

# An Historical Overview of

# BROWARD COUNTY AGRICULTURE, 1915-1940

by JOE KNETSCH and LAURA ETHRIDGE

Broward County, in the not too distant past, was still the frontier in Florida and the nation. Even after the closing of the frontier and the famous 1920 census showing that the nation's population was more urban than rural, Broward retained its rural and frontier character. Fields were filled with bell peppers, beans, and tomatoes, and there were packing houses

along the railroad tracks in almost every city. Broward's importance to the state and the nation, until after the Second World War, remained as one of the leading production areas in the world for truck vegetables.

Broward County was the beneficiary of Florida's frontier experience. Many of its early settlers had farmed on the frontier

in other parts of the state. The freezes of the 1890s brought many of these experienced hands to the area, and with them came their collective wisdom gained from earlier activities. The sandy loam soils of Broward proved no great challenge to many of the farmers who migrated to the area. Other, recruited by the railroad and land companies to settle the lands of Modelo (Dania), Hallandale, and other ventures, often were experienced farmers. Thus, Broward's agriculture, from the beginning, was more advanced than that of other frontier areas because of the experience level of the new inhabitants.

Agriculturalists who came to southeast Florida in the early years of settlement also benefited from the growth of scientific knowledge during the late nineteenth century. The expansion of experimental farms, extension services associated with universities or the United States Department of Agriculture, and the increase in "county agents" added to the wealth of experience and knowledge already at hand. Experimental farms, the most famous of which was that of Henry Sanford in today's Seminole County, showed many what could and could not be grown in Florida's diverse and difficult soils.<sup>1</sup>

Experimental farms in the Lake Worth area of Palm Beach County demonstrated

**Although agriculture continues to flourish in much of south Florida, rapid urban and residential development following World War II have reduced farming to a minor factor in Broward County's economy. But for most of its past, both before and after its incorporation as a separate political unit, Broward was renowned for its agricultural output.**

Constructing his railroad through the region in the mid-1890s, Henry Flagler envisioned the future county as the breadbasket of the lower east coast, in contrast to the metropolitan and resort roles he foresaw for Miami and Palm Beach, respectively. The Everglades drainage project of the early twentieth century had as its goal the opening of reclaimed mucklands as a vast agricultural empire. As late as the 1940s and early '50s, Dania's tomatoes and Pompano's beans were those communities' chief claims to fame.

This article provides both a descriptive outline and a statistical analysis of Broward County agriculture during its peak years, and addresses the impact of the Florida land boom and the Great Depression on the region's farms. Joe Knetsch, a former Broward County Historical Commissioner, is Research Historian for the Florida Department of Natural Resources; Laura Ethridge, who assembled the graphs, is also employed by the Department of Natural Resources as Administrative Assistant at the Bureau of Aquatic Plants..



Vegetable shipping docks at the F.E.C. Railway crossing over New River, c. 1910.

to investors what could be grown with ease and what was risky in south Florida.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these hands-on examples, numerous publications dedicated to agriculture were also available to Broward's frontier farmers. The scientific advances of the previous century added greatly to the success with which many Broward farmers handled the new climate and soils.

Little wonder that, at the beginning of our period of study, two observers could make the following statements about the area:

*Fort Lauderdale is one of the most important shipping points for truck on the east coast of Florida. From 300 to 1,000 crates of vegetables are shipped daily by express during the height of the trucking season, in addition to which 400 to 700 carloads are annually shipped by freight. The shipments from Dania are almost equal to those from Fort Lauderdale.*

Such was the pre-tourist economy of Broward County, according to Mark Baldwin and H.W. Hawker in their "Soil Survey of the Fort Lauderdale Area, Florida," conducted in 1915. Most of the produce from the truck farms of newly-formed Broward County was destined for the New

York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston markets of the Northeast and the Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis markets of the Midwest. Most of the Broward crops were sold f.o.b. on the docks and railway stations in the county; relatively few were sold to commission men in the various northern markets.<sup>3</sup> This meant ready cash sales for the local growers and a more rapid turnover for local merchants who depended upon the farmers for their livelihood. Broward, in 1915, was an agricultural county and would continue to be until relatively recent time.

