



## Hoke's big business

By Nicole Gabriel  
 Staff writer

**W**hen you pass by a cotton, tobacco or soybean field in Hoke County, you may just see it is a contributor to the county's rural atmosphere.

But take a moment and pull out that dollar bill in your pocket. Not only does it represent the revenue farming generates for Hoke County, but that dollar bill could have cotton in it grown right here in the county.

And that film you still haven't developed from the holidays — that has cotton in it, too.

Hoke County's other crops — soybeans, corn, pumpkins, peaches and others — feed the community and the nation.

And tobacco, it's not just for smoking anymore. Because of tobacco's genetic makeup, it's become valuable to the medical and genetic research industry.

These crops, and the farmers who grow them, are not just symbols of rural America. On the contrary, they mean big business for Hoke County.

Tom Starling, Farm Services Agency director, said that last year county farmers planted 18,000 acres of flue-cured tobacco and 16,500 acres of cotton.

The county sold 2.9 million pounds of tobacco which is about \$5 million worth, he said. He said county farmers harvested more than 10 million pounds of cotton in 1996. At 70 cents a pound, that racks up to more than \$7 million in cotton alone. Other crops do their part to bring money into the county.

Cotton, especially, is good for the economy. "Growing cotton is nothing to be taken lightly," Edgar Eden, owner of Edens Farms, said.

Edgar, who runs Hoke-Robeson cotton gin with his brother, George, said most people just don't realize how much money is generated by cotton farming.

At his gin alone, he processed over \$6.5 million in lint, \$720,504.12 in seed this year. He said he also processed \$39,581.60 in scrap that is used for padding materials.

"This is the greatest thing in the world for a rural economy," Edgar Eden.

### History

**B**ut cotton hasn't always been a booming business. Historically speaking, although cotton built this country at the turn of the century, it's been on

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—Tom Starling

a roller coaster ride ever since.

In 1925, the country peaked in cotton acreage with 1.8 million acres, and cotton was booming until the Depression hit.

When synthetic materials and knit fibers came in 1970's, cotton hit lowest point since the Depression. Polyester fashions were in and cotton was out.

However, over the past several years, Cotton Inc., an arm of the U.S. Cotton Board that conducts research and development, put on one of most successful marketing campaigns ever to bring cotton back in fashion.

Now, it's almost as big as it was in 1920's. In 1995, the cotton acreage in the U.S. was back up to over 800,000 acres.

Eden devotes 1,800 of his 4,000 acres to cotton and 150 to tobacco.

He said Hoke county's farmers have consistently produced some of the highest quality cotton in the state for past three years.

Although soil and climate could be the reason, Edgar said with a grin, "I'd like to think it's better farmers."

### Stewards of the land

**W**hile farmers like the Edens take pride in their product, these men are not simply stewards of the land. They are part biologist, veterinarian, chemist and environmentalist.

Earl Hendrix, a well-known local farmer who serves as chairman of the U.S. Soybean Production Committee, said "You're a jack-of-all-trades, let's put it that way."

Like Hendrix, who keeps a library of current reference materials, farmers must

keep abreast of the latest in technologies and procedures for such things as proper soil fertilization and pest control.

But mostly, they are businessmen who speak in terms of supply and demand and watch price indexes change every minute on their personal computers.

When it comes to their cotton business, Edgar Eden said he and his brother wait for China to "sneeze."

The U.S. is second to China in the world cotton production. China produces 19.5 million bales per year while the U.S. runs close behind with 18.8 million bales.

Exporting is where the money is, Hendrix said. One-third to one-half of the cotton produced here goes overseas. American cotton is highly competitive in foreign markets because it's the strongest around, he said.

Normally, Edgar Eden said he's pretty happy if cotton price closes at 80 cents a pound. Cotton peaked at more than \$1 per pound in 1995, but that was too high, he said.

And just as supply markets are manipulated by customers' demand, so too can they be manipulated by producers, George Eden said.

"As soon as cotton hit over \$1, we started to see these retro fashions," he said.

However, on the positive side, more people are sticking to natural fibers these days. Thanks to biotechnical engineering, cotton farmers are able to grow a cotton with the wrinkle-free qualities of synthetics with the strength and comfort that cotton has always offered.

### Government help

**A**lso on the positive side for local farmers, is the fact that the federal government has enacted laws to deregulate some aspects of farming. While tobacco acreage will remain regulated, cotton

farmers this year will have more flexibility. Starling said, "We're going more to a free market."

This year will be the first for this deregulation, but Starling and local farmers hope it will allow farmers to increase their profit margins.

Hendrix said that currently, margins have been thin. Farmers aren't getting rich, he said.

"You've just got to make enough money for the family to live on," Hendrix said.

And, whereas previously, farmers just worked to feed themselves, the average farmer today feeds 125 people.

Although the cotton industry seems to be going strongly, area farmers caution that if left unchecked, taxes could drastically affect all farming in the county.

Hendrix, who has been a farmer since 1952, said agriculture has carried the tax base in Hoke County for years, but he cautioned that taxes can get so high, they run families out.

That's what happened to the Edens in the 1960s.

Edgar and George Eden remember their grandfather's farm in Cumberland County. Their grandfather owned all of what is now housing developments off Morganton Road. Edgar took over the farm, but taxes got so high he was forced to move out and find other areas to farm. That's when he came to Hoke County in 1967.

"The handwriting was on the wall that I had to either get out of the farming business, or get out of Cumberland County," Edgar said.

Also, as cotton and tobacco fields give way to housing subdivisions on the east side, some farmers may have to move or find other sources of income.

Marshall Newton, Newton Farms, said each year he loses a little more land that he leases to development.

Newton's farm consists of 1,200 acres of cotton, 250 of wheat or soybeans and 30 of tobacco. He says he loses an average of 50 acres each year to development.

As people move into the county from Fayetteville and developments continue to spread, the land is becoming more valuable not to farm, Newton said.

"We'd be crazy to hold onto it and keep farming it, but we're going to prevent it as long as we can," Newton said. "We're not against growth by any means, as long as it's the right kind of growth."

### Whether the weather

**O**f course, the nature of the farming business means weather always plays a key role. This year's cotton and tobacco crops were greatly affected by the weather.

Hurricane Fran's 65 mile an hour winds blew away what would have been a banner year for local farmers.

The storm blew tobacco leaves off the stalks and laid cotton flat down in the fields, leaving it a tangled mess. The rains made harvesting difficult and, in some cases, made fields impassable for farming equipment. Some of the cotton, which should be harvested by November, is still left in the fields and will stay there until the land can dry out or freeze enough to get equipment in there.

Starling estimated county farmers sustained a \$2.6 million loss in tobacco profits and \$1.4 million in cotton profits. However, farmers agreed it could have been worse.

### Future looks bright

**D**espite this year's loss, Hendrix said the future of farming does look bright for most farmers. Hendrix has seen agriculture change from the horse pulling the plow to mechanized equipment in the fields. Now the future is in biotechnical engineering, he said. He said this technology will enable farmers to cultivate crops that produce a higher yield with less acreage and produce a product that remains highly competitive in today's markets.

"Agriculture as you know it and as you see it today is going to be completely changed in a few years," Hendrix said.

Starling, however, just hopes for the simple things for area farmers.

"I hope there's no bad coming," he said. "I just hope for good weather and good crops. I hope farmers can stay on the farms and produce the good food and fiber this country needs."

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Part of Tom Starling's job is to fly over farmland and survey the land. This is an overhead view of the Edens' farm.