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Rice in Texas

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by MM Pack

For much of the world's population, especially in Asia, rice is the most widely eaten staple food. Forty percent of humans—mostly in populous, less developed countries—depend on rice as their major source of calories and energy. Hundreds of varieties of rice are grown in a variety of climates and terrains across the globe. Throughout history, rice has fed cities and armies, supported empires and rural populations, and commanded mythical and religious significance. In many cultures, rice has been a symbol of fertility (that's why we throw rice at weddings) and in several Asian languages, the greeting "How are you?" translates literally as "Have you had rice?"

Genetic evidence shows that domesticated Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) originated in the Pearl River valley in Southern China between 8,000 and 13,000 years ago. Cultivation spread from China to Southeast and South Asia, and westward across India. The Middle East acquired rice by 1000 B.C., and Moslem conquerors brought Asian rice into Spain in the 8th century and to Sicily in the 10th century.

The second major rice species (*Oryza glaberrima*) was first cultivated about 3,500 years ago in the Niger River delta on the coast of West Africa. Although this species never spread too extensively from its origin, rice was an important crop in coastal West Africa, and the rice-growing skills of West Africans from the “Rice Coast” were instrumental to the success of rice in the New World.

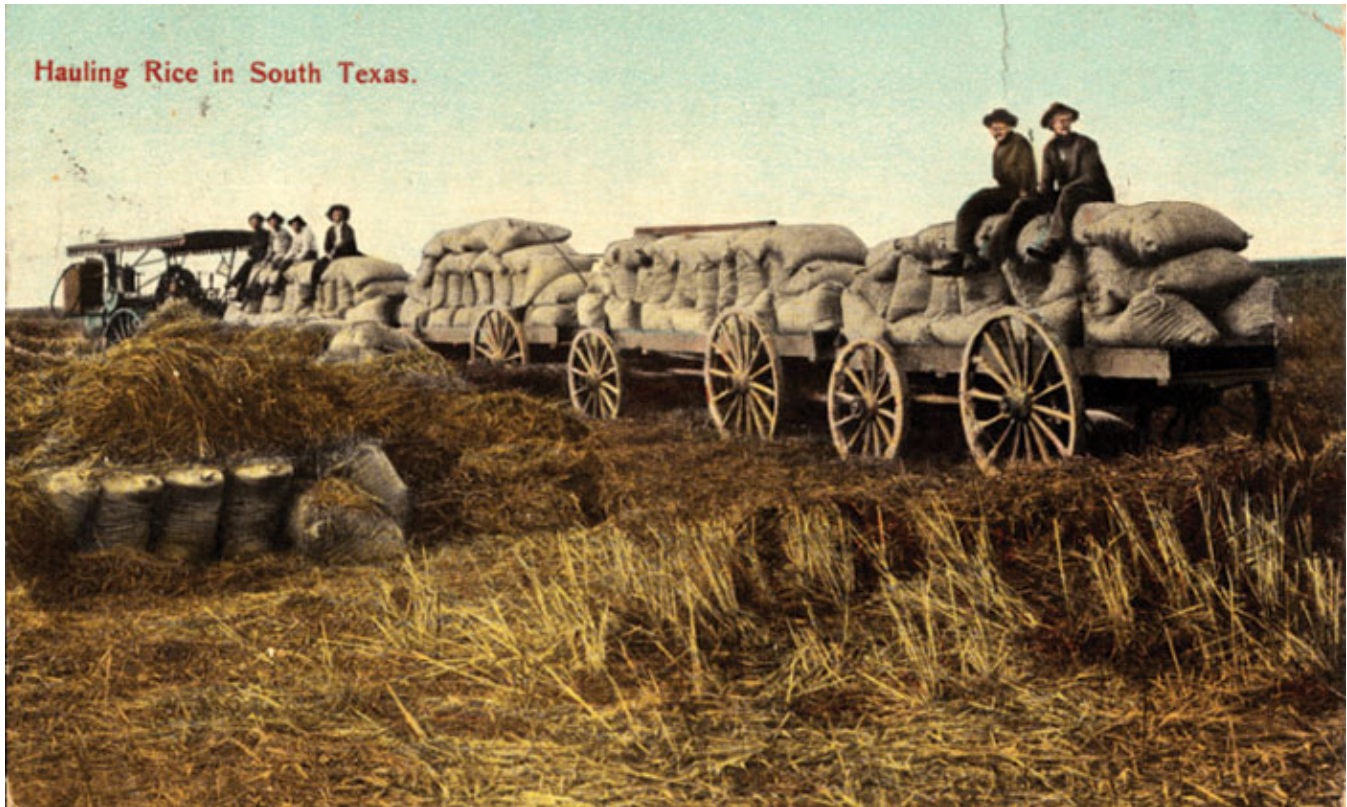
Rice arrived in the Caribbean islands from Europe in the early 16th century, and Spanish colonizers brought Asian rice to Mexico in the 1520s through the port of Veracruz. In what is now the United States, the first rice appeared in 1609, with a trial planting (that failed) in Virginia. Asian rice was introduced to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1685 via a ship from Madagascar (an island off the east coast of Africa colonized by Malaysians); rice cultivation was well established in the Carolinas by the 1690s.

