,000 Revealed in Valley Cotton Empire Suit," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 6 May 1933; *Las Cruces Citizen*, 29 June and 12 September 1929, as cited by Marvin Tessner, "Out of Mesilla Valley's Past," *Las Cruces Sun-News*, 27 June and 19 September 2004.

In September 1929 Krupp, Pickrell, and Davis formed a second company—the Valley Compress Company—for the purposes of buying three plants of the Union Compress and Warehouse Company. By late 1930 the partnership companies, now worth more than one-half million dollars, were becoming a complicated web of three companies owning seven compresses and financing farmers to boot. The founders' original vision of a "cotton empire" was on its way to reality when the bottom fell out of the cotton market. With farmers defaulting on loans and the Farmers Cotton Finance Company over \$400,000 in debt, the scheme fell apart. It was not resolved until a court case in 1933 revealed the details of a the massive scheme.⁶¹

Untangling the web took a lot of work. One of the two compresses in Las Cruces was moved to Artesia and eventually sold. Fabens, which by now had two compresses, saw one retained by Krupp as the Lower Valley Compress Company, but it ceased operation in 1932 and then burned down two years later; it was not rebuilt.⁶²

As the jury reached a verdict in the Davis-Krupp-Pickrell lawsuit and the assets passed through receivership in the summer of 1933, three men—R. H. Vickers, Paul Thomas, and W. E. Cheairs—organized a new company with a simple purpose: "To construct or purchase and maintain cotton compresses and public warehouses." The El Paso Valley Compress Company began by acquiring the original El Paso Compress & Fumigation Company plant in El Paso, the second plant in Fabens, and the first Las Cruces compress. They promptly set about expanding the Fabens and El Paso facilities, investing well over \$150,000. For the next forty years El Paso Valley Compress Company would operate as a highly successful regional company, expanding its operation with additional warehouses and a new compress in Deming in 1953.⁶³

⁶¹ "Million Dollar Business."

⁶² "Las Cruces Compress to be Moved to Artesia," *Albuquerque Journal*, 29 January 1933; "Burned Compress Won't Be Rebuilt," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 4 May 1934.

⁶³ Corporate papers, El Paso Valley Compress Company Minutes Book, in Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers Records, New Mexico State University Archives & Special Collections, Las Cruces, N.M. (hereafter cited as SWIG Records); "Valley Cotton Presses Sold," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 14 June 1933; "Fabens Expects Boost in its Cotton Income," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 6 November 1939; T. E. Nixon, "El Paso Valley Compress Benefits Luna Farmers," *Deming Headlight*, 18 April 1963.

Cotton Marketing and SWIG

The largest and possibly most significant cotton company in the Southwest emerged from the farmer cooperative movement of the 1910s and '20s. During the formative years of the western cotton industry, from Texas to California, the U.S. Department of Agriculture encouraged farmers to organize their own business for seed buying, seed production, ginning, and marketing. In the case of marketing and sales, the goal was for groups of farmers to create larger pools of cotton which could be sold in bulk and bargain for better market prices. It also gave growers the opportunity to create reputations for their product. This was an important consideration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, as in the 1920s western Upland cotton varieties like the locally popular College Acala had a bad reputation among cotton buyers in the South. For whatever reason, it simply ran through the cotton mills poorly, which buyers and spinners blamed on irrigation. As a result, "irrigated cotton" became synonymous with poor milling quality.⁶⁴

Following the lead of a number of state and regional organizations in the early 1920s, nine El Paso and Doña Ana county cotton producers formed the Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers Association (SWIG) in 1926. The SWIG founders kept several of the successes and failures of the earliest cotton cooperatives in mind as they set up their new organization. Rather than have a strict requirement that members only market through the cooperative with no option to get out during their contract period, SWIG made its structure more flexible and accommodating. In addition, unlike any of their predecessors, SWIG consciously undertook from the start that it would market cottonseed and its byproducts as well as baled cotton, thus providing services for both of the products a farmer owned after ginning his harvest. With firm grower contracts, SWIG could make "forward sales" of the expected forthcoming delivery of cotton and cottonseed, thus taking advantage of market prices and establishing guaranteed prices and sales even before a crop was harvested.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ George O. Gatlin, *Cooperative Marketing of Cotton*, USDA Department Bulletin No. 1392 (Washington: GPO, 1926); Glen Staten, *Breeding Acala 1517 Cottons, 1926 to 1970*, New Mexico State University Memoir Series Number 4 (Las Cruces: NMSU College of Agriculture and Home Economics, [1971]), 5.

⁶⁵ Otis T. Weaver, *SWIG: South-Western Irrigated Cotton Growers Association*, El Paso, Texas, USDA Farmer Cooperative Service Circular No. 29 (1962), 26-31.

