Facts About Flathead County's Agriculture and Suggestions to Prospective Farmers

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This circular is intended to give prospective farmers brief information regarding farming in Flathead County and to offer some suggestions about things to be considered in buying or renting a farm. The reader will find that soils, topography and climate vary considerably from area to area. For that reason a personal study and investigation should be made before purchasing or leasing land. The County Extension Agent, the Vocational Agricultural Instructor of Flathead County High School and the Soil Conservation Service will gladly furnish more detailed information upon request.

Agricultural Background

The first white visitors to the area now known as Flathead County were the trappers and fur traders. These were followed by settlers from Idaho and California who started farming and raising livestock. The first sod is reported to have been broken with oxen in the late 1880’s. Because of a lack of transportation, these early settlers produced only enough farm products for home use and the local market. Much of the settlers time was spent in logging the vast timber resources for the rapidly developing lumber industry, thus supplementing their farm income.

The completion of the railroad in 1891 provided a larger market for agricultural products and brought about a greater expansion in the production of crops.

Flathead County was organized in 1893 and Kalispell became the county seat in 1894.

Location and Physical Resources

Flathead County is located in northwestern Montana, bordered by Canada on the north and Glacier Park on the east. It has 3,313,280 acres of which 170,000 are crop land. See map on pages
8 and 9. Kalispell has a population of about 10,000. Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Bigfork, West Glacier and Somers are the other towns of importance.

With the exception of the area known as Flathead Valley, the county is rough and mountainous. The Flathead Valley, which is the important agricultural area in the county, is about 15 miles wide by 25 miles long and slopes from north to south at a low uniform rate. The elevation at Kalispell in the southern part of the county is 2,959 feet above sea level. Flathead lake, lying in Flathead and Lake Counties, is one of the largest natural freshwater lakes west of the Mississippi. The largest river is the Flathead which empties into Flathead Lake at the southern end of the county. Other important rivers include the Swan, Stillwater and Whitefish.

The soils of Flathead County are extremely variable. Soils in the grassland areas such as those found in the vicinities of Kalispell, Creston and local areas near Whitefish are very fertile and are well adapted to the production of forage, small grain crops and root crops. Much of the soil in the remaining timberland areas has a relatively low productive capacity.

In the Flathead Valley proper and along water courses there are timbered areas which would be suitable for crop production if cleared. The Soils Within These Areas, However, Are Extremely Variable and Should be Carefully Investigated by a Soils Specialist Before Starting to Clear Them for Cultivation. The mountainous parts of the county are timbered and provide some forest grazing.

Climate

The climate of Flathead County is less variable and not as severe as that found east of the Continental Divide. Local weather conditions depend largely upon the elevation and sheltering influences of the adjacent mountains.

The annual average precipitation at Kalispell for the last 53 years is 14.73 inches. Precipitation has varied from a low of 10.39 in 1929 to a high of 20.91 in 1948. Growing season (May 1 to September 30) precipitation has averaged 7.39 inches during the period 1897 to 1948.
Temperatures are generally moderate, with sunshine approximately 50 percent of the time. Records of the Kalispell weather station show an average for the growing season of 58.7 degrees with an average annual temperature of 42.6 degrees. The growing season varies greatly between areas and from season to season. At Kalispell the average frost-free season is 149 days with a range of from 103 to 205 days. At Columbia Falls, only 15 miles from Kalispell, the length of growing season varies from 50 to 137 days with an average of 93 days.

Since most farm crops cannot be produced successfully in less than a 90-day frost-free period this factor often determines the kind and varieties of crops grown in the different parts of the county. Local weather station records should be consulted to determine the adaptability of an area for the production of different kinds of crops.

Types of Farming

The Flathead Valley, situated in the south-central part of the county, is a diversified farming area which is farmed quite in-
tensively. There are about 1,700 farms in the county, most of which are located in this valley. These farms vary in size from small subsistence units to medium-sized livestock outfits. There are some larger range livestock units in several small mountain valleys in the western part of the county. The average size of farm is 230 acres. Many dry farms and stock ranches are larger. Fifty percent of Flathead County's farms are under 100 acres.

Since many of these farms produce too small an income at present to provide a living for the farm family, a considerable number of farmers supplement their incomes by working in the forests, in the lumber industry, harvesting Christmas trees and other part-time occupations.

The production of field crops provides the principal source of farm income. In order of their importance the principle crops are: wheat, barley, hay, oats, potatoes and peas. Winter wheat is grown extensively though many farmers grow spring wheat. Alfalfa is the principal hay crop. Some wild hay is put up each year, and in parts of the county wild hay is the only hay produced.

