

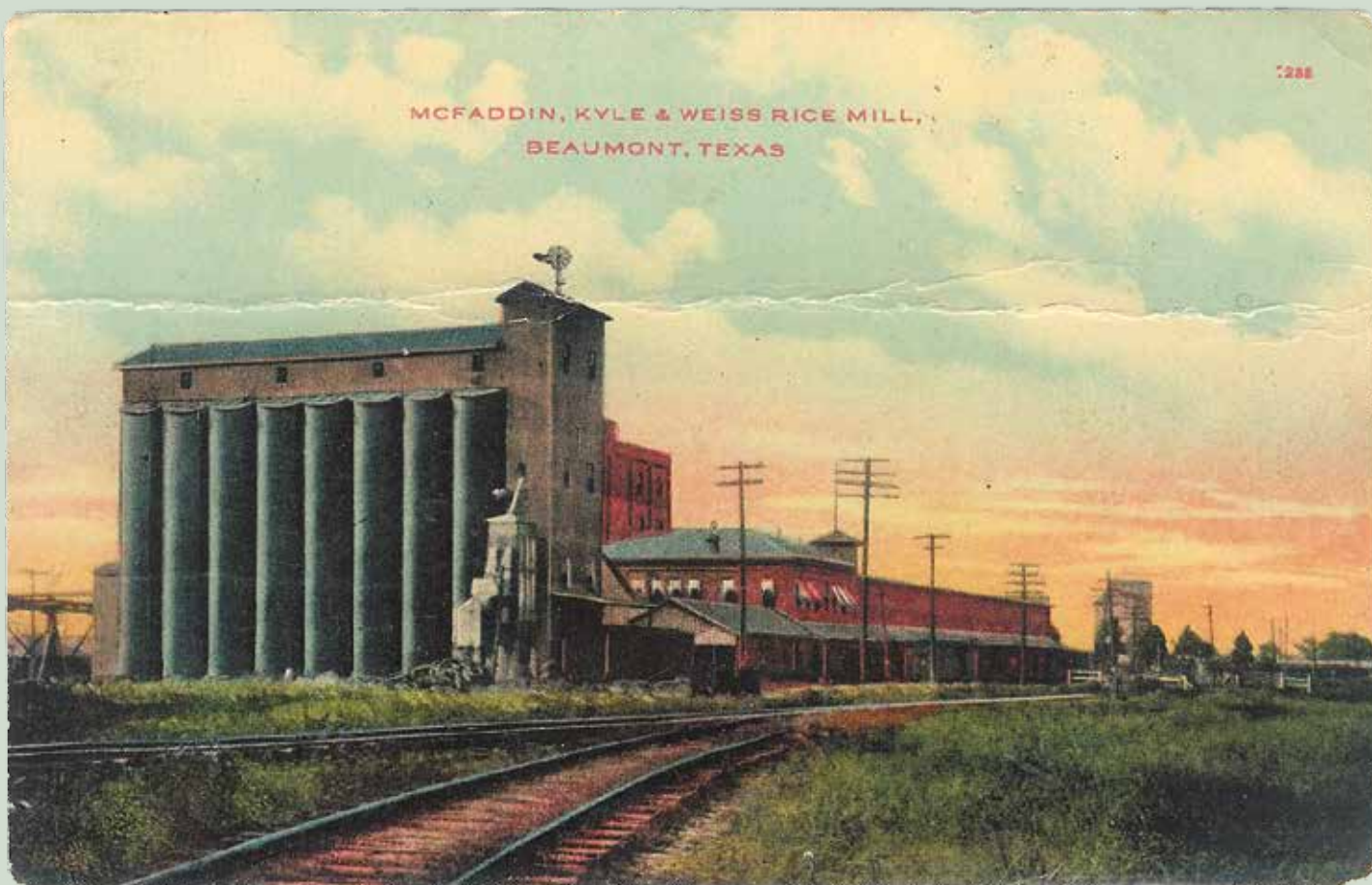
FIRST PROVIDENCE, THEN PROSPERITY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF BEAUMONT'S RICE CULTURE

