

Black Farmers Leaving The 'Texas Prairies'

BY KEN HERMAN

Austin, Texas - As a boy in the 1920s, Eritus Sams got up early in the morning, milked the cows at a Beaumont dairy and got farming in his blood.

Sams finally bought his own farm in 1954. Now, at age 65, he is a successful farmer, mayor of Prairie View and, like many of the decreasing numbers of black farmers in Texas, a man unsure about the future of the land he works.

"We are having a hard time keeping these youngsters on the farm," Sams said in a telephone interview from his city Hall office.

"MY son is 22 and he's in college. I'm afraid he is not going to farm. He's studying football," Sams joked.

The decline of the black farmer in Texas is no joke to Agriculture Commissioner Reagan Brown, an avid farming man who rarely gives a speech without talking about the pending "world food crisis."

"This is true nationally," Percy Luney, chief of civil rights at the Agriculture Department in Washington, said. "There has been a

decline in the numbers of black farmers dating back after World War II." Luney said the amount of land owned by blacks had declined 42 percent from 1969 to 1974.

Until the war, the majority of Texans - black and white - lived on the land, and farming was one of the few jobs open to blacks. After the war, with industry booming, many blacks headed to the cities for work.

In the past 50 years, farmers with small acreages all over the country have been leaving the farm, "and among these are the majority of all blacks in agriculture," the report says. "From the 926,000 black farmers in the United States in 1920, the number had dwindled by 1974 to 45,594 black farmers in this country."

Mechanization, lack of financing and low prices for cotton, the crop most black farmers raised, began driving blacks out of farming in 1930s, according to the report.

"With the collapse of the stock market in 1929 and extreme weather conditions that crippled agricultural production, black Texans suffered

more unemployment than other groups in the labor force because of their concentration in agriculture."

Brown said that blacks who now want to return to farming find it difficult because money is hard to come by.

"I was in New York the other day and I talked to a lot of black taxi drivers and every one I talked to wants to go home," Brown said. "They talk about going back to Mississippi or East Texas ... but many of those who would like to go back have no place to

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