The first two years SWIG marketed cotton through a cross-contract agreement with the Texas Farm Bureau Cotton Association.⁶⁶ The great distance between El Paso and the bureau's headquarters in Dallas and the differences in the cotton varieties and qualities between the irrigated Southwest and the rest of Texas led SWIG to hire its own staff to directly sell its own cotton in 1928.⁶⁷

SWIG showed promising success from the get-go. Reports at the first annual business meeting in 1927 discussed the experience of a partnership of one SWIG member. The pair had harvested their crop and split it in half, each taking half of the bales. The partner, a non-member, sold it through a private buyer on the open market as he had before, garnering 11.25 cents per pound. Meanwhile the member had turned his bales over to SWIG and let them market and ship his bales, getting more than 15 cents a pound.⁶⁸

While not all farmers in the El Paso and Mesilla Valleys marketed their cotton bales or cottonseed through SWIG, a large enough group did that SWIG became very influential. In its first marketing year (1928-29) SWIG sold 21,914 bales produced by 342 member growers, representing 21% of that year's total production in the El Paso Valley. In 1951 61% of its members had marketed delivered their cotton to SWIG all twenty-five years, handling 943,646 bales during that period—28% of the region's total cotton production during that period. In 1929 SWIG became one of the charter members of the American Cotton Cooperative Association, a national sales federation of all the major cotton cooperatives in the country. This was later replicated in the 1970s with a new, stronger organization called AmCot. In 1931 SWIG created a spin-off organization, the El Paso-based Production Credit Corporation (PCC), to provide financing to farmers who needed loans to support their cotton operations. The model established with PCC was used to help structure the federal Production Credit Associations under the Farm Credit Act of 1933. PCC loaned SWIG member-growers more than \$3 million until 1947, when SWIG liquidated PCC because other Production Credit Associations and commercial banks more readily provided short-term farmer financing.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ The Texas Farm Bureau Cotton Association was one of the original statewide cooperatives formed five years earlier at the urging of the USDA.

⁶⁷ Weaver, *SWIG*, 26-27; article by H. S. Hunter in *El Paso Herald*, 22 October 1927, copy in El Paso Vertical File: Cotton Mills, El Paso Public Library.

⁶⁸ "Coops. Get More For Cotton," *El Paso Times*, 13 July 1927.

⁶⁹ Weaver, *SWIG*, 34-42; General Manager's report, minutes of 14 August 1951 annual meeting, SWIG Records, New Mexico State University Archives & Special Collections, Las Cruces, N.M.; "AmCot's History," Calcot web site <<http://www.calcot.com>>.

Cotton Classification

Before any cotton bale could be sold, it had to be graded and classified according to official U.S. standards. The popular phrase "fair to middlin" was a variation on nineteenth-century cotton grading classifications for "fair" and "middling". Congressional passage of the United States Cotton Futures Act (1916) and the Cotton Standards Act (1923) mandated the Secretary of Agriculture to establish and maintain formal grading standards and training. The universal cotton standards established the criteria for farmers, buyers, and mills to discuss the quality of cotton and come to an appropriate price. For several decades the subjective assessment of cotton samples was done by "classers" at official USDA classing facilities around the country, who determined the grade and staple length based on a visual inspection of a sample of each bale provided by the gin. Over the years the standards were expanded to include color.

The USDA opened a cotton classing office in El Paso in the late 1920s, which graded all cotton grown in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Far West Texas. Under the federal Smith-Doxey Act of 1937, farmer groups organized to promote the improvement of cotton could operate its own classing office for its members instead of using the USDA facility. SWIG elected to do this, at first at its sales offices in Houston/Galveston and Charlotte, N.C. In 1958 SWIG decided to build an addition on its headquarters building on Doniphan Drive for a large certified classing room and hired a former employee of the USDA El Paso classing office to direct it. They continued employing classers into the early 2000s.⁷⁰

Cottonseed Processing and Marketing

The second product of the ginning process which creates cotton bales is the separated cottonseed. Cottonseed is high in protein, so it is valuable as a feed item, and has a large amount of oil that can be removed under pressure at a cotton oil mill. Any oil mill has to have a large amount of storage space, as the seed arrives during the harvest season it may not be pressed for several months. Milling cottonseed begins with cleaners to remove trash and most of the fuzz still clinging to the seeds (called linters). The remaining

⁷⁰ Timothy Curtis-Jacobson and George David Smith, *Cotton's Renaissance: A Study in Market Innovation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 203-4; Agricultural Marketing Service Cotton Division, *The Classification of Cotton*, USDA Miscellaneous Publication 810, rev. ed. (Washington: GPO, 1965), 4-15, 53; "Officers Elected by Cotton Group," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 13 August 1958.

*Of one ton of raw cottonseed at the start of the process, the mill separates out 394 pounds of oil, 856 pounds of meal, 534 pounds of hull, 170 pounds of lint, and 50 pounds of trash.*⁷¹

linters are removed by the same kind of saws as are found at a gin, but there are more saws with more teeth. Premium linters can be incorporated into upholstery and bedding; shorter linters can be used as cellulose, while the lowest grades are used for cotton padding materials. After delinting, the seed is cracked open so the meat inside can be separated from the exterior hull. The meat then goes into the press to extract the oil. The leftover meat can be ground into meal or made into pellets (cotton cake). The cotton meal, cake, and hulls can all be fed to livestock. Of one ton of raw cottonseed at the start of the process, the mill separates out 394 pounds of oil, 856 pounds of meal, 534 pounds of hull, 170 pounds of lint, and 50 pounds of trash.⁷¹

As noted earlier, from the beginning Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers planned to market cottonseed for members. Their original plan was to partner with a commercial oil mill and share in the profits, but this proved unsuccessful because the commercial mill paid the going market rate and there was no profits to share. For several years SWIG tried to purchase a minority interest in an existing oil mill, but eventually decided that it would have to buy or lease one outright.⁷²

The opportunity for SWIG came in the mid-1930s when the Spears Oil Mill went through bankruptcy. J. B. Spears opened a \$200,000 facility in the Upper Valley in 1923, and a short time later installed cattle pens to feed them the leftover cotton cake. Spears, a one-time large scale farmer and cotton entrepreneur, saw his ventures in cotton farming, milling, and financing collapse in the early 1930s. In 1934 SWIG leased the Spears Mill and immediately began reaping the benefits. By operating the oil mill itself, SWIG was able to "keep" the profits and return them to its member-growers in a similar manner as the cotton marketing program. With a feed crisis underway in 1934, SWIG members were getting \$35 per ton instead of the previous year's \$9-12 for cottonseed and two to three times more for cotton cake, most of

⁷¹ Joe Brown, "El Paso Cottonseed Mills Run at Capacity Despite Production Drop," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 28 November 1953.

