

3-1992

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Recommended Citation

Stoltz, Jack (1992) "The Porter Demonstration Farm," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol30/iss1/7>

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THE PORTER DEMONSTRATION FARM

by Jack Stoltz

Probably the most significant event to occur in the Terrell area or in Kaufman County, Texas, took place in 1903 on the Porter farm located north of Terrell on Poetry road. There the cooperative effort by business men, farmers, and a government agent led to the creation of the U.S. Agricultural Extension Service.

Three historical markers at the farm headquarters on Poetry Road proclaim the significance of what happened here. The U.S. Department of the Interior placed one of the markers in 1964, declaring it to be a part of the National Register of Historic Places. Texas A&M University erected a bronze plaque in 1953 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of this farm demonstration. Also, there is a state marker on the site.

A key player in the drama was F.B. McKay, general passenger and freight agent for the Texas Midland Railroad. This was a shortline road with headquarters and shops in Terrell. It extended from Ennis to Paris by way of Kaufman, Terrell, Greenville, Commerce, and Cooper. Its owner-president was E.H.R. Green, son of the fabulously wealthy Hetty Green, known as the "Witch of Wall Street."

McKay had read of the demonstration farms being set up throughout the South by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and wrote to Washington requesting that a similar project be established somewhere along the Midland route. The request was routed to Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, special agent for the department, stationed at Lake Charles, Louisiana. He replied that no funds were available for such a project, and he considered the matter closed.

McKay refused to give up the idea. He wrote Knapp that the Farmer's Institute of Terrell was interested in pursuing the matter and would underwrite any cost involved. Other demonstration farms at that time had been financed by government subsidy. The Farmer's Institute was an association of local farmers and businessmen. Many of the key business leaders of the town were also principal landowners: Matthew Cartwright, J.C. Grinnan, B.T. Childress, and others. With such an offer in hand, Dr. Knapp agreed to meet to discuss the matter.¹

Dr. Knapp had been a circuit-riding preacher and held a law degree. He had been connected with Iowa State College before being appointed special agent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was president of the Rice Growers of America and was considered the father of the rice industry in Louisiana and Texas.²

The meeting with the citizens of Terrell was held at the Odd Fellows hall on the morning of February 25. Dr. Knapp preceded the discussion

with the statement that he had nothing to give them: "If you want to help yourselves, I still work with you, but remember that the best help is self help."

Throughout his relationship with the town leaders Knapp stressed that the purpose of this demonstration would be to show the best methods of cultivation, to promote the diversification of crops, and to teach the importance of crop rotation to protect the soil. Only those crops were to be used which had been proven successful in similar soil and weather conditions.

The plan of operation was for a farmer to be selected who would provide fifty to one hundred acres for the venture and who would cultivate that acreage according to careful instructions. Any profit would be his, while the community was to raise sufficient funds to protect him against loss.

Three farms were offered immediately for the project by Captain J.B. Porter, B.T. Childress, and J.N. Stallings. An additional site was offered later by F.A. Waters and was considered. A local committee was appointed to make the final selection. At the same time a committee was appointed to secure pledges to underwrite any loss to the farmer selected.

At a second meeting held that afternoon Matthew Cartwright reported that \$415 had been raised in only thirty minutes, and more would be raised later. W.H. Flowers, chairman of the selection committee, asked to be given twenty-four hours to make their selection. Dr. Knapp agreed to stay until the next day to work with the committee. He declared that two of the sites would be suitable, but he insisted that the committee make the final choice.

On February 26 it was announced that the Porter farm had been chosen. An advisory committee consisting of W.E. Henderson, B.T. Childress, J.N. Stallings, W.H. Flowers, Kamp McGinnis, J.B. Porter, and F.B. McKay, was appointed to oversee the work. Walter C. Porter was named superintendent of the farm operation.

The Porter farm was located approximately three miles from town, a disadvantage for a demonstration since it would be difficult for visitors to travel so far in buggies and surreys to inspect the progress of the operation. Today that farm is located just one mile north of the city limits and the high school, just a short ride in modern automobiles.