Even prior to the creation of Broward County in 1915, many large producers, investors, and packers had taken an interest in the agricultural possibilities of the area. The Bryan family, for example, though not extraordinarily wealthy by the standards of the day, had acquired early experience in vegetable farming in other parts of the state and had transferred their hopes and dreams to southeast Florida. J.T. Wofford, of Hallandale, had earlier held substantial property in the Lake County area. The Chase family, whose packing houses dotted the Florida landscape, owned three packing houses in Broward County. Their establishments, two of which, by agreement, sat on the lands of the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC), were located in Deerfield, Pompano, and Dania.<sup>4</sup>



Fort Lauderdale pioneer Reed A. Bryan, Sr., at his orange grove near today's Riverland Road and U.S. Highway 441, c. 1928.

Though he passed away prior to the heavy agricultural development of the region, former Confederate general and active railroad builder John B. Gordon also filed for land in the area that would become Broward County.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Broward's attractiveness for agricultural investment was known to many who were in the forefront of truck farming in the early twentieth century.

Although many current residents may wonder why the emphasis of this study is on truck farming and not citrus growing, it is important to understand that most of the early communities of Broward County were founded near the coast and supplied living quarters and food for the newly constructed Florida East Coast Railway. Local farmers used this artery of commerce to ship their vegetables and fruits to market, or, as noted above, sold them on the loading dock. Even the inland community of Davie, noted for its agricultural experiments and citrus groves, began by growing truck crops, as early families like the Hills, Crosses, and Salvinos "... found the soil rich, moist and good for raising vegetables."<sup>6</sup>

When Broward became a separate county, it produced only 9,605 crates of grapefruit in a total state production of 2,498,595 crates. Only about one percent of the oranges produced in Florida originated within the county's border.<sup>7</sup> Orange culture may have been the premier drawing card for bringing people to Florida, but, in the case of Broward, it was the remarkable ability of the soil to produce vegetables that allowed people to stay and prosper.

Descriptions of Broward County agri-

culture throughout the 1915 to 1940 period varied little. In 1922, for example, P.H. Thompson wrote:

*The last three years Broward County has been the largest shipping point of vegetables on the East Coast. Tomatoes, peppers, beans, eggplant, cabbage, potatoes, onions, together with celery, fruits, such as avocados, mangoes, guavas, strawberries and other varieties, which give a fresh fruit for every month in the year . . . The sturdy pioneer type at last pitched camp in the wilderness of the unfathomable Everglades to endure the hardships of laying hold on these wonderful muck lands so richly endowed by nature.*

Davie, according to Thompson, was considered the "Demonstration Grounds of the Lower Everglades." The packing houses "in each town" ran to capacity during the winter months. Thompson almost glowed when writing about the "first budded citrus grove in the Everglades," and prophesied that the next generation would plant hundreds of trees where one was planted before.<sup>8</sup>

Writing in the February 1937 *Florida Public Works* magazine, August Burghard, then secretary to the Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce, stated: "Broward County has seven incorporated communities, all located along the east coast, and one smaller agricultural community, Davie, which is located in the Everglades, fourteen miles west from the coast."

He described Deerfield as "largely agricultural," with the emphasis on its bean,

eggplant, and cucumber crops. Pompano, he noted proudly, was known as the winter "Bean Capital of the United States." Oakland Park, too, was cited for its bean production, while Dania, "with its large, frost free east marsh section and other marsh lands," was the center of the tomato production celebrated each year by the annual "Tomato Day." Hallandale, according to Burghard, was Broward's other agricultural city, both Hollywood-by-the-Sea and Fort Lauderdale having progressed to a more tourist-based economy.<sup>9</sup>