⁷² Weaver, *SWIG*, 42-43.

which was coming back to the farmers. Two years later SWIG renewed its lease with an option to purchase, which they soon exercised. It christened its oil mill division as the Farmers Cooperative Oil Mill.⁷³

In late 1949 Farmers Cooperative added a cottonseed oil refinery to the mill, giving itself the option to produce either crude or refined cottonseed oil based on what was getting the best market prices. The refined oil was shipped mainly to oleomargarine manufacturers, but it could also be used for salad dressings, soaps, and other compounds. At the same time it also upgraded the press equipment, increasing the yield by five more pounds of oil per ton of cottonseed. The mill was now processing an average of 45,000 tons of seed annually from 1,500 growers during an operating season that lasted from late September to early the next summer. With the improved equipment, members regularly were getting \$8-\$15 more per ton on cottonseed than if they sold it themselves.⁷⁴

SWIG continued to operate the cattle feedlot from the original Spears campus as part of Farmers Cooperative Oil Mill. In addition to the cake, it fed cottonseed meal and hulls to livestock. The feedlot generated even more profits, both from the contracts feeding out cattle as well as fertilizer sales. In 1951, though, SWIG opted to discontinue this sidelight operation because of the numerous other, similar feedlot operations in the area.⁷⁵

The oil mill property, on old U.S. Highway 80 (now Doniphan Drive) near the municipal power plant, provided a large site where Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers established a permanent headquarters. Its location along the Rio Grande and literally straddling the Texas-New Mexico state line made it an ideal location for all its members. A modern Spanish-style architecture office building (fig. 1), complete with classing facilities for grading ginned cotton. For many years the large billboard sign that read "SWIG, Cotton and Cottonseed Products" (fig. 2) became a local landmark.⁷⁶

⁷³ "Mill Will Open Next Week to Handle Valley Cottonseed," *El Paso Herald*, 8 October 1923; "\$500,000 Valley Venture Aired," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 12 March 1937; "License Plan to Avert Milk Strike in El Paso Offered Distributors," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 17 September 1934; "Valley Mill Sale Contract Approved," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 18 July 1936.

⁷⁴ Weaver, *SWIG*, 11-18, 42-43; "Cotton Growers to Open Oil Refinery," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 10 August 1949.

⁷⁵ Weaver, *SWIG*, 42-43.

⁷⁶ Weaver, *SWIG*, 44.

Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers was not the only farm organization to get into the oil mill business. In March 1928 a group of farmers led by L. N. Shafer, C. A. Mebus, W. J. Stahmann, and W. T. Henderson raised \$30,000 in capital to start the Tornillo Oil Mill. Like Farmers Cooperative Oil Mill, the Tornillo cooperative also operated a small cattle feedlot. The company started with a small mill capable of crushing 25 tons of cottonseed

The company started with a small mill capable of crushing 25 tons of cottonseed per day and, despite a fire that destroyed the facility in 1934, Tornillo Oil Mill was ready to expand in the early 1950s. Investing nearly \$500,000, the mill increased its capacity to 140 tons of cottonseed per day.

per day and, despite a fire that destroyed the facility in 1934, Tornillo Oil Mill was ready to expand in the early 1950s. Investing nearly \$500,000, the mill increased its capacity to 140 tons of cottonseed per day. "The cotton seed processing facilities that are now available to Lower Valley farmers are as complete and efficient as modern engineering can create," the *Herald-Post* reported. The upgrades included equipment to process Pima cottonseed. The new operation generated 60 percent of its profits from cotton oil, which it shipped as far away as Canada. Aside from the cake, meal, and hulls fed for livestock feed, the mill also produced linters used for felting, rayon, explosives, and mattress stuffing.⁷⁷

Two other oil mills operated in the El Paso area. The Rio Grande Cotton Oil Company was established before 1934 in Clint. The Western Cottonoil Mill, a division of the Anderson-Clayton national conglomerate of cotton buyers, financing, warehouses,

⁷⁷ Frances Segula, "Tornillo, Texas ... Only in Memory," *Password* 31(2) (Summer 1986): 113; "Valley Farmers Own, Operate Oil Mill," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 September 1952; "\$40,000 Fire Destroys Mill at Tornillo," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 5 February 1934; "Tornillo Cotton Oil Mill Completes \$500,000 Expansion," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 22 September 1952.

