

Continued from Page Four—

Success Story

Through an agreement with Consolidated Products Company, whey from the cheese plant is piped to a building nearby where it is reduced to a semi-solid form, packed in barrels, and shipped to producers of livestock and poultry feeds.

During the past year the cheese plant paid farmers \$391,000 for milk. In addition, Grade A distributors in Decatur paid out \$255,000 to producers with whom they had contracts. Local milk and dairy products plants now provide jobs in town for more than 100 workers.

To initiate these enterprises many meetings were held with farmers who were taken into complete confidence with respect to financial operations. They knew, just as we did, that the program was an effort to build a sounder economy for all the people of the community, both town and country.

Catching the spirit of locally-owned business concerns, farmers in the Decatur area have gone into the making and distributing of farm supplies on a big scale. In 1937, the Tennessee Valley Fertilizer Cooperative was organized by local farmers with a paid-in capital of \$10,300. In less than ten years it has earned for its farmer-owners \$237,000 and now has a net worth of about \$225,000. Today the Valley Cooperative owns a modern fertilizer plant worth about \$60,000, which at peak season employs fifty or more people. It is affiliated with eleven cooperatives in nearby counties, each of which maintains a store and warehouse which do a general supply business. The Decatur plant manufactures fertilizer for about 2500 farmers.

Last year the Cooperative went into the seed business. In a modern plant, built at a cost of \$40,000, all kinds of farm seeds are cleaned, stored and sold. Seed for planting winter cover crops, once imported, is now produced by the farmers of the territory which the plant serves. This year the Cooperative entered the feed business and is now building a mill to cost \$125,000, which will be able to turn out 100 tons of mixed feed in eight hours; the new plant will turn out from fifteen to twenty cars of feed daily. Feed will be distributed through the same cooperative organizations with which the concern is already dealing in selling fertilizer and seed.

Wood is one of the most abundant raw materials in the Southeast; in Alabama and all surrounding states about half the land is devoted to growing trees. Most communities are content to sell their trees just as the logs come from the forest, but not Decatur. Here there are factories that convert wood into cabinets, boats, brooms and other finished articles which create local jobs and add value to the materials used. Six locally-owned industries in Decatur last year paid farmers and landowners in the trade territory \$493,000 for forest products. One of these, the Decatur Box and Basket Company, employs about seventy-five men and women in the making of containers for fruits, vegetables and flowers.

Nine-tenths of Decatur's industries are home-owned, but among its important agricultural industries the Alabama Flour Mill is an exception. The mill, which has the capacity to convert 150,000 bushels of grain into flour and feed each month, is a subsidiary of the Nebraska Flour Mills of Omaha. It came to Decatur in 1941 because the city, located on the Tennessee River, has been made accessible by inland waterways through the work of the TVA. After the nine-foot channel in the Tennessee River had been opened, it was possible to load barges with wheat at Kansas City on the Missouri River, move down the Mississippi, into the Ohio and up the Tennessee to unload at a mill on the waterfront at Decatur. But management of the "foreign" flour mill entered immediately and wholeheartedly into the campaign of Decatur people in making markets for all the farm products grown in the locality.

"Upon establishing our mill in Decatur, we announced that we would buy all the grain offered to us by farmers in the territory," explained A. L. Johnson, general manager.

The first year we were not able to buy any local grain. But each year since, local purchases have increased. During the past season we paid Alabama farmers \$684,000 for wheat, oats, barley, milo and corn.

Located in the nation's highest per capita flour-consuming section, this mill has succeeded beyond its owners' hopes; its storage and processing facilities will be doubled in the near future. More than two hundred people are now employed at the mill.

Many other agricultural industries play important parts in providing markets for farmers and jobs for industrial workers. Among these are the Decatur Oil Mills, which paid farmers \$2,500,000 for cottonseed, and the Home Oil Mills, which paid \$430,000 for peanuts. Tennessee Valley Farm Industries, a new business, has just completed a poultry dressing plant which will handle 12,000 broilers daily; during the summer and fall it paid farmers about \$170,000 for chickens. Cotton handled in the local market added \$5,000,000 to the bank accounts of farmers in the trade territory.

Several individuals are operating interesting, and in some instances unique, industries and services in Decatur. Five years ago, for example, Dennis McClendon started a harness repair shop on a very small scale. Later he began making leather lines, for which he found a ready sale. Now he operates a more venturesome leather goods manufacturing concern that employs sixty people.

After having served as apprentices with the Decatur Iron and Steel Company, which during the war built tugs and landing craft, Melvin Ozier and Bob Wilson established a metal-working business called the Willo Products Company. Financing the business presented no serious problem; Decatur is now quick to back its young men who have the "know-how" for making things. These young men make, among other things, tanks in which farmers store tractor fuel.

Southeastern Metals, of which R. H. Harris is president, works with aluminum. This corporation now employs forty young men and women; it was organized by three young Decatur men. The firm makes kits for the Boy Scouts of America and various kinds of household utensils. "We started our business by getting a contract to make Army canteens," explained President Harris. "But after the war was over, we had no difficulty converting to civilian products. Now we get more orders than we can accept."

These examples are typical of Decatur's seventy-five industrial and processing establishments, which now employ 4,143 men and women, black and white, and last year paid local workers \$6,500,000 in wages. Most of the plants are small, home-owned and home-operated. Like the farming program with which many of them are related, they are "diversified" in materials, products and the types of employment they provide. Most important of all, they solved the employment problem of Decatur and Morgan County.

When the program was launched, the population of Decatur was 13,593. By 1940, it had increased to 16,604. It now has an estimated population of 20,500. During the fifteen-year period, Morgan County, of which Decatur is the county seat, has gained 3,000 in population, the city 7,000. Thus the city has provided jobs for "surplus" farm workers in a county that ranks among Alabama's first five in the number of tractor-operated farms.

"Never have we lost sight of the main objective—providing markets for the products of diversified agriculture," said Maynard Layman, in summarizing Decatur's efforts to build a well-balanced economy. "We have talked about it constantly, worked hard, and accepted all the help we could get. But very early in the game we learned that we had to accept responsibility for building our own community; others would not do it. For example, when we tried to provide a plant for marketing and manufacturing grade milk, we approached Borden, Pet, Carnation and all other big corporations in the business. All asked how many cows we had. When we told them, they laughed. So we were compelled to do the job ourselves. We found that this same principle applied to every new project undertaken."

The "Decatur Plan," in which farmers grow the raw materials for factories, can be styled to fit the commodities produced in any community. It is the only way through which the typical county seat in the Cotton Belt can create new payrolls. If universally adopted, it would raise the earning power of both rural and urban groups to something like a "parity" with incomes in other sections of the nation. Best of all, it would stop the trek of migratory labor from all over the Cotton South.

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