However, early French and British colonists of the region knew nothing about growing and processing rice. Those who did know were the slaves that American colonists imported from West Africa, where rice cultivation had been practiced for thousands of years. Africans from the Rice Coast of Senegambia and Sierra Leone—because of their invaluable rice skills and experience—brought the highest prices in the slave markets of Charleston.

By 1700, West African slaves were growing and processing Asian rice for Northern European colonists on plantations in the American South. Rice was a highly labor-intensive crop, and all processes—planting, irrigating, harvesting, drying, winnowing and milling—were performed by human hands.

By the mid-18th century, rice cultivation had become one of America’s most important businesses—primarily in South Carolina and Georgia. This continued for the next 100 years, until after the Civil War when rice production there dwindled because of several converging factors: There was no more slave labor to perform the work; a series of devastating hurricanes hit the region; and the soil was overworked and depleted. By the turn of the 20th century, the rice industry in those states was essentially dead.

However, during this same period, growing rice commercially became increasingly important in Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas, and later, in Northern California and Mississippi. These remain the rice-growing regions in the United States today.



Rice in Texas

The first record of rice in Texas is from 1828, found in documents from the Austin Colony—the initial Anglo settlement in the northernmost Mexican province, Coahuila y Tejas. Mary Austin Holley, cousin to Stephen F. Austin and a tireless documenter of early Anglo-Texas days, wrote in 1836 (the year of Texas' independence from Mexico), "Rice is already produced in considerable quantities...."

This early Texas rice cultivation was primitive. Small plots were plowed with oxen or mules, seed was planted by hand, and the yield was harvested with

sickles, winnowed in baskets and milled by heavy mortar and pestle—essentially the same practices followed in Asia and Africa for millennia. Since the settlers depended solely on rainfall and not irrigation or managed flooding, the crop was known as “Providence Rice.” If Providence sent rain, there was a crop. If not, not. By the 1850s, however, significant acreage was devoted to irrigated rice production in the southeast part of the state; these Texas rice plantations were worked by slaves until after the Civil War.

Rice cultivation improved in the 1880s thanks to the introduction of wells, canal systems, irrigation pumps, milling machinery and the post-Civil War expansion of railroads to take crops to market. Land was cheap and suitable for rice, and this attracted immigrants from the grain-producing areas of the Midwest. They brought with them combines and mechanized agricultural practices that had been developed for wheat, but worked just as well for rice. By 1900, Texas and Louisiana together produced 99 percent of the commercial rice crop in the U.S.

Beginning around 1900, there was a concerted effort by railroad companies, chambers of commerce, and local land boosters to encourage Midwesterners and other immigrants (see sidebar, Japanese Rice in Texas) to move to Texas and grow more rice. The Santa Fe Railroad, for example, advertised “Homeseeker’s Excursions to Texas and The Rice Belt” from Kansas City and St. Louis at “greatly reduced rates.” The Texas Rice Coast was described as a paradise of inexpensive, fertile land, abundant water and temperate climate, where fortunes could be made growing two crops of rice per year for the world’s markets.