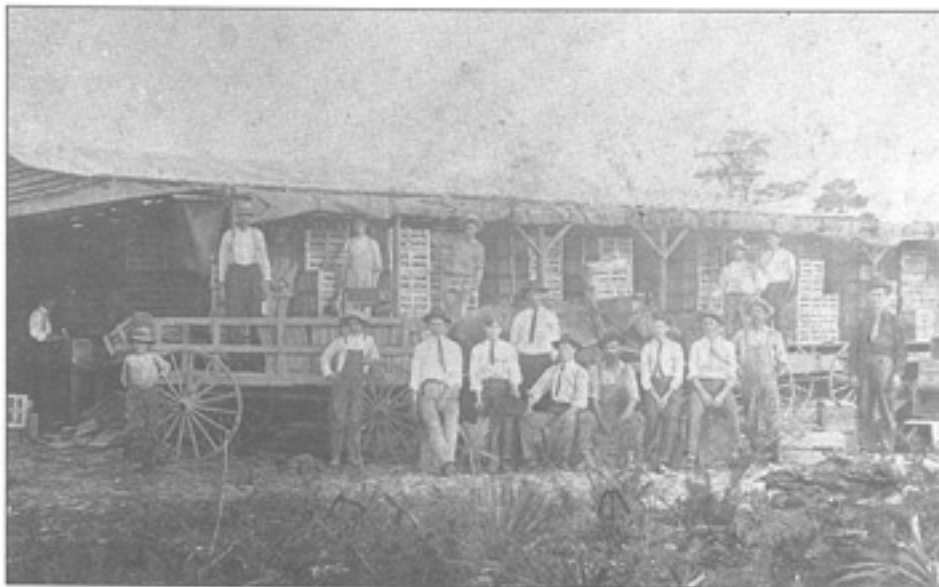
*Kim's Guide to Florida* (1938 edition) told potential tourists and residents that "Thousands of acres in the vicinity are planted in beans, so that Pompano has the distinction of being the largest individual F.O.B. market for winter green beans in the world." Davie, *Kim's* noted, was also a rich vegetable growing area, and also featured both the "beautiful 400-acre Wacico Grove" and Flamingo Groves, which was famed for its Lue Gim Gong oranges. Dania's Tomato Festival was included as a "must see" for *Kim's* readers.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the emphasis in the promotional literature of the pre-World War II era was on Broward's agricultural prospects and growth. Tourism, though growing in importance, remained limited to Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, and the beach areas of Dania and the other smaller towns.