Sweet cherries are an important crop on the east shore of Flathead Lake. While most of these cherries are grown in Lake County, the Flathead County Cherry Growers' Association maintains a warehouse in Kalispell and markets the cherries from the upper end of the cherry producing district. Apples and small fruits are also grown in the Flathead Valley. These crops, however, are grown mainly for local consumption.

Practically all crops are being produced under dry land conditions. There are about 3,500 acres irrigated by the usual ditch method and 500 acres by sprinkler systems in Flathead Valley. In Pleasant Valley and Lost Prairie in the western part of the county, an additional 3,000 acres are flood irrigated with the spring run-off water.

The Hungry Horse Dam now under construction on the South Fork of the Flathead River will make water available for the irrigation of 43,560 acres in Flathead County. This water may be delivered to the land through pumping plants and irrigation canals
Increased irrigation would result in considerable change in the type of farming and methods of farm operation.

Livestock — Livestock is an important source of farm income with dairying the most important livestock enterprise. The production of dairy products is being steadily increased and is expected to be of major importance as more land is irrigated. Beef cattle are grown on some farms in the valley but are more important in the wild hay producing areas, and along the edge of the valley where grazing land is available. Sheep in small farm flocks is a profitable enterprise on many farms.

Markets

Most all of the hay, feed grains and some of the wheat produced is consumed by livestock on the farms. The surplus wheat is marketed locally through cooperative and privately owned elevators.

Aside from the local demand, commercial potatoes are generally
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FLATHEAD VALLEY

FLATHEAD COUNTY'S AGRICULTURE
marketed in Spokane, the Twin Cities and Chicago. Flathead County produces an excellent quality of seed potatoes which are in demand in Washington, Oregon and California. Most of these potatoes are marketed through local buyers.

Most of the livestock not used for local slaughter is marketed in Missoula, Spokane and the Pacific Coast cities.

There are two creameries at Kalispell and one at Whitefish. These plants handle a high percentage of the milk and cream produced in the valley. Their principal outlet for dairy products consists of the year-around local trade and in summer they supply the camps and hotels in Glacier Park. In addition milk from Flathead Valley is being marketed in Eastern Montana counties. Surplus butter is marketed in Spokane, Seattle and Portland.
The markets in Flathead County for poultry and poultry products are based primarily on Spokane prices. There is room in Flathead County for additional production of high quality eggs to supply local markets the year round. Egg production is highly seasonal causing a shortage of quality eggs for about 6 months each year.

**Public Utilities and Services**

Standard grade schools are maintained in rural areas. Flathead County High School is located in Kalispell. Bigfork, Whitefish and Columbia Falls also have high schools which are served by rural bus lines. A Vocational Agriculture Department is maintained at Flathead County High School.

Rural free mail routes are provided for most areas on generally good, well kept roads which also provide ready access to local market. All-weather roads connect the main population centers. A transcontinental railroad runs through Whitefish and Columbia Falls from which a branch line leads to Kalispell and Somers.

A transcontinental airline provides daily east-west service from the Flathead County Airport located midway between Columbia Falls, Whitefish and Kalispell.

Rural telephone service is available in most areas of the county and many farms are supplied with electric power from R.E.A. or private power company lines.

Cooperatives in the county include the Equity Supply Company, Flathead Electric Cooperative Inc., the Western Montana Dairy Breeders (artificial insemination) Association and the Flathead Woolgrowers Association.

Recreational facilities are abundant and the numerous lakes and streams provide good fishing. Various kinds of big game are found in the mountainous areas while the valleys provide upland and migratory bird hunting. Glacier National Park, famed for its scenic beauty, is only 30 miles from Kalispell.

**Suggestions to Prospective Farmers**

Before thinking seriously about buying a farm, one should be reasonably sure that:
1. He and his family prefer farming to all other ways of living.

2. He is able and willing to do hard physical work, and

3. He has the temperament, experience and training required.

Those who decide to go into farming will want to seriously consider the things which may spell success or failure in their farming operations. Some of these points are:

1. **Location:** You will want to locate in an area where the climate is suitable to you and your family and where you can produce the kind of crops and livestock in which you are most interested. For help in finding out about the climate of any particular area consult the U. S. Weather Bureau, Helena, Montana, or local weather stations.

   You will also want to inquire about the availability of schools, churches, markets, roads, electric power, telephone and mail services, and the people who will be your neighbors.