The immigrants came and the rice fields flourished. In 1912, Texas A&M University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture jointly established The Beaumont Cooperative Rice Experiment Station, which remains one of the premier rice research facilities in the world today. By 1915, there were big rice mills in Port Arthur, Beaumont, Orange and Houston. Texas-milled rice

traveled to local markets by railroad, and on to global markets via the seaports of Houston and Galveston.

The commercial rice industry in Texas always depended heavily on international markets; it thrived until there were major market slumps after World War I and later during the Great Depression of the 1930s. World War II brought a resurgence, and the world's demand for rice continues.

Today, Texas is the fifth largest rice-producing state, after Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana and California. The current major rice-producing counties in Texas are Colorado, Wharton and Matagorda, which generate around 60 percent of the Texas rice crop. According to the USA Rice Federation, Texas rice production and processing adds \$200 million per year to the state's economy.

Texas Rice and Texas Water

Traditionally, Texas rice farmers have irrigated their fields with water from one of the Texas rivers that traverses the state northwest to southeast and empties into the Gulf of Mexico—the Brazos and Colorado Rivers in particular. This is accomplished by a complex network of canals and pumps, along with the use of reservoirs and wells.

In the 1930s, the state created the Highland Lakes on the upper Colorado River to store water for use by the upriver cities like Austin, and for agricultural irrigation and industrial purposes downriver toward the Gulf. Rice farmers were enthusiastic supporters of this system; they realized the benefits of flood control and water reserved for drought years. The body that governs the water allocation among users is the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA). (All the river waters in Texas are controlled by similar authorities, answerable to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.)

Since they were established, the Highland Lakes reserves have been adequate for all purposes, and LCRA has released water from the lakes downriver every year. That is, until 2012. As the multiyear Texas drought has become increasingly serious, the water level of the lakes has dropped to a frightening 34 percent of normal capacity, while the water demands of ever-growing cities have increased exponentially (for example, Austin's water use tripled between 1970 and 2010).

In 2012, 2013 and now 2014, LCRA has declined to release water downriver for irrigation. Similar scenarios are playing out on the Brazos and other Texas rivers. This has set up heated and emotional conflicts of interest between upriver cities and downstream rice farmers. It's a textbook example of the competing demands in a state that traditionally has been agricultural and is becoming increasingly urban and industrialized.

The drought and lack of irrigation water for three years running have had serious effects on the state's rice industry. Not only has the impact been far-reaching for farmers and their employees, but for related businesses such as equipment vendors and rice mills as well. Ronald Gertson, a fourth-generation rice farmer in Wharton County and an advocate for rice farmers' water issues, has said that crop insurance is becoming less available each year. On the positive side, farmers are using laser-leveled fields for more precise irrigation and building permanent levees to capture rainwater. Some are trying alternate crops—such as soybeans and sorghum—and pastureland, although the clay soils ideal for growing rice are less suitable for other crops.

So what are the long-term prospects for rice in Texas? Is this crop—fundamental to the development of the state for more than a century—going to just fade away from lack of water? There aren't any easy answers, but Dr. Ted Wilson, director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Beaumont and a world authority on rice production and research, thinks otherwise.

In a panel about rice at the Foodways Texas Symposium this past March at Texas A&M University, Wilson was cautiously optimistic that the industry could weather this drought crisis. “But there will have to be many changes in the way we grow rice,” he said. Research projects around the world are breeding strains of rice that require less water and developing new methods to grow them. Texas rice-growing counties are slowly developing downstream reservoirs to store irrigation water. Perhaps in the future, water desalination processes will become financially viable. Also, as Gertson has pointed out, rice farmers are a tenacious lot. “If and when water does become available again, there will be folks left here to utilize it for rice production.”



Japanese Rice in Texas

At the turn of the 20th century, one of the groups enticed to Texas to grow rice were the Japanese. In the early 1900s, Japanese immigrants initiated at least 30 large-scale, communal efforts to farm rice on the coastal plains around Houston and Beaumont.