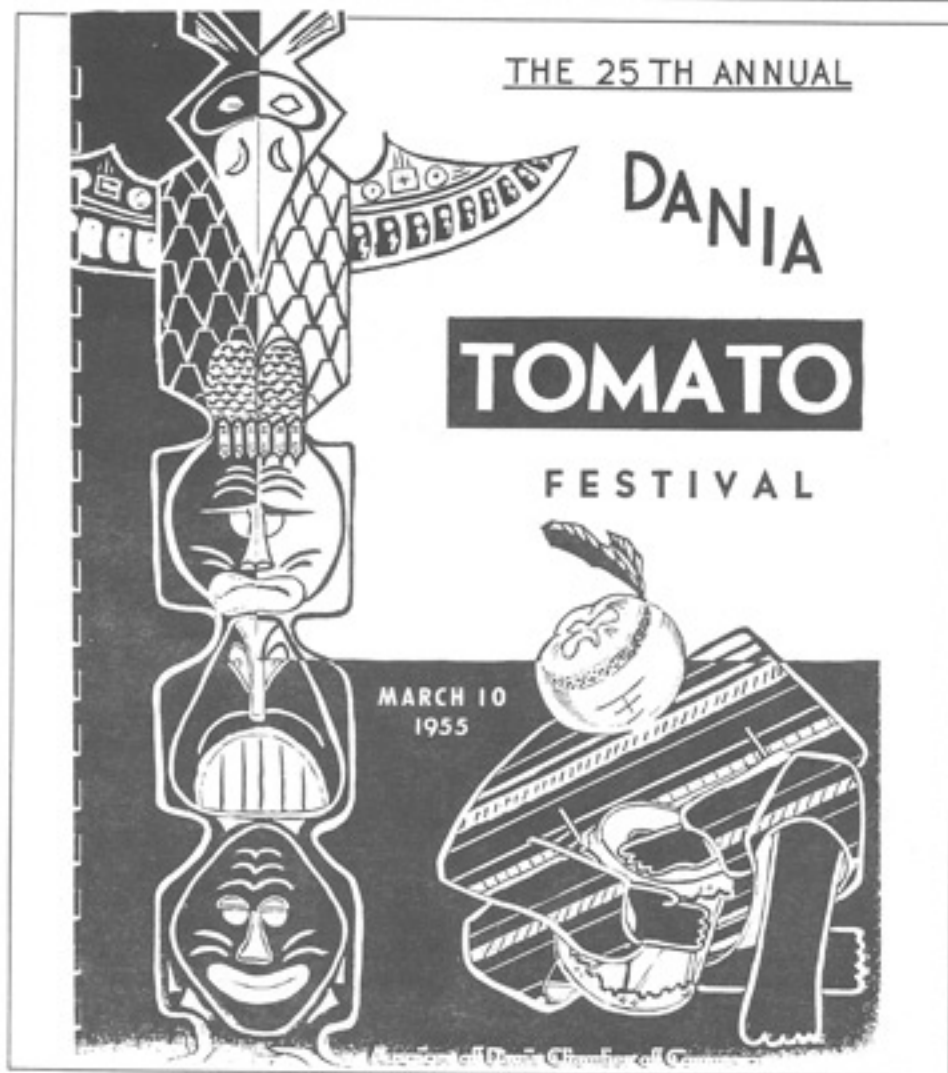
Northern Broward County's agricultural beginnings can be traced back to the arrival of the first settlers in the early 1890s, but the real growth came with the railroad. This avenue of commerce brought Emil Ehmann, Isaac Hardy, James Heyns, L.R. Smoak (often credited with planting the first sack of beans), and Albert N. Sample, who owned lands stretching from present-day Lighthouse Point far into the country and constructed Sample Road with his own funds to provide access to his croplands.

Even further west, into modern Coral Springs, H.L. "Bud" Lyons and Franklin Fisher, among others, pioneered in bean farming in the early 1920s, by draining the rich sandy loam soil, hiring many "Nassau blacks" to help clear the land, and cultivating a vast acreage. Eventually, they created a farm totalling nearly 18,000 acres and helped the Pompano market remain the world's largest bean exporting spot.<sup>11</sup> This activity in Pompano was mirrored in Deerfield and Oakland Park, and continued through the Great Depression and during and after World War II.

Southern Broward County saw the growth of Dania and Hallandale as the leading agricultural communities. The



Unidentified Broward County packing house in the early years of the twentieth century.



Program from Dania's "Tomato Day" festival, a tradition which lasted from 1927 to 1956.

growth of Dania has been well chronicled by Marlyn Kemper and Dr. Cooper Kirk in earlier volumes of *Broward Legacy*, and need not be repeated here except to note that the first "Tomato Day" celebration took place on May 17, 1927, after Dania had already been recognized as one of the world's leading tomato producing areas.<sup>12</sup> Hallandale, too, experienced its first spurt of growth as a result of tomato farming. Farmers in the area had first experimented with pineapples, but soon found that truck crops, especially tomatoes, could be grown more profitably and quickly. As Hallandale's historian, Dr. Bill McGoun, noted in his book *Hallandale*, "For four decades shipments of winter tomatoes were dominant in the Hallandale economy. At the height of the business, 13 packing houses lined the east side of the railroad from N.E. Third Street south to Beach Boulevard and a 14th sat on the west side of Dixie Highway. The FEC would drop off a box car in front of each at night and pick it up the next day,

full."<sup>13</sup> In both northern and southern Broward County, peppers, tomatoes, and beans were consistently grown in large amounts for shipment to northern markets.

Broward's remarkable agricultural growth can be seen in some of the statistics available for the years under study, as well as in descriptive accounts. However, before exploring these figures, it should be stated that there are gaps in the census numbers as well as some inconsistencies that need to be researched more thoroughly. Also, the figures, taken mostly from the United States Census data for 1920, 1930, and 1940, are not as precise as they may seem.