By Denise Gomez

Past the easternmost boundaries of Houston lies the ancient Neches River, where various settlements formed along the banks long before our region's towns, highways, and industries emerged. This "ideal place for a town" became Tevis Bluff, named for the 1824 settlers Noah and Nancy Tevis, who operated one of three ferries along the river where people and cattle crossed as they moved westward. Although the Tevis family had owned their land for several years, they waited until 1835 to obtain an officially recognized deed. Unfortunately, shortly after the Tevis deed petition was approved, Noah Tevis died. He left his estate to his wife, who took a leadership role as the town of Beaumont began to form its boundaries.¹ Nancy, called "the mother of Beaumont," stood alongside Joseph Grigsby and the three principals of the Joseph P. Pulsifer Company, Henry Millard, Joseph Pulsifer, and Thomas B. Huling, to form "the townsite company." The company donated two hundred acres given by the three men and then divided it,

setting aside land for public spaces—a hospital, a college, and a "steam mill square."²

Before the Port of Beaumont opened, the Jefferson County area relied on rivers for major trade. Late historian W. T. Block wrote, "If, in 1830 Mrs. Tevis had access to any of the manufactured wares of New Orleans, or had a market for her cotton, hides, or other commodities, it was due to [Thomas F.] McKinney," the "first wealthy Texan," and Samuel May Williams, the first to use steamboats in local cotton trading. Among their collection of steamers was the *Laura*, the first steamboat to pass through Buffalo Bayou to Houston in 1837, and the *Lafitte*, the first Texas-built steamboat, constructed at a cost of \$19,000 (about \$401,459 today) and destined for wreckage after two years of service.³ Steamboats were owned by rich merchants such as McKinney, who often assumed dual roles as businessmen and captains, trusting only in themselves to safely transport their goods.



Shown, a postcard of Beaumont's McFaddin-Kyle-Weiss Rice Milling Company. Rice mills encouraged public service irrigation projects, which turned into the canals and waterways that sustained large-scale rice production.

Photo courtesy of the McFaddin-Ward House Museum, Beaumont, Texas.



The French family occupied this house from 1845 to 1865. Now a museum in Beaumont, Texas, it educates students and tourists on local history. Photo courtesy of Doug Matthews from Wikipedia.

In the early harbor days, laborers worked endlessly, repeatedly loading and unloading by hand, with most of the commerce moving inland via waterways. “Idlers were not welcomed” as workers, noted early twentieth-century historian Florence Stratton. Later models of boats evolved from purely service vessels to passenger crafts where romances blossomed and dinners were served. The side-wheeler *Florilda*, boasting a length of 250 feet and capable of carrying thousands of bales of cotton, served what Henry R. Green called “the most stupendously-accursed wine ever administered to saint or sinner.”³⁴ As the nineteenth century closed and time passed, railroad tracks took the place of inland waterways.

North of Beaumont stands the John Jay French Museum, a white and grey, wood-paneled, two-story, nineteenth-century home surrounded by trees and decorated on all sides with rectangular windows. French, a New Yorker who dabbled in the art of tanning, traveled by ship to present-day Beaumont in 1832. Initially inspired to open a general store and tannery, French lost half his intended merchandise at sea. What remained of his products was briefly placed on sale and sold out quickly, convincing French that the area had a healthy market and economy. He soon returned north to retrieve his wife and four children, and they began their new lives in an area that was briefly called “French Town.”³⁵

Widely known as pioneers, one of the French family sons, David, is credited with planting the first rice seeds in Beaumont shortly after the Civil War’s end. While rice farming became an important and defining industry for Southeast Texas, sophisticated irrigation was both lacking and necessary for industrial growth. Early rice growers raised quantities for at-home use and consumption, and they depended on favorable weather, lending the moniker “Providence Rice” to the crop. According to Dr. L. T. Wilson, director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Research Center at Beaumont and Eagle Lake, the climate of the Gulf Coast, with its yearly rainfall of 37 to 46 inches, well-known hot summers, and heavy clay soils that “hold water well, make [our location] ideal for rice production.”³⁶

Able to survive without irrigation, this early rice was

treated in the same manner as all other crops. A young daughter of John Jay French was tasked with keeping away birds and other menaces from disrupting the maturing rice. Rice farmers used what was readily available to them—animals, humans, and nature—because rice was not yet among the ranks of lumber and cotton as a cash crop. As a result experimenting came at the leisure of farmers. The French family used a hollowed-out log as a mortar and a rounded piece of wood as a pestle, grinding the rice in order to remove its husks. While the grinding method worked, French attempted to modernize the process by bringing in used equipment from Louisiana to be placed in a French family rice mill, but this venture failed quickly.⁷

