Chapter XXV

THE NUMBER AND SIZES OF FARMS
IN POLK COUNTY — 1910-1958

It is quite impossible to make direct comparisons in the number of farms of the different farm acreages through the years due to the changes in base acreages used by the census bureaus through the various census reports. The U.S. Census Reports, however, do give valuable data that can be used directly such as, number of farms, percentage of land in farms, average size of farms. Even though the acreage listings of the various sized farms vary in the census reporting, certain general conclusions can be drawn which indicate trends in farm sizes.

The total land area of Polk County, 1,979 square miles, makes a total land acreage of 1,226,560 acres. In 1910 only 72.3 per cent or 888,852 acres were in the 3,525 farms of the county. By 1920, 1,069,153 acres or 84.4 per cent of the county was in the 4,200 farms of that year. In 1920, 15.5 per cent of the farms were under 100 acres in size and such farms occupied only 3.2 per cent of the land in farms. In 1950, 36 per cent of the farms were 100 acres or less, they occupied, however, only 6.2 per cent of the area in farms that year.

During the period of 1944 to 1958, the number of farms up to 100 and 200 acres began to decrease, as the size of farms increased and the number of farms decreased. Beginning with and immediately following World War II, through the use of mechanized equipment, such as bulldozers, additional crop land was put in cultivation and also the total area in farm lands increased up to 1,190,523 acres.

The average size of farms increased from the 254 acres in 1920 to 302.2 acres in 1950 and 352.3 acres in 1954. The number of farmers operating 1,000 acres or more increased from the 27 “Bonanza Farms” of the early 1900’s to 83 in 1940, 90 in 1948 and 115 in 1950. The glamour of the “Bonanza Farms” of the period, 1900-1915, with its fifteen to thirty teams of horses, its horse-drawn equipment, has been lost in the mechanized 1950’s. With the passing of the horse-drawn binders, shock threshing, threshing rings, steam threshers, has also gone, in part at least, a spirit of community cooperation which helped enrich farm living, the grass roots of democracy.

The trend in sizes of farms appears to be toward the more efficient units whereby maximum efficiency and the longest period of service can be had from the high priced mechanized equipment. The 1950’s mark the period of changes and readjustments for the farming enterprise. Our concepts of farm buildings has changed from the costly weather-tight barns, ornate barn equipment, to the loafing barn for the dairy cows, efficient farrowing house for the brood sows and the elimination entirely of the horse barn. The loafing barn, milking parlor, the cooling tank