As the controversy surrounding the 1990 census has proven to Floridians, the methods for acquiring information are often inexact. More importantly, the dollar values given for crops sold at any given time are not consistent. Variations in dollar values are especially evident for the Depression decade. With these warnings in mind, we can proceed to follow the growth of agricultural production in Broward County from 1915 to 1940.

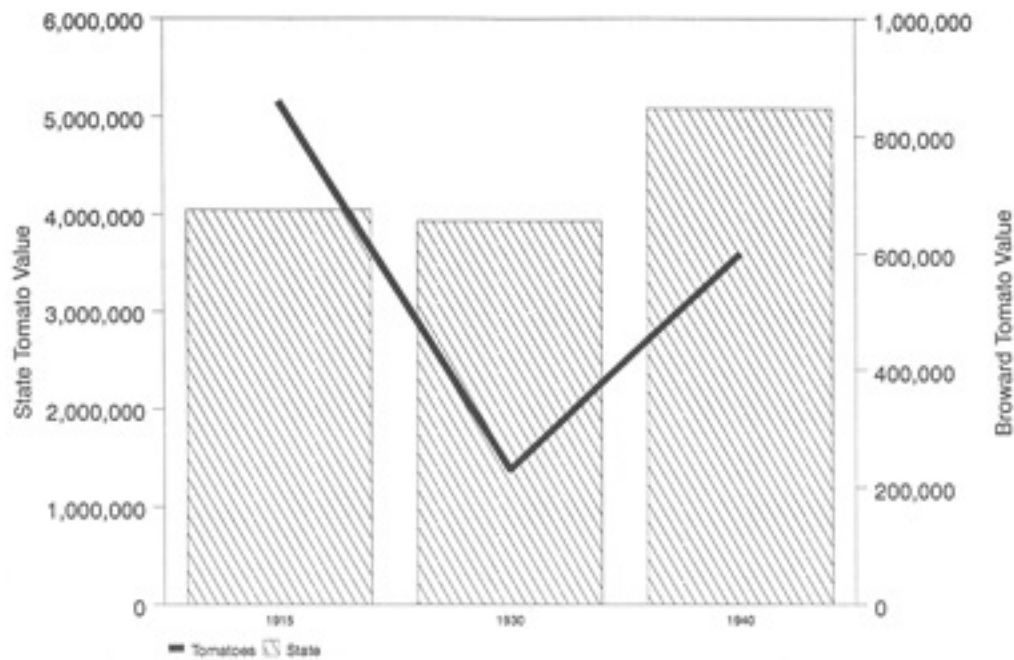
When Broward became a county in 1915, its total acreage under production was recorded at 5,902. Of this total, 4,784 acres were dedicated to the three main truck vegetables: peppers, beans, and tomatoes.<sup>14</sup> In this founding year, the tomatoes alone accounted for approximately twenty-two percent of Florida's production of this crop.

That same year, the bean crop in Broward equaled about fourteen percent of the total state production. Peppers grown in Broward accounted for only about seven percent of the state total, but this percent-

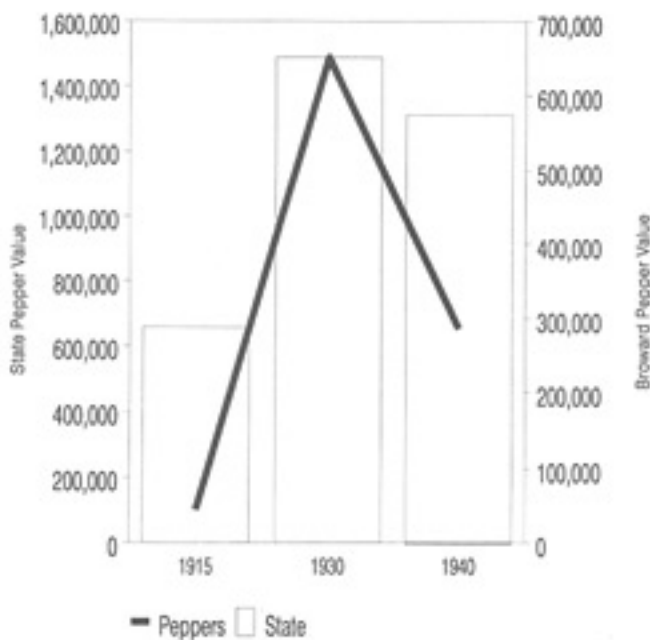


The old Pompano farmers' market along the F.E.C. Railway in the 1930s.