Early commercial rice yields popped up around 1886 from a 200-acre planting by Louis Bordages and Edgar Carruthers. In the 1880s a New Orleans newspaper observed the growing Jewish community in Jefferson County, noting, “[their settlement is] a precursor of the prosperity which is to follow.” The Bluesteins, a Jewish family associated with commercial rice agriculture and known for possessing the town’s sole copy of the Torah, began in neighboring Orange County and shipped one hundred barrels of rice on “the first boxcar of rice ever shipped from Orange.” Soon after, Bluestein moved to bustling Beaumont but kept his rice in Orange. Another Jewish citizen and successful grocer, Lederer, had a small rice farm south of town in 1900.⁸

Perhaps one of the most well-known families in Southeast Texas, the Broussards traveled to Texas from Louisiana in 1845 and were listed among the settling Acadian groups in Florence Stratton’s 1925 *The Story of Beaumont*. The innovative Joseph Eloi Broussard was born in his family’s bayou-side home and was known for handling himself well with cattle and all things associated with a young boy raised on a ranch. After marrying, Broussard “heeded the ‘call to the city’” and moved to Beaumont. He bought his first mill, a gristmill, in 1889, and just three years later he accomplished another “first” when he opened the Beaumont Rice Mills. The rice mills became the motivating force behind the beginnings of “public service irrigation projects” in the state of Texas. Moving his rice mills in 1905 allowed Broussard

Joseph Elois Broussard, shown here in his Confederate army uniform, became a prominent businessman with ventures in irrigation, milling, and farming.

Photo courtesy of Tyrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

to try out new equipment. Stratton wrote, Broussard's mills were the "most modern plants in the rice belt...equipped with an elevator for handling grain" and marveled at the fireproof McFaddin-Weiss-Kyle Mill.⁹

"Rice-mania" set off at the turn of the twentieth century. A man from Galveston's Texas Star Rice Mill, John Reimerschoffer, bought ten tons of rice seed from Louisiana, handing it out at no cost so long as farmers were willing to experiment with rice growing. As rice farming expanded, mills sprang up, and Nederland was founded in 1889 as a "rice capitol [sic]." Lands suitable for rice production rose to three dollars per acre when just a year prior they were valued at a dollar per acre. Beaumont Rice Mills was not alone for long, and by the time Texas entered the twentieth century, half of the Texas rice mills were in the Jefferson County area: Beaumont Rice Mill and Hinz Rice Mill in Beaumont, Port Arthur Rice Mill in Port Arthur, and Orange Rice Mill in Orange. Rice acreage grew quickly, going from 1,500 acres in 1891, to 43,000 in 1900, and 54,000 by 1904.¹⁰

Rice's potential as a profitable crop could not be reached, however, until irrigation became readily available. Canal companies built two hundred miles of canals to bring freshwater to rice farmers between 1899 and 1906. Port Arthur Rice and Irrigation Company constructed twenty-five miles serving 13,000 acres; McFaddin-Weiss-Kyle Canal Company's twenty-five miles served 16,500 acres; the Beaumont Irrigation Company had a hundred miles of canals serving 32,000 acres with the remainder served by the Neches Canal Company and Taylors-Hillebrand. These canals remain in use today as the framework of the Lower Neches Valley Authority's canal system.¹¹

Rice businessmen regularly took on irrigation, milling, and farming jobs all at once, especially as the industry



matured. Farmer Willard G. Lovell, allegedly using only a few mules and his bare hands, built an efficient irrigation system for his 8,000 acres of land when he implanted pumps at Taylor's Bayou, creating Lovell's Lake.¹² The Beaumont section of the *Water Supply and Irrigation Papers of the United States Geological Survey* described the Lovell system as having an estimated capacity of 18,000 gallons a minute, with an engine efficiency of 75% and 100 measured horsepower, pumping 275 gallons-a-second with a flume 146 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 3 feet deep, and a main canal 3½ miles long and 50 feet wide. The survey shows evidence that Lovell had one of the more powerful systems in the area when compared to the neighboring Bingham, Gulf Rice Growing Company, and

Moore systems that boasted smaller engines and canals. In 1902, the Lovell system irrigated the most acreage amongst the Northern Taylor Bayou systems, covering 700 acres compared to the Bingham system's 400 and the Moore system's 80 acres.

The Jefferson County Rice Company, however, dominated both the north and south Taylor's Bayou Systems, irrigating 2,300 acres of their 10,424 total acres in that year. The Beaumont Rice Company outshone the entire Jefferson County area, irrigating 15,000 acres. The Jefferson County Rice Company divided its land into sections and sold them to settlers on the "crop-payment plan" offering land at a rate of \$20-\$25 per one-and-a-half acres on the condition that the new landowners gave half of their yielded crops until their payments were completed.