⁷⁸ "King Cotton Supplies Work to E. P. Gins....," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 4 April 1953; "Hand Mangled in Mill," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 14 February 1934; *El Paso Post*, 3 June 1929, as cited by "In Old El Paso," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 3 June 1939; Warranty Deed, [Globe Land Company] to Globe El Paso Cotton Oil Company, 7 August 1925, in El Paso County Clerk Deed Records, Book 447, Pages 141-42; "Western Cottonoil Co. Selected as 'Manufacturer of the Month'," *El Paso Times*, 27 September 1953; Brown, "El Paso Cottonseed Mills Run at Capacity." The Globe Fico Manufacturing Company (1929) united the El Paso Grain and Milling Company flour mill, Globe Ice and Cold Storage, and the Globe El Paso Cotton Oil Company under a single business in 1929. Many of the Globe Mills structures still stand east of Old Fort Bliss where the Rescue Mission and McKinney Wrecking are located.

and processors, operated a large facility in El Paso starting in 1929. Its original facility apparently was the Globe-El Paso Cotton Oil Mill and refinery at Old Fort Bliss. From its headquarters in El Paso, Western maintained local offices in Pecos, Van Horn, Presidio, Socorro, Tex., Deming, Las Cruces, and Lovington, N.M., and Wilcox, Ariz. In the 1950s their mill produced 180 railroad tank cars of cotton oil (at 60,000 pounds per car) each year. Though a commercial operation, Western paid farmers \$13 to \$15 million annually.⁷⁸

El Paso Cotton Mill

Even before there were people experimenting with growing cotton in the El Paso area local leaders were trying to get a cotton mill in the city. A cotton mill is where the bales of ginned cotton are broken down, spun into yarn, and then woven into fabric. Some of the first efforts came in 1902 and 1905 and included efforts by the new El Paso Chamber of Commerce. Their efforts did net interest, such as the 1917 report that a Wichita Falls man was considering building a \$1.5 million facility in El Paso. The efforts, though, did not become serious until local cotton production had taken off in the early 1920s.⁷⁹

In the early 1920s the Chamber of Commerce launched a public subscription drive to build a locally owned cotton mill. Leaders felt that if one cotton mill opened that others would follow, particularly in light of increasing local cotton production. In late 1923 the group had already gotten subscriptions (stock buyers) and interest from all over the country toward the goal of raising \$500,000; several local cotton farmers and leaders had put in several thousand dollars each. Construction began near Eleventh and Park Streets with plans to open in late 1924. The facility was to include a mill building, dyeing plant, and storage warehouse that was going to make indigo-dyed denims, drill (used to make shirt material, mostly pockets and linings), chambray (for work shirts and overalls), and osnaburg (for cement bags).⁸⁰

The El Paso Cotton Mill opened in December 1924. "The chain has been finished, the last link added and El Paso as a garment

⁷⁹ "Cotton Mills for El Paso," *El Paso Herald*, 24 July 1902; "History of El Paso Chamber of Commerce, 1899 to 1920 ...," *Greater El Paso* 1(4) (March 1920): 27; *El Paso Herald*, 7 February 1917, as cited by "In Old El Paso," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 7 February 1942.

⁸⁰ "\$500,000 Project Put Over Quickly in Splendid Shape," *El Paso Herald*, 25/26 August 1923; "Textile Mill Construction to Begin Soon," *El Paso Herald*, 28 November 1923.

manufacturing center made yesterday the first real stride toward prominence in a new field," proclaimed the *El Paso Times* on 15 December, 1924 announcing the first run of cloth through the mill, which was sold to a local clothing manufacturer of overalls and rodeo clothes. While the city had about a half-dozen clothing manufacturers, before this date they had been buying all of their material from mills in Alabama, South Texas, and Georgia. The mill planned to make 4,500 yards of fabric a day on its 5,015 spindles and 172 looms, with a maximum capacity of 6,800 yards, as well as several thousand yards of denim a week, depending on demand. A week later the facility opened for a public viewing and dedication—"a Christmas present to El Pasoans." A. P. Coles, the mill president and "father of the mill movement," proclaimed that "This mill belongs to the people of El Paso[,] and I am proud to say that there is no better mill and machinery in the country. The only fault I can see with our mill is that it ought to be several times larger."⁸¹

A 1940 newspaper article described how the mill worked in detail. The first step was when cotton was broken out of bales and mixed by machines that "fluff it up and muss it around." Then it went into a cleaning room, where the trash, dirt, and flies-tiny little strands of cotton too short to twist for yarn—were removed. The cleaners then rolled out the cotton into large bats "that give you an urge for a real cotton mattress." In the next building, the operators keep the main mill room very hot and humid so the cotton fibers would crinkle and curl, making them easier to straighten and spin by the carding machines. The resulting soft ropes were then spun on spindles in a process of twisting and stretching the cotton into yarn or thread—the longer the process, the smaller the thread. In the next step, the spools of thread were strung on a rack to create the warp of cloth (fabric threads running long way). In the loom room, the warp was fed through the room where shuttles put in the woof (crossway threads). The finished cloth came off in large drums, where it was ironed, cut, and packed into cloth bales to ship to manufacturers. Most of the mill's output was used for sacks, overalls, and shirt material by garment manufacturers in El Paso and on the West Coast.⁸²

⁸¹ "Output Sold to El Paso Company," *El Paso Times*, 13 December 1924; Arthur A. Anderson, "Public Visits El Paso's New Industry for First Time," *El Paso Times*, 23 December 1924.

⁸² "E.P. Cotton Mill Employs 222, Make Miles of Cloth," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 31 May 1940.