In 1902, the Japanese Consul General in New York City was looking for opportunities for Japanese to settle in the United States. At the same time, railroad companies and local boosters were actively soliciting new settlers to come farm on the Texas "Rice Coast." The Consul successfully campaigned in Japan for businessmen to immigrate to Texas and invest in the land and heavy equipment required for commercial rice farming. A 1904 New York Times headline declared, "Japanese After Texas Rice Lands; Believe There is a Great Future for the Industry There."

Among these early Japanese impresarios were a banker, a journalist, a wine merchant, a tea merchant, several former military officers and a prominent politician who was also a university president. To establish their enterprises, they brought Japanese farmers with them who actually knew how to grow rice. Two of the most well-known Japanese communities were the Saibara settlement in Webster, just outside of Houston, and the Kishi Colony near Beaumont.

Before coming to Texas in 1903, Seito Saibara was not only a lawyer and president of two universities; he was also the first Christian elected to the Japanese House of Representatives. Inspired by the economic potential of the Texas rice lands, he purchased 1,000 acres in Harris County and commenced growing rice with about 30 farmers and their families. Saibara's descendants continued farming rice into the 1970s.

Kichimatsu Kishi, formerly a Japanese army officer, had inspected farmland in California, Mississippi and the Carolinas before purchasing 3,500 acres in Texas' Orange County in 1907. By 1908, he and his initial 15 tenant farmers harvested their first rice crop. The Kishi Colony continued to grow and thrive; the farmers

were well-educated and most brought wives and families from Japan. The rice crops were very successful until 1912, when salt water contaminated their irrigation source. Kishi and his farmers switched to vegetables, fruit orchards and cattle, and continued farming until the 1930s.

Significantly for the state's rice industry, the Japanese settlers introduced a new variety of rice to the region. The emperor of Japan gave 300 pounds of Shinriki ("God power") seed rice to Texas; this was a hardy and disease-resistant strain that outperformed the varieties already present. Because of this superior variety and because they quickly adopted the latest technologies, Japanese growers were able to double and triple their crop yields per acre, which influenced how the rest of the state farmed rice.

Although there were some failures, most of the Japanese rice farms flourished in Texas until after World War I when the bottom fell out of the world rice market. The growers' financial prospects did not improve with the Great Depression that began in 1929.

At the same time, the political situation worsened for Japanese-Americans in the United States. Although Japanese settlers at first were welcomed by the government and by their Texas neighbors (much more so than their counterparts in California), they weren't able to become naturalized citizens, and by the 1920s, anti-Japanese discrimination had reared its ugly head. In 1921, the Texas legislature passed the Alien Land Law that banned foreign immigrants from purchasing any more land, and in 1924, the U.S. Congress passed legislation that closed further Japanese immigration into the country.

Economic and social prospects for Japanese-Americans seriously diminished with the outbreak of World War II. Following Pearl Harbor, the federal government set up internment camps across the western U.S., and three camps were established in Texas, where up to 6,000 Japanese-Americans were imprisoned for the duration of the war. However, most of those interned there were not Texas residents; they were transported from California and other

parts of the country. There were fewer than 500 Japanese-Texans at the time; while their lives were made difficult during the war, most did not go to the camps, and some of the families' children served in the U.S. armed forces.

Although most of the Japanese rice farmers sold out or converted to truck farming, some rice farms continued to function as late as 1979. Today there are no longer any active Japanese-owned rice farms in Texas, but descendants of these early farm families populate the Gulf Coast, primarily in urban areas. Several organizations work to document and preserve the family histories of the early Japanese settlers who had such a marked effect on the rice industry in Texas.

The Story of Uncle Ben's Converted Rice

What do a German scientist, an unknown East Texas rice farmer, a U.S. Army quartermaster, a maître d' in a Chicago club and an international candy manufacturer all have in common? The answer is Uncle Ben's Converted Rice—a product that changed the way U.S. troops were fed during World War II. It was developed in 1942 by a Texas company that went on to become one of the largest rice producers on the world market.