Among the first large-scale rice farmers of Jefferson County, Lovell arrived in 1890 from Michigan and settled in the open prairies between Beaumont, a "prosperous city of about 15,000," and Labelle. His eulogy described Lovell as well-respected in his field for being knowledgeable and for defying the setbacks he faced in his beginning days of rice farming. The Lovell farm found enemies in the area's cattle ranchers, who used the available lands for grazing. His eulogy read, among his accomplishments, "This land was regard-

The McFaddin-Weiss-Kyle Company was among the businesses dipping into all aspects of the rice industry.

Photo courtesy of McFaddin-Ward House Museum, Beaumont, Texas.





This M&M Air Service Plane was for seeding, fertilizing, and watering rice, circa 1947.

Photo courtesy of Tyrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

ed as the cow's inheritance.... It was therefore not surprising that this man...who put acres of land over which the cattle had formerly roamed, under fence and begin his rice farming, was soon [in] disfavor among the cattlemen of this section." By 1908 Lovell became successful and traveled to the big cities of Beaumont, Houston, and Galveston for rice business, frequently attending community affairs. In his diary, he wrote that he used Honduran and Japanese rice in his fields as did his fellow rice farmers. By 1914 imported rice seed that "deteriorated in yield and quality" made way for brands like Sol Wright's Blue Rose, described by a 1914 *Beaumont Enterprise* article as "the most famous of all the famed Wright rices...[making] up over half the nation's crop."¹³

The 1908-1909 edition of the *Standard Blue Book of Texas* described how "in less than ten years, 237,000 acres of virgin soil has been broken, hundreds of miles of main canals have been excavated, millions of capital invested," calling rice culture's increase "phenomenal." It called upon farmers from the country's northern and western corners, daring them to try the southlands, saying that "[they] will find no great difference in the preparation of rice land." Irrigation was advertised as adaptable and laid out the schedule for rice harvests, "Rice is planted between the 15th of March and the middle of June, April and May being the usual time and yielding the best crops. After planting, little remains to be done until harvest. The value of this year's crop in Jefferson County, practically all of which is milled at Beaumont is about \$2,000,000" (or about \$52 million in today's dollars). The year's profit for rice farmers was \$881,450 (about \$13 million) and the total investment of the county's rice industry was "conservatively estimated at \$4,000,000" (about \$60 million).¹⁴

Such an abundant production of rice was not without consequence. In 1905 rice prices fell and by 1906 the "rice market 'went bust' from overproduction." The southern part of the Neches experienced an invasion of saltwater after

dredging damaged the Port Arthur and McFaddin canals. Farmers feeling the adverse effects of the economy either moved away or moved on to other enterprises. Similar to the way farmers experimented with rice in different plots of land or with different watering methods, they began seeking out different but equally profitable crops. Sugar cane became a worthy competitor as cane syrup sold for a dollar per gallon. Still, many farmers stayed and waited for the bad times to pass.¹⁵

The market's impact highlighted the importance

of forming an organization of farmers "for the purpose of securing general cooperation among [them] and to study and promote better farming conditions... [and] secure reliable statistics." They called themselves the Jefferson County Rice Farmers Association in 1906 and met monthly to discuss "subjects of vital importance," like fertilizers, cultivation methods, seeds, and irrigation methods. In 1908 this organization was considered the "strongest independent organization of rice farmers in the United States" by the *Blue Book* with the "anybody-who-is-anybody's [sic]" of rice farming an active member. The organization provided benefits like advertisements and announcements seeking labor.¹⁶

A "rice kitchen" was established in Beaumont around 1903 or 1904 to educate the community, especially women, about the uses beyond "just putting gravy on it," according to regional historian Judith Linsley. The kitchen was "the brainchild" of William Perry Herring McFaddin, a name made famous by his business ventures in rice farming, milling, and irrigation canals. An advocate of rice, he especially tried to push forth the idea of what he called "rough rice," rice that had a significantly higher nutritional value, but the more aesthetically pleasing polished white rice gained unwavering popularity. Linsley jokes that "somebody needed to send [McFaddin] to marketing school," and maybe the idea, which required less processing, could have won favor. The kitchen, however, was successful among downtown Beaumont housewives.¹⁷