Everything about the grand new mill was great except for one thing—it did not use locally grown cotton. The mill operators probably purchased their equipment based on the cotton being raised in El Paso in the early 1920s, which was mostly shorter-staple varieties from Texas and the South. The slightly longer Acala cotton was just starting to become popular when the mill opened. Thus, the spinning machinery in the factory could not handle most of the local cotton, except for that with poorer grades or that was harvested late in the year. So instead of buying local cotton, the mill had to import it in from other parts of Central Texas.⁸³

By World War II the Lone Star Cotton Mill⁸⁴ was using 6,000 bales of short-staple cotton to make 140,000 yards of assorted cloth on its expanded machinery of 9,300 spindles and 272 looms. During the war years, fifty percent of its production was filling government, war-related orders, including duck (linen canvas) for airplane motor covers and life preservers. Being one of the westernmost cotton mills in the country, Lone Star could ship orders to any West Coast manufacturer within thirty-six hours—a real advantage during the war.⁸⁵

As it turned out, the biggest threat to Lone Star Cotton Mills turned out to be new ownership. In May 1946 New York textile manufacturer Meyer Silberstein of the Tilton Textile Corporation acquired the majority shares of the mill. He initially promised to continue operating the mill and increase total production and employment. The day after Silberstein paid local shareholders, local garment makers no longer could obtain any of the mill's products. For almost a month, Silberstein refused to sell locally until the El Paso Chamber of Commerce intervened to help keep the local clothing factories from shutting down. Reportedly, Silberstein raised his prices because he could finish out the material at other textile firms he owned and would rather sell, for example, finished pockets to local manufacturers instead of raw cloth. By fall most of the manufacturers were eventually able to purchase some mate-

⁸³ "Valley Farmers Follow Cotton Through Mill From 'Bale to Bale,'" *El Paso Herald-Post*, 9 March 1939; "E.P. Cotton Mill Employs 222."

⁸⁴ About 1933 the mill changed its name from El Paso Cotton Mills to Lone Star Cotton Mill. This may have coincided with a change of majority stockholder, as a July 1933 article refers to the mill being owned by Hessisin & Company of New York. "\$42,000 Added to E.P. Cotton Mill Payroll," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 10 July 1933.

⁸⁵ "Lone Star Cotton Mill Busy on War Goods; To Keep Humming on Peacetime Products," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 31 May 1945.

rial from Lone Star Cotton Mills or from new sources in other parts of the country, but it was a sign of things to come.⁸⁶

In May 1948 Silberstein proposed to expand the cotton mill, change and increase the lines of cloth manufactured, and bring in at least fifty Eastern families experienced with the new equipment and expansions. The hitch was housing the new employees. The post-war expansion at Fort Bliss and Biggs Field had put a severe pinch in the local housing market, making new and rental properties scarce. Silberstein proposed that the Chamber of Commerce or local investors build \$350,000 worth of new homes. Silberstein was clear, however, that he would not act unless the housing situation could be resolved. "We've got to do something about housing here," said Chamber manager Chris Fox, "or we're going to feel the pinch of shortsightedness." The situation apparently did not improve. The next year Silberstein shut down the Lone Star Cotton Mills and sold everything to the General Cotton Supply Company. General Cotton never reopened the facility. They removed all the equipment and sold the empty buildings to Mine and Smelter Supply Company in 1950.⁸⁷

Mine and Smelter Supply stayed in the old cotton mill facility until 1965, when the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) purchased the campus. The IBWC used the site to house its staff working on the Chamizal Settlement land dispositions that were to formally take place in 1967. That year, when the new channel for the Rio Grande was dug, the buildings were demolished. Parts of the old site now sit on both sides of the border, and no evidence exists of El Paso's only cotton mill factory.⁸⁸

SWIG Expands Its Operations

Up through the 1950s Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers did not own any compress or warehouse operations. The only thing that actually appeared at the SWIG headquarters was the paper documentation of the weight, quality, and ownership of a

⁸⁶ Articles from the *El Paso Herald-Post*: "New Mill Owner to Increase Output," 16 May 1946; "Lack of Material Likely to Close E.P. Garment Plants," 1 June 1946; "Commerce Chamber Presses to Keep Factories Running," 3 June 1946; "Fail to Agree on Pocket Material," 22 June 1946; and "Pocket Material Now Plentiful," 28 November 1946.

⁸⁷ "Plan Expansion at Cotton Mill," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 27 May 1948; Real estate and property deeds of sale, Lone Star Cotton Mills, Inc. to General Cotton Supply Company, 26 October 1949, recorded in El Paso County Clerk Deed Records, Volume 950, Pages 487-493; "Min Supply Firm Buys Cotton Mill for Office Building," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 3 March 1950.

⁸⁸ "Chamizal Project Moves Office," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 24 March 1965.

bale and a sample that was used to grade the product for marketing purposes. Over the years SWIG opened "field offices" at Pecos, Tex., and Artesia, Las Cruces, and Deming, N.M., to provide similar services. The purpose of the bale samples was to classify the product against official federal cotton standards, which became the basis for market sales and prices. It was more effective for SWIG to just have farmers tag their cotton bales and have them sent directly to shipping points, usually on the Texas Gulf Coast. SWIG's position began to change in the 1960s, however. In 1961 it purchased its first 75,000-bale warehouse in Houston to create a central gathering point for all SWIG cotton from Southeast New Mexico, the Rio Grande Valley, and Southwest New Mexico, where it could be assembled for direct shipment to processing mills, thus eliminating another middle-man and keeping a little more money for the grower-members. It also consolidated its sales offices back at the SWIG headquarters on the Farmers Cooperative Oil Mill campus.⁸⁹

SWIG also began purchasing a number of the area compress and oil mill operations. In 1970 the Tornillo Cotton Oil Mill decided to sell out to SWIG and liquidate its assets. SWIG shut down the mill a couple of years later.⁹⁰ Three years later SWIG took a lease-purchase option to takeover the El Paso Valley Compress Company. This folded the Las Cruces, Deming, and Fabens compresses into their operation, which included the other Las Cruces compress and the oil mill, as well as all of the El Paso Valley Compress Company's warehouse storage into their cooperative marketing network. By the end of the century SWIG owned twenty-one warehouses in the Southwest, plus additional warehouses in Houston and North Carolina.⁹¹

For all of the changes, SWIG made few changes in the structure of its organization. The vision of the original founders were so strong that the bylaws were changed only a couple of times in

⁸⁹ Weaver, *SWIG*, 12-13, 45; "An Important Message from one of the Largest Marketers of the World's Finest Cotton: SWIG," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 8 September 1958.

