



WINTER GARDEN REGION

WINTER GARDEN REGION. The Winter Garden Region is an agricultural area on the South Texas Plains north of Laredo that centers around Dimmit, Zavala, Frio, and LaSalle counties. It is noted for its year-round production of vegetables by irrigation. Before irrigation transformed the region, it was an arid area of short grasses and mesquite^{qv} trees. In the late 1890s area farmers began experimenting with dry-land crops and irrigation. The first Bermuda onion crop was raised near Cotulla in LaSalle County in 1896, and commercial onion culture began in that county in 1898. At the same time Dimmit County farmers began to utilize artesian wells and dams to provide water for irrigated crops. When rail transportation reached the area in the first decade of the twentieth century, a major land boom ensued, as the ranches that covered much of the area, including the Catarina, the Seven D, and the Cross S, sold land for irrigated farms. The number of farms almost tripled in LaSalle County between 1900 and 1920, while the average value of an acre of farmland in Dimmit County increased from \$1.80 in 1900 to \$24.60 in 1910 and then to more than \$40 in 1920. In Zavala County the 96,000-acre Cross S Ranch was divided into ten-acre farms between 1905 and 1907, and the number of farms in the county tripled between 1900 and 1930. The most important crops in the region were onions, spinach, beets, and strawberries, though cotton dominated in Frio County; some citrus fruit was also harvested, and nut trees became increasingly important. The population of the region more than tripled between 1900 and 1930, reaching 36,816. With the increased costs of irrigation by the 1930s and the economic impact of the Great Depression^{qv}, the boom in small farms came to an end. While there were still many small farms, much of the region was returned to ranchland, and irrigated farming became a large-scale enterprise in many areas. Corporate ownership of large farms became increasingly common after World War II, with such major companies as Del Monte establishing canneries close to the fields. In the 1990s the Winter Garden counties were still among the leading producers of winter vegetables through irrigation. Zavala County had some 40,000 irrigated acres in 1995, and Dimmit was also among the leading irrigated vegetable-growing counties.

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Mark Odintz

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