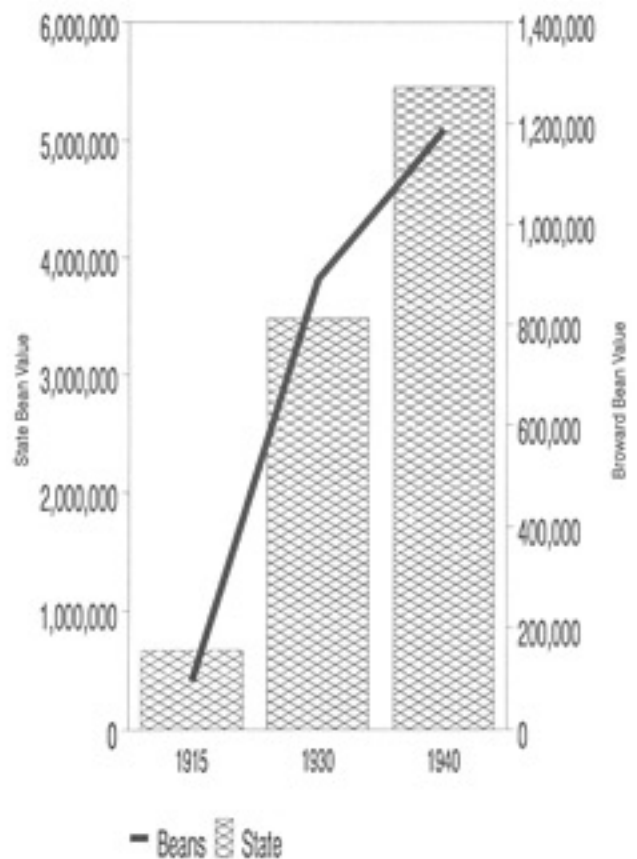
State vs. Broward Tomato Value  
1915 - 1940



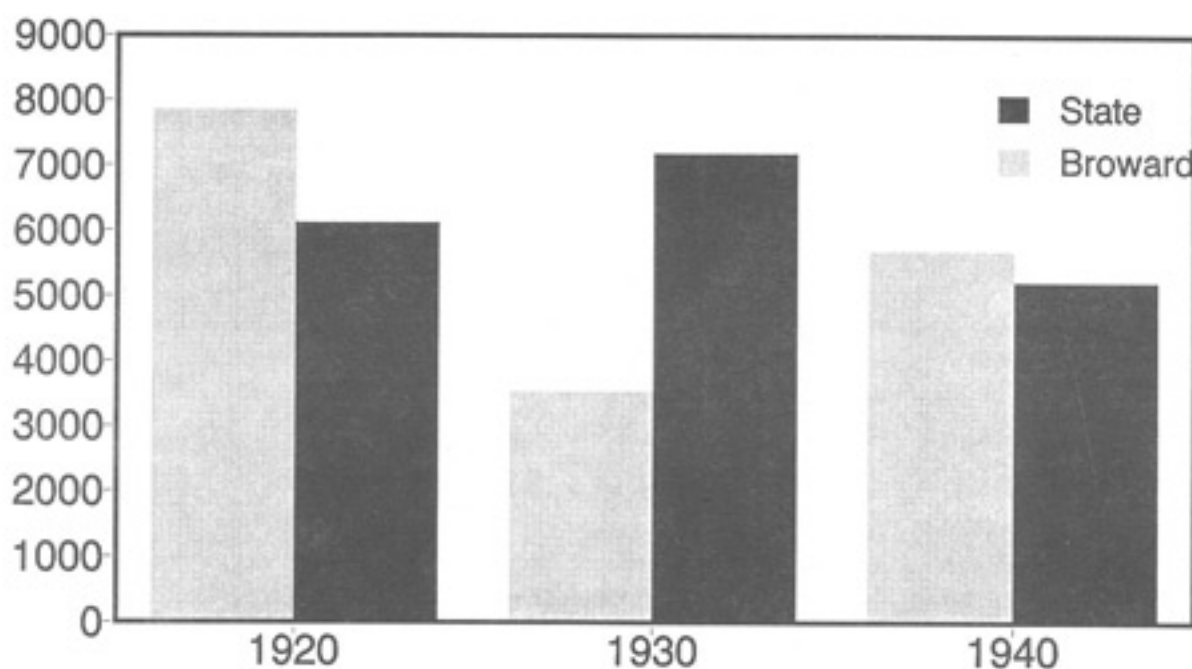
State vs. Broward Pepper Value  
1915 - 1940