⁹⁰ Seguila, "Tornillo, Texas," 113; "Irrigated Cotton Growers Will Retain Officers, Board," *El Paso Times*, 14 September 1972; Arthur Ivey, Interview by Richard Mason, 1 November 1983 (Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University), Tape One, Side Two.

⁹¹ "Cotton Group Will Take Over Compresses in Fabens, Deming," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 13 September 1973; Harry Cline, "Calcot Buys SWIG Cotton Warehouses," *Southwest Farm Press*, 21 August 2006. Around the late 1980s SWIG acquired the Artesia Compress Company, the last privately owned compress/warehouse in the region.

its first fifty years. In 1935 SWIG expanded its territory beyond the boundaries of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District to include Pecos River producers from Roswell to Pecos, Tex., and in the Deming and Gila River regions. It was not until 1965, however, that SWIG mirrored this expansion in its board when it added four members (to make thirteen total) who represented the expansion areas that had previously only been represented to the board by advisors.⁹²

III

Local Marketing and Promotion

From the first locally grown commercial cotton crop in 1917, the cotton industry had steadily expanded through the early 1970s. National Cotton Week activities, sponsored by the El Paso Valley Cotton Association and other cotton organizations, became a fashionable feature each spring. Retail stores would compete in a contest for the best window displays. These were later punctuated with the annual fashion show started in 1952 and sponsored by the Popular Dry Goods Company that featured the National Maid of Cotton. Student essay contests and newspaper articles highlighted the importance of cotton growing to the region. Cotton producers and processors were often quite blunt in their promotions—locally-grown cotton generated four times the national average yield per acre. "It is of such high quality that it commands premium prices on the world's markets. Cotton accounts for 90% of our farm income and is one of the leading sources of prosperity in The Fabulous Southwest." Local prosperity, the promotional materials told readers, depends on their buying and favoring cotton merchandise. "It is important that every citizen know and understand the importance of these facts and that he have a true and greater appreciation of the importance of National Cotton Week."⁹³

⁹² Weaver, SWIG, 26-27, 32; "SWIG OKs Director Expansion", *El Paso Times*, 15 September 1965.

⁹³ "Cotton Grows From Infant to King in 37 Years," *El Paso Herald-Post*, 10 May 1954; "Busy Schedule Awaits 1965 Maid of Cotton," *El Paso Times*, *Sundial Sunday Magazine*, 28 February 1965, p. 3. "Buy It Made of Cotton and Help the Southwest Grow" [National Cotton Week advertisement], *El Paso Herald Post*, 11 May 1953.

The highlight of the fall, just as the cotton harvest was getting ready to begin, was the Fabens Cotton Festival. Held for many years at the Fabens Compress warehouse, this annual celebration included the crowning of the Fabens Cotton Queen, who later represented the region at the National Maid of Cotton contest in Memphis.⁹⁴

National Cotton week, the Fabens Cotton Festival, and the Maid of Cotton were not just celebrations for growers and people in the industry. At its heart was marketing—highlighting the importance of cotton and encouraging consumers to buy cotton over other synthetic fabrics. El Paso even tried to capitalize on its own part of the industry. In March 1963 the El Paso Valley Cotton Association was making plans to market “Paso-Cot” to make Lower Rio Grande Valley cotton a brand name that consumers would recognize and seek out.⁹⁵

Recent Decades

The 1970s marked a major turning point in cotton production, not only in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, but nationally. In the 1960s most cotton was shipped domestically, but by 1979 it was at 26 percent and declining. In 1969 SWIG hardly sold any of its members cotton abroad, but by 1980 more than half was going to the Far East—places like China, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. These trends continued into the 2000s, when nearly all cotton was shipped to foreign markets. The national industry recognized the predicament and formed “Cotton, Inc.” in 1970 to help stabilize the market share for cotton products in the United States. The “Seal of Cotton” logo (1973) and marketing campaigns like the “Fabric of Our Lives” (1989) brought new attention to the industry and to cotton-related products.⁹⁶

While the efforts of local organizations like SWIG and the El Paso Valley Cotton Association and national groups like Cotton, Inc. helped stabilize the cotton industry, it could do little to impact local farmers who quit growing cotton. “The long-term decline

⁹⁴ The Fabens Cotton Festival and the Cotton Queens are featured in section elsewhere in this issue.

⁹⁵ “Window Displays Show Many Uses for Cotton,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, 9 May 1955; “El Paso Cotton Label Planned,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, 20 March 1963.