Right before 1920 farmers had trouble with "red rice" growing in their rice crop. Red rice is "genetically very similar to commercial rice...in fact, the same species," but it is treated like a weed and removed because it is considered unacceptable in U.S. markets. At one time farmers jokingly called it "The Bolshevik of Rice" because of its red color and the ongoing Russian Revolution.¹⁸

Before the Great Depression hit, the earlier overproduction of rice resulted in a rice farmers' depression. The farmers began to focus on subsistence crops, grown to eat instead of sell in mass quantities for profit. Nevertheless the Great Depression worsened the smaller, regional rice de-

pression but it was not as big of a shock to farmers already used to the struggle. Linsley remembers seeing a political cartoon depicting a rice farmer and a politician warning about the Depression, with the farmer saying something along the lines of “Tell me something I don’t know!”¹⁹

In 1946 the rice industry changed again in a huge way. This time as a result of N. W. and Fields Mitchell, K. W. Kinky Shane, Gilbert Mapes, and one Stearman bi-plane. Not the first in the country to implement aviation agriculture, they were the first to use it on a rice field. World War II had ended and outdated planes were accessible for veterans Shane and Mapes, who brought the idea to the farming Mitchells. Together the four air-seeded the Mitchells’ rice field and the method became widely adopted. In fact, “they do everything but irrigation” with planes, noted Judith Linsley. While aviation agriculture completely revolutionized the rice industry it also introduced a certain dangerous element to rice farming because it required a spotter on the ground to guide the airplanes in the directions they needed to go. The airplanes flew low to the ground to ensure they hit their targets when seeding and spraying. Sometimes the planes flew so low that they crashed into the spotters, often teenage boys spotting for summer jobs, in collisions that usually proved fatal.²⁰

Such a rich history transformed rice into a culture celebrated by those who work the fields, sell the crops, and eat rice every day. Judith Linsley remembers rice’s constant presence on her childhood dinner plates and calling Beaumont’s contemporary rice mills’ “rice dryers” as a young girl. In the fall of 1900 Beaumont hosted its first large-scale community event, the Beaumont Rice Festival. The festival’s attitude exuded optimism, as did its goal: to make Beaumont, with fields surrounding her at two sides and two local seaports, “the most important city in the south as far as rice is concerned.” Community entertainment ensured the first rice festival’s huge success, but nothing drew a larger crowd than the following year’s festival attraction, an automobile described as a “wonder of the ages” owned by Beaumont local J. C. Ward, who drove



As the post-war economy boomed, so did rice production. Technological advancements allowed rice farmers to churn out more product more efficiently. These sacks of rice are waiting to be shipped from the Port of Beaumont.

Photo courtesy of Tyrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

the “horseless carriage” among parade floats. Exhibits, a festival queen, and a “shop on wheels” were included in the parade line up. Eventually this rice festival evolved into the South Texas State Fair, but the celebratory mood surrounding rice survived through time.²¹



The Beaumont Rice Festival held in 1900 shared many similarities with today’s Texas Rice Festival held annually in Winnie, including parades, pageants, educational booths, and food.

Photo courtesy of McFaddin-Ward House Museum, Beaumont, Texas.

In October 1969 a small but successful gathering, planned by farmers, manned by volunteers and enjoyed by locals of the towns of Winnie, Dayton, Anahuac, and Liberty celebrated the year’s harvest once again, this time as the Texas Rice Festival. Initially, the four towns intended to rotate hosting the festival, but the board of directors voted to select downtown Winnie as the official host location. As the festival’s popularity grew so did the need for accommodating space, and by 1975 the board of directors and Chambers County entered a lease agreement that moved the festival to Winnie-Stowell Park, where it has been held since. The enlarged space expanded festival-goers’ entertainment options, and by 1980 the festival’s itinerary included the Gospel Singing Jubilee and a livestock show, broadened its pageants for all genders and age groups to compete, and began presenting “Farmer of the Year” awards in multiple categories.²²

In a little over a hundred years, David French’s small rice experiment evolved into a modern agricultural empire. Researching the town’s history, one encounters the attitude that Beaumont *was* a flourishing rice town, but arguably it still is. Although rice fields have dwindled from 60,000 acres to 25,000 acres since the seventies and aging farmers can no longer rely on their children, who may want to pursue other careers, to succeed them, Douget’s Rice Mill still greets those driving down Interstate 10 or Highway 90, and the locals clearly have not forgotten.²³ There is an undeniable dedication towards preserving, celebrating, and tasting their rice history.

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