State vs. Broward Bean Value  
1915 - 1940



## Broward v. State Average Farm Value



age was to rise dramatically in the next three decades. Thus, even in the very beginning of its existence as a political entity, Broward County was an important contributor to Florida's agricultural standing and well-being.

During the period from 1915 to 1940, the value of the state's production of these three crops rose rapidly. Bean value totaled about \$666,169 in 1915, and nearly doubled by 1920. By the end of 1940, the state bean crop was worth \$5,453,434. Beans, however, were the only crop that increased in value to this great extent. Tomatoes, for which Dania and Hallandale were both famous, were worth \$4,048,653 in 1915, but only rose to \$5,082,117 by 1940. Peppers began the period worth about \$655,974, and ended the period at approximately \$1,313,421, which represented a small drop under the peak 1930 value of \$1,491,805. The three major crops grown in Broward County, therefore, were important to the state's total agricultural output, and the income generated by their sales helped maintain the standard of living for the area.

Two of the major indicators for the well-being of Broward farmers in the period 1915-1940 were the value and average size of their farms. In these statistics, however, a major question arises. In 1920, the first year for which this data

is available, the average farm value for Broward County was placed at \$7,852. As the Great Depression hit the county, this value nearly halved itself to \$3,521 per farm, rebounding to \$5,687 per farm by 1940. The average size per farm also followed this trend, beginning at 72.9 acres in 1920, dropping to 25.7 acres in 1930, and jumping to eighty-two acres in 1940.

These figures represent the effects of a number of problems faced by Broward farmers in the early twentieth century, problems which still confront all farmers today. First, the choice of Broward farmers to expand their production areas in the 1920s was a response to the boom economy experienced by the nation as a whole. This expansion resulted in an over-extension of both productive capacity and actual production as the nation headed into an economic downturn.

The result was heavy losses by a number of Broward County farmers, losses which forced some out of business. Secondly, the type of crops grown in Broward County for shipment to northern markets could be grown almost anywhere in the country. This allowed a large substitution factor to accelerate Broward's downturn, while Florida, as a whole, could rely upon the continued demands for citrus, which could not be grown in most other regions. In economic terms, Broward farmers made

the wrong choices in the late 1920s, and did not grow crops which could maximize their economic well-being.

By the 1940 census, Broward County's agriculture was well on the way to recovery. In that year, the state's total value for its agricultural output was \$20,107,235, of which Broward County accounted for \$2,267,382, or slightly over ten percent. Broward's average farm value, as noted above, climbed back to a respectable \$5,687, and the average farm size increased to eighty-two acres.

These figures, by way of explanation, may indicate a concentration of farm holdings caused by the economic hard times experienced in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Of Broward's three major crops, the county's beans and peppers accounted for about twenty-two percent each of the state's production, while its tomatoes equaled about twelve percent of the state total. Prosperity, it appeared, was well on its way for Broward farmers by the time the county entered the Second World War.

The efforts of Broward County's agricultural pioneers, people such as Bud Lyons, Frank Stirling, the Bryan family, the Moffitts, and many, many more, bore fruit during the period between 1915 and 1940. Through the efforts of these pioneers, crop lands were cleared, pastures

created, roads built, and an economy established that could sustain large numbers of people both within and outside the county proper.