⁹⁶ “Crop Disappoints Area Cotton Producers,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, 25 November 1979; Ken Flynn, “More Than Half of El Paso’s Cotton Crop is Shipped to Buyers in China, Far East,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, 11 July 1980; Liza Casabona, “Forty Years Cultivating the Industry,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, 26 October 2010.

in [local] acreage is attributable both to the increasing impact of man-made fibers upon the market and to the advent of other cash crops in the area including vegetables and pecans.” In 1975 and

In 1972 the cotton industry had adopted a new standard for cotton bales, called “universal density.”⁹⁷ With new gin facilities being equipped with universal-density bale press stands, the old compresses at Fabens, Las Cruces, and other locales became obsolete and closed. The last of the local cotton oil mills, SWIG’s Farmers Cooperative, shut down in the mid-1990s.

1976, regional cotton production declined to levels that had not been seen since 1923.

By the 1980s the amount of cotton acreage in El Paso, Doña Ana, and Hudspeth counties stabilized and has held steady for twenty-five-plus years at about 50,000 acres, producing around 90-100,000 bales of cotton. From the several dozen gins in these three counties, many operations have consolidated into larger gins like the Mesa Co-Op Farmers Gin at Vado, N.M., organized in 1991. Other gins closed, like the popular B. E. Harvey Gin, which had operated at the same site in Las Cruces from 1926 to 2006. In 1972 the cotton industry had adopted a new standard for cotton bales, called “universal density.”⁹⁷ With new gin facilities being equipped with universal-density bale press stands, the old compresses at Fabens, Las Cruces,

and other locales became obsolete and closed. The last of the local cotton oil mills, SWIG’s Farmers Cooperative, shut down in the mid-1990s. Even the longtime favorite social event, the Fabens Cotton Festival, was discontinued in 1996.⁹⁸

With increasing operating expenses and declines in production, SWIG began feeling an economic pinch. In 2006 the producer-

⁹⁷ Universal density bales were 20 inches wide by 54 inches long by 28 inches thick with a density of 28 pounds per cubic foot. This was a compromise between standard density (22 lbs/cu. ft.) and high density (34 lbs/cu. ft.) that international shippers was satisfied with. Karen Gerhardt Britton, *Bale o’ Cotton: The Mechanical Art of Cotton Ginning* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 119.

⁹⁸ “Crop Disappoints Area Cotton Producers”; Compiled statistics from annual publications *Cotton Production in the United States* (GPO, 1919-1970), *Cotton Ginning in the United States* (GPO, 1972-present), and the U.S. Census of Agriculture (every five years, 1982-2007); Wit Harvey, Interview by Donna M. Wojcik, 13 March 2008 (N.M. Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum Oral History Program, Las Cruces, N.M.), Tape One, Side One.

members met and decided to liquidate the long time marketing corporation. Many of the warehouse assets and the marketing aspects were taken over by Calcot, the California version of the marketing cooperative (originally called the California Cotton Cooperative Association). A few months later the oil mill property was sold to Global Alternative Fuels, which is building a biodiesel fuel plant on the site. This leaves the Mesa Co-Op and Valley Farmers gins as the only locally owned representations of a once vibrant industry supporting cotton farmers and production in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.⁹⁹



1924 El Paso Cotton Queen Vera Shafer.
Photo courtesy of Southwest Collection,
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Tex.,
Tornillo Photograph Collection.

Is a declining industry, once so prominent in the region, going to disappear forever? The 1979 words of farmer Robert Skov still seem applicable today as they did then: "I think it's here to stay. As long as we've got the land, it's one of the more profitable activities." The stability in regional cotton production levels since then appear to reinforce his observations. The myriad of cotton marketing activities and organizations, though, remains today only as a part of El Paso's history.¹⁰⁰

All photos for "Cotton: A Foundation of the Agricultural Economy" and "Pictures from the Cotton Industry" courtesy of the author unless otherwise credited.

⁹⁹ "Calcot, SWIG Agree to Consider Combining Cooperatives," *Western Farm Press*, 8 June 2006; Harry Cline, "Calcot Buys SWIG Cotton Warehouses," *Southwest Farm Press*, 21 August 2006; "City Council OKs Tax Break For New Biodiesel Producer," *El Paso Times*, 12 December 2007.

¹⁰⁰ "Crop Disappoints Area Cotton Producers."

