# WHEAT FARMING IN WESTERN KANSAS

Meade County, Kansas

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Western Kansas is primarily a wheat-raising section. It is included in the Great Plains area. The land is level and, although the rainfall is not over-plentiful, there is usually enough for the raising of winter wheat. The climate is… moderately cold in the winter and warm in the summer. The soil is rich and black. Although numerous crops have been tried, winter wheat has been found to be the best-adapted crop for this region.

The size of the wheat farms in western Kansas varies a great deal, ranging in size from a couple of hundred acres to several thousand acres. The average farm contains from 500 to 1000 acres, part of which is usually in prairie grass.

The first operation consists of plowing or cultivating the ground after the wheat has been removed. This is done by means of a tractor and one of the following: a lister, a moldboard plow, or a one-way disc plow. The land is tilled from 3 to 7 inches deep the first time over and 30 to 60 acres a day are tilled at this operation.

The land is left alone then until the rain has packed it and the volunteer wheat has practically all come up. Volunteer wheat is that wheat that sprouts and comes up from the wasted seed that has fallen in the field because of the wind, rain, hail, and other weather conditions and because of the shattering that has taken place in the harvesting of the wheat.

The land is then tilled again to remove the volunteer wheat and whatever weeds happen to be on the land. This is done by a one-way disc plow, a lister, a harrow, a disc, a rod-weeder, or other cultivation implements. At this operation the land is not tilled very deep, but only deep enough to kill the volunteer wheat and the weeds that are usually a depth of 2 or 3 inches. From 40 to 80 acres, are tilled each day at this operation.

The number of times that it is necessary to cultivate a field depends entirely upon the weather conditions – especially upon the amount and the time of the rainfall. Sometimes the land is tilled only once, while other times it is tilled as high as five times or more.

The first tilling of summer fallowed land usually takes place around the middle of May to the middle of June depending upon the rainfall, weeds, and the temperature. Summer-fallowed land is that land that lies idle after the wheat has been harvested until the next year. This is the method most commonly used in western Kansas to build up and strengthen the soil as well as conserve moisture. As a rule, the yield on summer-fallowed land is quite a bit more than on land that is seeded year after year, and in times of drought, it is the only land that has any yield at all.

Most of the farmers in this region have a herd of cattle, some hogs, some chickens, and maybe a few horses for the light farm work when it is inconvenient to use a tractor. Therefore, the farmers must have feed and roughage of some kind. They either have to raise it or buy it. Most of them raise their feed if at all possible. The common feed is sorghum of some kind.

Sorghum is usually planted in the latter part of May or early June if there is enough moisture in the ground to bring it up. If there is no moisture then, it is planted later when there is moisture, sometimes in the latter part of July.

As a rule, wheat is planted in September and October if there is enough moisture. Generally speaking, wheat planting starts after the first rain in September. The best time to plant wheat is from the middle of September until the middle of October, provided the weather conditions permit. Some wheat has made a good yield when planted as late as December. Most farmers do not like to plant wheat when there is no moisture, because the wheat will not come up until it rains, and after it rains it forms a crust on the top of the soil which makes it very difficult and sometimes impossible for the young and tender wheat sprouts to break through, in which cases it is necessary to replant the wheat.

Several different kinds and sizes of drills are used to plant the wheat, and, so far it is still a great question as to which is the best. There are a great number of things that enter in the selection of the type of drill desired and each is best suited for some particular reason, but it is hard to tell which is the best when you consider all the conditions and think of the result desired at the same time.

Some kill most of the weeds and volunteer the wheat while drilling. Others can go deeper and get the wheat down to the moisture better and make higher ridges. Some make the rows close together, and others farther apart. Practically every type is used in this region. Sometimes one proves to be the best for that particular season and then the next year another type will be better. Most of the time there is very little difference. After all, there is the item of guesswork which is no small item. How easy farming would be if the farmer could foretell the weather for the coming year!

As a rule, 25 pounds or more of seed is planted on the acre, depending upon the moisture, the land, and the size of the seed. From 50 to 140 acres are planted in one day, depending upon the type and size of the drill used.

The feed must be put up at about the time of the first killing frost which occurs around the middle of October. The feed is mowed, raked, and then hauled in and put in the barn or in a large stack from which it is handy to feed the stock during the winter. Another item of importance is securing water for the stock which, on practically all of the farms, is done utilizing windmills.

During the winter the farmer milks cattle and tends to chickens, feeds hogs, and does other jobs about the place such as repairing machinery, and improving the looks of the farm. Cream and eggs are sold to provide an income during the winter months.