Despite periods of hardship, especially

during the Great Depression, Broward's farmers showed the potential and profitability of an area once thought to be swamp and sand. By doing so, they opened the way for other types of development and

made possible the way of life experienced in Broward today. We owe our agricultural forebears much more than a passing reference in the history of Broward County.

## ENDNOTES

1) Brenda Elliott and Joe Knetsch, "Truck Farming in Historic Orange County: 1880-1920," paper presented at the Florida Historical Society Annual Meeting, Orlando, May 10, 1991, contains an account of Sanford's and others' efforts in this area of Florida.

2) The Huguenot and Belleville "Plantations" of the Lake Worth Trust, and other enterprises, experimented with pineapples, tomatoes, and Irish potatoes in the late 1890s. The historical account of these experimental farms has yet to be written. However, much of the activity of these enterprises is recorded in the correspondence of A.P. Sawyer, A.P. Sawyer Papers, Folder 5-14, MS 175, Florida Collection, Florida State Library, Tallahassee, Florida.

3) U.S. Department of Agriculture, Field of Operations of the Bureau of Soils, 1915, Mark Baldwin and H.W. Hawker, "Soil Survey of the Fort Lauderdale Area, Florida (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 754.

4) "Chase Properties," three-ring binder in Chase Papers, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville (hand numbered pages did not copy in readable form).

5) The Bryans, Wofford, and Gordon all attempted to use the pre-emption method of obtaining land in Broward. See Joe Knetsch and Paul S. George, "To Settle the Land: Pre-emp-

tion and the Withers Report in Early Twentieth Century Broward County," *Broward Legacy*, 13 (Summer/Fall 1990), 27-33.

6) Victoria Wagner, *The History of Davie and Its Dilemma* (Fort Lauderdale: Nova University/New York Institute of Technology Press, 1982), 13.

7) State of Florida, Department of Agriculture, Fourteenth Biennial Report of the Department of Agriculture, part 2 (Tallahassee: T.J. Appleyard, 1916), 295-98.

8) State of Florida, Department of Agriculture, Seventeenth Biennial Report of the Department of Agriculture of the State of Florida, part 1 (Tallahassee: T.J. Appleyard, 1922), 59-61.

9) August Burghard, "Progressive Broward County," *Florida Public Works* (February 1937), 5, 6, 15.

10) *Kim's Guide to Florida: A Travel Companion & Reference Book* (Anna Maria, Florida: Kim's Guide, 1938), 79-81.

11) Marlyn Kemper, *Pompano Beach Diamond Jubilee Commemorative Book Celebrating 75 Years, 1908-1983* (Pompano Beach: Historic Broward County Preservation Board, 1983), 28-46; V. Anne Fisher, "From a Hill of Beans," *New River News*, 21 (Spring 1983), 4-9.

12) Marlyn Kemper, "A History of Dania," *Broward Legacy*, 3 (Fall 1979), 12-13; Cooper Kirk, "Andrew Christian Frost: Founder of

Dania," *Broward Legacy*, 3 (Summer/Fall 1979), 16-25.

13) Bill McGoun, *Hallandale* (Hallandale: Hallandale Historical Society, 1976), 10.

14) For the sake of convenience and readability, the following are the sources consulted for information contained in the narrative and graphs:

For 1915: State of Florida, Department of Agriculture, Fourteenth Biennial Report, part 2, 252, 279, 282, 292.

For 1920: U.S. Census Bureau, Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, volume V, Agriculture (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 365, 375. This census did not break the report down by crop, but lump totalled such categories as vegetables, field crops, etc.

For 1930: U.S. Census Bureau, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, volume II, Agriculture, part 2, Southern States (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 66, 684, 702, 714, 720.

For 1940: U.S. Census Bureau, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Agriculture, volume 1, first and second series, state reports, part 3, Statistics for Counties (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 694, 764, 770, 779.

Copies of these pages are on file at the Broward County Historical Commission.