

# Bryce had century-long agricultural tradition

❁ From 1861-1977 ❁



*For 116 years, Bryce patients got up every morning, ate breakfast, and went to work in the fields.*

**B**eginning at its inception in 1861 and lasting until 1977 – just thirty short years ago – Bryce maintained a comprehensive farming operation. For 116 years, Bryce patients got up every morning, ate breakfast, and went to work in the fields.

Maintaining over 2000 acres in the western and northern portions of Tuscaloosa County,

well as the mules which pulled the plows and the farm wagons.

Industrial production was not just limited to livestock and row crops. Bryce even had its own coal mine from the 1860s to at least 1902.

“The shaft ran from the rear of the dome to the Warrior River,” according to Bryce historian Steve Davis. “Coal from the mine provided fuel for heat and the fuel to produce gas, which in turn provided the lighting for the famed Kirkbride

design. An accident temporarily stopped production in 1902 and I am not sure if it was ever re-opened.”

As was the case with the field operations, staff and patients worked the mine.

During Reconstruction, river shoals were engineered to promote improved fish production. Fish from the shoals were a part

of the hospital’s food supply, especially in the years immediately following 1865 when all of the hospital’s livestock was stolen by federal soldiers.

Specific on-campus locations where farming operations occurred included the areas now occupied by the university’s soccer field, student health center, and softball field.

The farming operation not only helped feed the patients at Bryce through some very hard times -- especially during the Civil War and Reconstruction – but also contributed financially to the institution’s upkeep.

For example, in the year 1955 Bryce’s farm revenue was reported to be \$52,925.45, with expenses at just under \$35,000. The net profit of \$17,926.69 in that year was vital to the institution’s general fund. It’s also important to keep in mind that this monetary amount came after much of the food was used to feed the hospital’s staff and patients.

After the Wyatt reforms in the early 1970s, public perceptions and legal structures began to change. Many patients had gone to work in the fields whether they wanted to or not. Bryce was going to have to pay the workers minimum wage and couldn’t afford it. Thus, in 1977, all farming operations ceased.

Not everyone was happy about it.

“I remember very well all the people who

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plus its own on-campus fields between the existing main building and River Road, the Bryce agricultural operation raised corn, peas, potatoes, watermelons, peaches, pecans, and butter beans. Cotton was raised as a cash crop. In terms of livestock, Bryce raised its own cattle and hogs (the hogs being housed in a “piggery” behind the main building) as

loved the peace and comfort they found in their work," said Steve Davis, Bryce Hospital historian. On many mornings Davis rode the bus to the fields alongside the patients.

"It was the most meaningful thing in many of their lives. It was the only structure many of them knew. In fact, lots of the patients continued to get up in the morning, carry their hoes to the fence, and crawl under it and go out into the fields on their own. We'd go get them and tell them they couldn't do their work anymore. Oh, it was sad. So many of them just cried and cried. They said it was what they were good at and what they wanted to do. They took a lot of pride in keeping the fields beautiful and putting food on the table."

Times change. Change is hard. Bryce implemented Vocational Rehabilitation in place of the farm work.

One mental health consumer, who asked not to be named, said he thought shutting down the farming operation had serious drawbacks.

"I understand that things sometimes have to happen, but what this did was take away the structure and dignity and routine of many people who loved what they were doing," he said. "Through their farm labors they were being productive citizens. They were making important contributions. Obviously they wanted to keep on working. It was all they had ever known. Their work had strong roots in their family traditions."

"When that was taken away it took away the chance for the patients to get their minds off their troubles. In place of the farm work they had a lot more time on their hands. They too often used that time to sit around and think about their illness. When you are idle and you focus on your illness instead of being active, it very often makes your illness worse and not better. I think that happened a lot when the farming operation shut down."



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