2. **Size of Farm:** The size of farm depends upon many things including:
   a. The kind or type of farming to be followed. If you are going to run livestock or raise wheat, for example, you will need a great deal more land than if you are going into truck gardening or poultry.
   b. The quality or productivity of the land. Land with a low productivity must be farmed more extensively and in larger units in order to secure sufficient income for family living over and above the costs of operation.
   c. Standard of living you and your family require. If your family is small and has few wants you will require much less income than a larger family which requires more food, clothing, medical care, insurance and recreation.

3. **Land Values:** The value of a farm is determined by such factors as productivity of the land, topography or lay of the land and climate. Kind of farming to which the land is suited,
its location with respect to markets, schools, churches and public facilities are also important.

Judgment plays an important part in appraising the above factors. It is impossible to determine the exact value of a farm. It is possible, however, for the prospective purchaser to make a business analysis of the farm. Average yields and prices should be used in this farm analysis, since the farm will usually have to be paid for over a period of years. The income should be sufficient to pay operating costs, upkeep, taxes and family living and leave enough to pay principal and interest charges on land, stock and equipment.

4. Selecting and Buying a Farm: In addition to the above considerations there are many other things which you should look for in selecting and buying a farm.

a. Soils—The character and property of the soil largely determines the type of farming for which the farm is adapted. You should be careful to check the depth, uniformity and fertility of the soil. A detailed soils survey has been made of parts of Flathead County which gives a great deal of information about soils and their suitability for crop production. Soils maps are available at the County Extension Office and the Soil Conservation Service Office.

b. Water—It is essential that the farm have a good water supply for the home and for livestock throughout the year. If the land is to be irrigated you will want to find out about water rights that go with the land. Is the supply adequate for the entire season and what are the annual charges?

   Land which is poorly drained should be avoided unless a drainage system can be easily established. The cost of such improvement must be considered in determining land values.

c. Weeds—You should determine whether the land is infested with noxious weeds. Perennial noxious weeds are extremely difficult and costly to control or eradicate.
and definitely reduce the value of the farm. There is a Weed Control District covering the entire county.

d. Buildings and Improvements — Buildings which are suited to the farm are essential and can usually be purchased with the land cheaper than you can construct them yourself. Therefore, give careful consideration to the type of buildings and their age and condition. Generally you will want to avoid places which are overbuilt because such improvements are costly to keep in repair and taxes and insurance are usually excessive.

e. Farm Layout—Location of buildings with respect to roads and fields, location of drainage and irrigation ditches, and the size and shape of fields are all important to you in the operation of the farm. A well laid out farm can be handled more efficiently and hence is worth more than one poorly arranged.

f. Taxes—Excessive taxes detract from the value of the farm. Poor farms are often overtaxed as compared with good farms. You will want to find out whether the taxes on the property are in line with those on similar farms in the community.

g. Legal Considerations—Before buying have a definite understanding as to: (1) The property included in the sale, (2) Water rights and ditch rights on irrigated farms, (3) How unpaid taxes and unexpired insurance is to be handled, (4) What liens or encumberances are outstanding against the property, (5) When you are to take possession, (6) Sale and purchase price, (7) Who will pay for getting the abstract brought up to date.

An up-to-date abstract of title should be required. The abstractor's office in the county can furnish this document. There can be considerable expense involved, if the abstract has not been kept up to date. Have the abstract REVIEWED BY A COMPETENT ATTORNEY to determine if the seller can furnish legal, clear title
to the property. The attorney should also check the type of deed to be given.

If possible arrange to have your real estate Mortgage debt run for 20 to 35 years if you have to borrow money to buy the farm. Provision should be made so you can make advance payments or pay off the entire debt at any time if you wish.

h. Well Developed Community—For the average person desiring to get started in farming, probably the best advice would be to get good land in a well developed community.

5. Renting vs. Buying a Farm: If you do not have sufficient funds to pay a reasonable part of the purchase price of a good farm and some additional cash for living and operating expenses, it may be advisable for you to lease a farm and use what capital you have for the purchase of livestock and equipment.

Experience shows that the renter usually makes a better return on his investment than a man who buys a poor farm or one which is too small, or the man who goes too deeply into debt. In addition, the operation of a rented farm will give you a chance to gain experience and become better acquainted with the possibilities in the area without assuming the financial risk involved in buying a farm. It is also possible that by waiting a few years you may be able to buy land cheaper than you can at the present time.

If you decide to rent, the first five points discussed in section 4 above should be considered in selecting a farm.

Assistance Available

Several agencies, whose function is to give assistance to farmers, maintain offices in Kalispell. These include the County Extension Service, Farm Home Administration, Production and Marketing Administration, Soil Conservation Service, Farm Credit Administration and U. S. Forest Service.