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Cotton market defied planning

Leader tried to get farmers to cooperate

Cotton was the major Southern crop from the 1820s until the 1950s and '60s, and its price determined whether a farmer could pay off the mortgage, buy his children shoes and put food on the table.

By the 1890s, it became clear too much cotton was being produced. But how to get thousands of farmers to agree to reduce acreage? Or how to keep them from glutting the market following the ginning season?

LOUISE PETTUS
Nearby History

John T. Roddey, a Rock Hill native who was still under the age of 30, moved to New York City in 1891 where he founded the firm of J.T. Roddey & Co. at 80 Broadway. The firm dealt in cotton, stocks, grain and provisions. Roddey's specialty was cotton.

After four years in New York, Roddey was convinced that the cotton market was manipulated by "professional bears" who deliberately depressed the market to buy cotton cheap. He said there was a "cotton trust" just as devastating as the beef trusts and sugar trusts. The losers were the farmers.

Farmers, Roddey reasoned, had only one recourse. They must organize. Roddey offered a plan. He proposed a reduction system in which farmers would withhold from the market one bale in every six they produced. This would withdraw more than one million bales from the market.

Roddey proposed a warehouse system in which the farmers stored the cotton at modest cost. Every cotton producing county would have at least one warehouse which would be run as a stock company. The warehouse receipts would be like money in the bank.

The cotton gins would be numbered and would be required to report weekly on the number of bales they had ginned.

Agricultural organizations across the South applauded Roddey's plan. Roddey spoke in numerous Southern cities. It was a grand plan, but there were too many small farmers, too many who were illiterate. The Roddey Plan, as it was called, failed.

In 1912, John Gary Anderson of Rock Hill, known for his Rock Hill Buggy Co., took John T. Roddey's plan and, with some changes, reintroduced it to the South. Anderson proposed that farmers reduce cotton planting by one-fourth, a more drastic cut than Roddey's.

Anderson proposed an educational program with paid canvassers who would visit each farmer and explain how the program would work. Anderson personally hired a man to visit all cotton farmers in two York County townships — Ebenezer and Catawba. He got 147 farmers to sign pledges that they would reduce their plantings.

E.J. Watson, the South Carolina agricultural commissioner, was also the president of the Southern Cotton Congress. Watson liked Anderson's ideas and put them on the agenda at a meeting in New Orleans where it was adopted. The Roddey Plan was now the Rock Hill Plan.

In January 1912, Anderson and Watson with other cotton leaders determined that it was time to visit every Southern state in an all-out drive to organize the cotton farmers.

Voluntary reduction didn't work because cotton prices went up. Farmers couldn't resist planting more cotton. The Rock Hill Plan failed in 1912.

Ironically, in the Great Depression of the 1930s, it took the U.S. Agriculture Department and the Congress to carry out most of the features of the Roddey and Rock Hill plans by mandating crop reduction, setting up government warehouses to store surpluses, and establishing minimum prices for cotton.

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