Photos from the Cotton Industry



*Valley
Cotton
Field*

Cotton Plant



Open Cotton Bolls





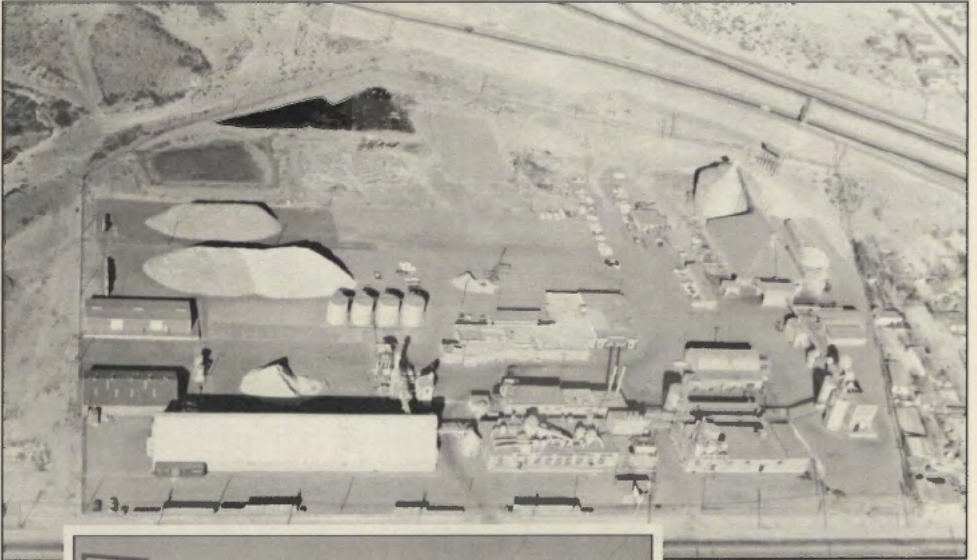
*Cotton
Harvester*



*Cotton Gin
Facility*

*Cotton
Bales*





*Aerial View
of SWIG*



*Entrance Sign
to SWIG Plant*

ELEPHANT BUTTE DAM



LARGEST IN THE WORLD • RIO GRANDE VALLEY IRRIGATION PROJECT ©1914
Aullender

Elephant Butte Dam

*shortly after
completion in
1914. Shown on
El Paso Chamber
of Commerce
brochure.*



otton is raised in considerable quantities throughout El Paso's trade district—not only the standard staple but also the long staple Egyptian cotton. The picture above shows cotton raised without irrigation at Big Springs, west Texas. Cotton is raised under irrigation in a number of localities. Arizona long staple cotton raised under irrigation last year brought 33.4 cents per pound in Liverpool, netting the growers 21.6 cents at shipping point. Egyptian cotton thrives in the southwest.

*Above: Cotton Bales Near Alpine
Below: El Paso Valley Products including Cotton.*



Rainfall in "The El Paso Southwest" varies from 2 to 40 inches annually, according to locality, altitude, and year, in Arizona, New Mexico and west Texas. Artesian and pumped wells are employed to supplement the rainfall for intensive agriculture. However, many crops can be successfully raised with natural rainfall. Lower left hand picture shows products of "dry farming" (natural rainfall in semiarid belt) at Tucuman, N. M. Other pictures show "dry farm" apple orchards and cotton fields, and a pumped well, all at Midland, west Texas.

Cotton Trivia

Acala was a small community in western Hudspeth County between Tornillo and Fort Hancock. It was near W. T. Young's farm and was the site of Young's adobe-brick cotton gin building. Young christened the community Acala after the cotton variety that he so enthusiastically promoted and raised. At its peak, the community boasted 100 residents, a general store, restaurant, service station/garage, and a tourist court on US Highway 80. Today it is a ghost town with one building and about 25 residents.

Area Streets that are associated with the cotton industry:

Oil Mill Road in Tornillo

Compress Road in Las Cruces

Cotton Gin Road just south of San Elizario

Ivy Drive near Del Valle High School—presumably named for Louis or K. B. Ivey, prominent early cotton farmers and boosters.

Once there was an Algodon Street just off Eleventh Street in the Cotton Mill Addition by the Lone Star Cotton Mill in the late 1940s. The street (and the area) were removed when the river channel was relocated as part of the Chamizal Settlement in the late 1960s.

There once was a Globe Mills Road in the Globe Mills complex near Old Fort Bliss. One of those mills was the Globe-El Paso Cotton Oil Company, which was taken over in 1929 by the Western Cottonoil Mill.

Cotton Street pre-dates the area's cotton industry. It appears on El Paso maps as early as the 1880s and is named, along with the sub-division that Cotton Street demarcates to the east, for Frank B. Cotton. A Boston banker, Cotton and other partners including Noyes Rand, invested in land purchases in West Texas, including the large tract originally designated as Burdett Survey No. 2, patented by James Wiley Magoffin. In 1881 the land passed into the hands of Cotton and became known as the Cotton Addition. For many years Cotton Street was the "edge of town." Even though the city limits extended as far east as Washington Park.

Camp Cotton was an U.S. Army facility in El Paso beginning in 1916 as part of the border build-up after Pancho Villa's raid. It remained open as a training facility attached to Fort Bliss up through 1920. The tent-city camp took its name from its location adjacent to Cotton Street in the desert just outside El Paso near Arizona Avenue.

Lecturas:

*Articles and Dissertations on El Paso and the Southwest
recently published in other journals*

- Bob Alexander. *Rawhide Ranger, Ira Aten* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.
- T. Lindsay Baker. *Gangster Tour of Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.
- Clinton F. Cross. "Chief Justice David Wellington Chew" *El Paso Bar Journal* (October/November 2011) 13-14.
- Marcia Hatfield Daudistel. *Grace & Gumption* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press) 2011.
- Arnoldo De León. *War Along the Border* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.
- William S. Kiser. *Turmoil on the Rio Grande* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.
- Janet Monteros. "Women's Rights in the El Paso Juárez Region During the 1700's" *El Paso Bar Journal* (October/November 2011) 7-8.
- Jane Pattie. *Cowboy Spurs and Their Makers* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.
- Robert B. Shaw. *Field Guide to Texas Grasses* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press) 2011.



Congratulations

Keith Erekson, New Member of the Board of the El Paso County Historical Society, was named one of the 7 Outstanding Teachers at UTEP for 2011.



Correction

On page 71 of issue 55-2, 2nd paragraph, 3rd line from the bottom, Wayne Windle argued cases before the Supreme Court.



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Active in Numerous Civic and
School Organizations
Journalism Teacher at Bowie
High School



JOSEPH LEE LEACH

1921-2011

Charter Member El Paso
County Historical Society
Professor in the English
Department at
The University of Texas
at El Paso
Active in Local Civic and
Scientific Organizations

GRETA BORGHILD KARLBOM MOORE

1930-2011

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Active in Numerous Civic
Organizations
An Avid Fly-Fisherman





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