More and more farmers are moving to town for the winter months and living on the farm in the summer until the wheat has been planted. This, of course, is not the desired type because they let the buildings run down and do not have any cattle, hogs chickens, or horses, and they have to buy all of their meat, milk, eggs, butter, and cream. This naturally makes the cost of living higher for them.

During the winter many farmers take cattle and sheep into pasture their wheat if it reaches a sufficient growth, and if they do not have plenty of stock of their own. This is quite profitable as the stock does not cost the farmer anything to keep because they eat the wheat and this doesn't hurt the wheat if it is large enough and the ground is packed so that the stock will not pull up the wheat by the roots. Care must be taken, however, so that the wheat is not over-pastured, and also from pasturing the wheat too late in the spring. Both of the latter will decrease the yield of the wheat. Of course, the farmer usually has to provide water for the stock he takes in. This does not cost him a great deal other than a lot of extra work. From one to 4 dollars a head, a month is paid to pasture cattle. From 2 to 5 dollars a head, a month is paid to pasture horses. From 20 cents to 50 cents a head, a month is paid to pasture sheep. Prices vary according to the abundance of pasture and according to the level of prices and wages in general. If wheat pasture is very plentiful, prices are not so high on pasture. If wheat pasture is scarce then prices are higher. If the level of prices is low, the amount paid for pasture is low also. If the level is high, the amount paid for pasture is also high.

In the spring the farmer either hatches several eggs or buys chicks from the hatchery, and then has his hand full tending them. Some farmers also raise ducks, geese, guineas, and turkeys.

Sometime in the spring the garden is plowed or spaded as the case may be, and the fence repaired to keep out the stock and chickens, and things are put in readiness for the garden. Among the garden plants grown in this region are: radishes, lettuce, peas, beans, pumpkins, squash, cantaloupes, watermelons, cucumbers, beets, carrots, turnips, rhubarb, cabbage, tomatoes, potatoes, sweet potatoes, horse radish, spinach, and other less prominent plants and also a large number of various kinds of flowers. The garden takes up a lot of the farmer's time, but it well repays him for his time and work as well as the cost of the seeds, by supplying a great deal of food that may be canned and used during the winter. Of course, it is necessary to irrigate the garden, but this involves practically no cost, but it requires a lot of time and labor.

In the late spring and early summer the machinery is all repaired. The tractor is overhauled and the combine got in readiness for harvest. A combine is a machine that

is pulled through the fields with a tractor and harvests and threshes the wheat in one operation and spreads the straw and the chaff back on the field.

The combine consists of a great number of parts and many of them are quite intricate. Although the combine is used only several weeks out of the year, a lot of wear takes place on it and it is usually a job of a week or two to repair it and get it in No. 1 shape for harvest, so that it will not be necessary to stop so often after harvest has begun. Sometimes the repair bill on the combine amounts to a hundred dollars or more. The initial cost of the combine is from $1500 to $2500.

An ordinary tractor costs around $1400. You may now get tractors with iron lugs on the wheels or rubber tires… whichever type you prefer. The rubber tires cost a little more, but it has been found that they pay in the long run as you get better service with them… more power, and less fuel consumption. More and more tractors are having rubber tires on them. Combines are also coming out with rubber tires on them.

It takes at least three men to run an outfit during harvest. One drives the tractor, one runs the combine, and one drives the truck that hauls the wheat away – to the elevator or the bin. The truck driver scoops the wheat when it is hauled to the bin where it is kept to be used for seed or to be sold later. If it is kept to be sold later, it is because the owner expects a rise in the price, otherwise, it is all hauled to the elevator from the combine and sold. That is all of it except that which is kept for feed and seed.

The amount of wheat that may be harvested in a day depends upon the weather, the condition of the wheat that is standing up well or lying down, the yield of the wheat, the type and age of the machinery, the number of stops necessary, and whether the wheat is level or in varying lengths, and the amount of straw it is necessary to cut in order to get all of the grain. A great deal also depends upon those operating the machinery. From 40 to 80 acres are cut in a good day's run, and from 1000 to 1600 bushels may be threshed in good wheat.

The yield of the wheat varies from a total failure to 40 bushels per acre. Many factors decide the yield. Some of the most important factors are the seed, the land, the cultivation, the time of planting, the amount of moisture in the soil at the time the wheat is planted, and last but not least, the varying conditions of the weather including the time and amount of hot weather, cold weather, hail, wind, rain, and snow.