By 1874 John Brooks Porter had arrived in Kaufman County with his bride, Paralee, a daughter of the Moorings of Mooringsport, Louisiana. His farm, located on the outskirts of Terrell, had its beginning by 1877. At the time of Dr. Knapp's visit, Porter was actively involved in its management, but by then he had turned over much of the field operations to his son, Walter.³

Dr. Knapp outlined the basic plan of operation in his report to the

Secretary of Agriculture in January 1904:

An important feature of this demonstration lies in the plan of organization. The people of Terrell, Texas, entered voluntarily into an association to test varieties of seeds, farm methods of cultivation, the application of commercial fertilizers, and other problems of the farm, and they put up their money to guarantee the association against loss. They selected an excellent committee of business men and farmers to carry out the plan. To this committee, composed of: W.H. Flowers, president, B.T. Childress, J.B. Porter, Walter C. Porter, J.N. Stallings, F.B. McKay, secretary, W.E. Henderson, and C.T. McGinnis, great credit is due for their judicious plans and effective services.⁴

At the outset approximately seventy acres were devoted to the project. Dr. Knapp insisted that only those crops proven to thrive in similar soil and weather conditions were to be used. It was announced in the beginning that there would be twenty-five acres devoted to cotton, twenty-four acres to corn, three acres to peas and sorghum, one acre to sweet potatoes, and one acre to kafir and maize. In the final plan, thirty-seven acres were planted in cotton in nine separate plats.

In his report at the conclusion of the demonstration, Dr. Knapp outlined the procedure they followed:

Just before planting the land was disked, cross-disked and harrowed. The cotton seed was planted 1 inch deep in rows 3½ feet apart. The planting drill was followed by a roller which pressed the soil after the seed was covered. The cotton came up in five or six days after planting. May 1 to 3 it was harrowed, and in about 12 days it was side harrowed and cultivated. May 15 to 18 it was chopped to 18 inches, then plowed. It was plowed thereafter once in 12 days until August 1. All plats were cultivated the same.⁵

In dividing the cotton into nine test plats of three and four acres (with plat #2 having fifteen acres), they were able to test results under varying conditions — type of seed planted, use of fertilizer, and use made of the land the previous year. Four varieties of seed were planted, including the Rowden, developed in Van Zandt County. All four were tested without and with fertilizer. The results in all nine plats were revealing and set guidelines for future years. On one test plat the yield was 326.6 pounds of lint per acre. On a nearby field, handled by the old method, the yield was only 166.6 pounds per acre. Not only had they produced more cotton per acre, but the land was left in better shape for the next year's planting.⁶

The land planted in corn was cultivated in the same way. On March 25 it was disked, cross disked, and harrowed. From April 4 to April 8 it was planted, two inches deep, rows five feet apart. The corn came up on April 12 when a heavy hail storm caused considerable damage. Then, on June 15, a severe wind flattened fifty percent of the stalks, making further cultivation impossible. In spite of all these developments there was encouragement from the yield on the remaining stalks. The damage was charged to the fortunes of farming.⁷

When the harvest was completed, Porter announced that he was relinquishing all claims to the money the community had raised to protect him against loss. He reported that he had cleared \$700 more by farming by the new method than he would have under the old. He also announced that in 1904 he intended to cultivate his entire farm of 800 acres following the guidelines they had developed.⁸

As soon as the test results were learned and even the casual observer could see the harvest for 1903, things began to happen that were to have a profound effect on agriculture all across America. In November James Wilson, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, made an inspection tour of the southern states to study the effects of the boll weevil on cotton crops. He was persuaded to put Terrell on his itinerary, and he agreed to visit the Porter farm. A delegation of Terrell citizens met him in Ennis and escorted him to Terrell on the Midland. He was given a royal welcome by the townsfolk and a grand tour of the farm by the Porters and the advisory committee.⁹

Wilson was impressed by the enthusiasm of the citizens and the results of the demonstration, and he instructed Dr. Knapp to expand his demonstration program. Dr. Knapp needed no more encouragement.

A week later E.H.R. Green, president of the Texas Midland Railroad, announced plans to build an experimental farm south of Terrell to develop a strain of cotton that would be resistant to the boll weevil. He confessed that he had been skeptical of Dr. Knapp's work. "Being from Missouri," he said, "I had to be shown." This put to rest the speculation locally that Green had been a silent instigator of the venture along with his company official, F.B. McKay.¹⁰

Green purchased 302 acres of land on the outskirts of town and ordered the erection of four huge hothouses to conduct his experiments. He hired Kamp McGinnis as farm manager and secured Dr. Knapp's promise of cooperation. He stated that he had visited other government stations and had been impressed by the flowers that were made more beautiful with cultural and breeding methods, and he thought the cotton plant could be improved in the same way.