For many consumers since the mid-20th century, rice has meant Uncle Ben's Converted Rice in a box graced by a smiling, older African-American man wearing a bowtie. Into the 1980s, the company commanded a full quarter of the U.S. market for dry rice, and its products currently are sold in more than 100 countries. Although a subsidiary of the far-flung Mars, Incorporated conglomerate, and with its rice production plants now in Mississippi, the company's headquarters remain in Houston where the tale of converted rice first unfolded.

The story begins in 1930s London where a German biochemist named Erich Huzenlaub developed a process to improve the nutrition and shelf life of white

rice. In this process, cleaned, unhulled rice is put in a vacuum tank where the air is sucked from the grains. High-pressure hot water containing water-soluble B vitamins is then forced into the grains and steam is applied to seal them. Once dried, the rice is milled to remove the husks, leaving smooth, hardened kernels (now impervious to insects) whose nutrients can't be rinsed away. However, surface starch is removed from the "converted" rice, allowing grains to remain separate when cooked.

Huzenlaub patented his process and began to pursue marketing. Serendipitously, Forrest E. Mars (scion of the American candy family) was in Europe searching for new food manufacturing opportunities. The two found one another and, in 1941, Mars became part owner of the patent.

Meanwhile, in Houston, an enterprising food broker named Gordon L. Harwell was also convinced that white rice nutrition could be improved by pre-milling processing. Although not a scientist, he performed parboiling experiments with a pressure cooker in his garage. Then he learned of Huzenlaub's work and began pursuing him relentlessly. However, Huzenlaub had bigger fish to fry; he was visiting major rice millers in Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi to solicit backers for his process.

As it happened, none of the big players understood the potential of converted rice, even though World War II had started and the U.S. was mounting full-pressure efforts to efficiently and nutritiously feed the troops. Since Harwell was the only entrepreneur who grasped the importance of the process, Huzenlaub and Mars moved to Houston and partnered with him, and in 1942, Harwell's Converted Rice was born.

After successful demonstrations to the Army Quartermasters Corps, the trio opened the initial converted rice plant in Houston in 1944. The sole customer was the U.S. military, which bought all the rice the plant could produce and helped finance a bigger facility. In August 1944, Time Magazine described the "vitaminized, weevil-proof rice for G.I.s," stating that the new plant would

produce 25 to 30 million pounds per year for the army. The research director of the Quartermasters Corps called converted rice “one of the most significant scientific developments of World War II.”

Like many food enterprises developed to support the military, after the war ended, Harwell’s rice company had lots of product and manufacturing processes in place—and no customers. In 1947, Harwell turned his formidable energy toward creating a civilian market. Since Americans outside the coastal South traditionally were not big rice eaters, he needed a story to convince the public that converted rice was tasty, nutritious, quick and easy.

Prior to the war, one of the small-scale products Harwell brokered was something called Uncle Ben’s Plantation Rice—presumably named to evoke the role that African-Americans played in the South’s rice production. The titles “Uncle” and “Aunt” were long used by Southern whites to address older people of color (e.g., Aunt Jemima, Uncle Remus).

The story Harwell told (and Mars, Incorporated still tells today) is that an African-American farmer outside Houston grew award-winning rice of such quality that other growers aspired to match “Uncle Ben’s” rice. Purportedly, by the time Harwell was branding his converted rice, Uncle Ben was deceased, and his surname (and any other facts about him) was lost to history.

Harwell adopted Uncle Ben’s as the reassuring name for his converted rice products. But what to do for a logo? As the story goes, Harwell was dining with advertising guru Leo Burnett at the Tavern Club in Chicago; their brainstorm was to ask the club’s maître d’ to pose as Uncle Ben. This facet of the story is verifiable—the man’s name was Frank C. Brown. When Brown died in 1953, a New York Times marketing columnist noted his role in the Uncle Ben’s story and described his long career in various Chicago restaurants. Harwell trademarked Brown’s image as Uncle Ben, and it remains the company’s logo today.

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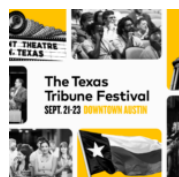
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