After three years and the investment of several thousand dollars in his model farm, it was converted to "Green's Flower Factory." Soon after, his grand experiment was abandoned.

B.D. Moore, who operated his Hetty farm with convict labor, located north of Terrell in the Sabine River bottom, announced that his entire operation (1000 acres) henceforth would be with the new methods of cultivation.¹¹ Major J.S. Grinnan of Terrell reported that he was setting aside 330 acres on his plantation for a similar project, and other local landowners followed his example.

Encouraged by the success of the Porter demonstration, the broad publicity it was given, and the clear mandate from Secretary Wilson, Dr.

Knapp set up an ambitious program to develop many more demonstration plots near small communities throughout the farm belt of the South. Then, when Congress appropriated \$250,000 in March to fight the boll weevil, his staff was in a position to take on the additional challenge. By then he had moved his office to Houston and had an organization of sixty employees working in the field.¹²

Realizing the magnitude of the program, he concluded that the only workable plan was to work through the county unit. This led, in 1906, to the assignment of the first county agent W.C. Stallings, to Smith County, Texas. In 1911, the Texas legislature authorized county courts to budget tax money in support of a county agent in each county. Soon afterward, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Texas A&M College worked out a cooperative agreement for the college to administer the Extension Service throughout the state. Today it is financed jointly by county, state, and federal governments.¹³

All this was followed by the Smith-Level Act in 1914 which expanded the Extension Service to include home economics and improvement in rural life. The first home demonstration agent was Mrs. Edna W. Trigg in Milam county.¹⁴

The elements that made the Porter Demonstration Farm the catalyst for such a significant change in American agriculture included:

it brought science and agriculture together for the good of the farmer and the consumer;

it was a demonstration in the strictest sense, not an experiment—every innovation was previously tested and proven successful; and

it was a cooperative venture, proving what could be accomplished when neighbors work together. As Dr. Knapp said, "A gift of \$30,000,000 by the national government would not have done the cotton farmer as much good."

There was an ideal blend of a visionary scientist with down-to-earth methods, a progressive farmer who was determined to give the plan a chance to succeed, and community leaders who saw the possibilities and gave their encouragement, time, and money in a pioneering enterprise.

Finally, Dr. Knapp's message was the key to the future of the cotton farmer: improved methods of cultivation, better seed selection, use of proper fertilizers, and an end to the "one-crop" philosophy throughout the South, with diversification of crops and crop rotation to preserve the soil.

The bronze plaque on a base of Texas granite erected in 1953 by Texas A&M University summarizes all that happened here:

Here the first farm demonstration was established jointly by Seaman A. Knapp, Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Porter, the people of Terrell, February 26, 1903. The demonstration of scientific agriculture on the land was the beginning of the Agriculture Extension Service, now known around the world.

“What a man hears, he may doubt;
 What he sees, he may possibly doubt;
 What he does himself, he cannot doubt.”

—Dr. Seaman A. Knapp.



Walter C. Porter

by Julie Cox



Dr. Seaman A. Knapp

by Julie Cox

NOTES

¹*Terrell Transcript*, January 27, 1903. The author is indebted to Essie McGinnis of Terrell for work done in 1928 in compiling available information covering the Porter Demonstration Farm and related events. Her manuscript, filling forty typewritten, legal-size pages, recorded transcriptions of the news stories appearing in the *Terrell Transcript* from 1903 to 1908.

²*Terrell Transcript*, January 15, 1903. Interview with William A. Porter, third-generation owner of Porter farm, August 1, 1990.

³Interview with William A. Porter, August 1, 1990.

⁴*Terrell Transcript*, January 29, 1904.

⁵*Terrell Transcript*, January 29, 1904.

⁶*The Porter Farm*, leaflet published by the Texas Agriculture Service, Texas A&M University, in cooperation with the Kaufman County Improvement Program.

⁷*Terrell Transcript*, January 29, 1904.

⁸*Terrell Transcript*, January 29, 1904.

⁹*Terrell Transcript*, November 4, 1903.

¹⁰*Terrell Transcript*, February 15, 1904.

¹¹*Terrell Transcript*, March 9, 1904.

¹²*Terrell Transcript*, March 15, 1904.

¹³*Terrell Transcript*, leaflet.

¹⁴*Terrell Transcript*, leaflet.