



Minnesota Works Progress Administration:  
Writers Project Research Notes.

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### SWIFT COUNTY

Swift County is located just west of the original hardwood forest area, in the prairie grassland section of west-central Minnesota. Benson, the county seat, located near the geographical center of the county, is 152 miles from the Twin Cities.

In the early 1880's, Swift made a serious bid to become the leading milling center in Minnesota, but eventually was forced to bow to larger centers with more advantageous locations. Today agriculture and dairying are the leading industries. In 1930 they gave the county a  $4\frac{1}{2}$ -million-dollar income. Wheat, formerly the major crop, has become of secondary importance compared with the raising of feed crops, dairying, and livestock raising. Swift has definitely turned its back upon single-crop farming and has instituted a system of diversification and year-round production.

The 1936 State planning board report, in a classification of land productivity, reported better than 75 percent of the land "good", while only about 5 percent was reported as "poor", the remainder being marginal. Drainage ditches have added 54,650 acres to the tillable area.

In 1930 the population of Swift County was 14,735, of which 12 percent <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~ foreign-born. The density of the population is 19.9 persons per square mile.

Monson Lake, in the northeast corner of the county, is a convenient recreational area. It was recently designated a State park.

#### OPPORTUNITIES

With 94.4 percent of the area classified as farm land, there re-

mains very little raw land for development. However, there are a number of good farms in various stages of development that can be purchased or rented, and which should yield the owner or tenant a good income. Climate and soil conditions are excellent for growing a wide variety of crops.

Swift is not inconveniently located in relation to markets. A haul of approximately 150 miles takes the farmer to the metropolitan area of the Twin Cities. From Benson, it is only 31 miles to Willmar, a city of more than 6,000 population and a four-way junction of the Great Northern Railroad; at Ortonville, only 43 miles distant, is located the Big Stone Canning Company, one of the largest corn canneries in the United States.

PHYSICAL SETTING Swift County is surrounded by Kandiyohi County on the east, Chippewa and Lac qui Parle on the south, Big Stone on the west, and Stevens and Pope Counties on the north. In the land surveys it is designated as including Ranges 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, and 43 west, and Township Numbers 120, 121, and 122 north.

Topography To the pioneer who first viewed this region, it must have appeared to be a vast, flat, monotonous stretch of land, unbroken even by trees. The elevations and depressions differ but 10 to 30 feet, and these differences are made by long, smooth slopes. In the northeastern portion--in the Townships of Kerkhoven and of Camp Lake--are a few massive hills, rising 75 to 125 feet above the plain. The highest point in the county is to be found in northeastern Hayes Township--an elevation of 1,150 feet. These hills are a part of the morainic drift which extends from the northwest to the southwest portion of the county. Hegbert Township also has a rolling contour, some of the ridges rising 50 feet above the lakes. These hills extend through northwestern Fairfield and Tara.

Drainage Two rivers, the Pomme de Terre and the Chippewa, and the



numerous streams and creeks that empty into them, furnish the county with an excellent drainage system. The Pomme de Terre flows through the western part, past the village of Appleton, to the Minnesota River. The Chippewa flows through the central part of the county, into the Minnesota River; East Branch, (Little Chippewa), a tributary of the Chippewa River, drains the northwestern part of the county and joins the main stream in the Township of Benson.

Due to the flatness of this region, there are sections which have required artificial drainage. The land so drained totals 54,650 acres. Capital invested in drainage enterprises to January 1, 1930 was \$1,570,046, providing 224.5 miles of ditches and 367.0 miles of tile drains.

Soil Soil of Swift County is very productive. It is clay intermixed with sand and gravel, with the upper 1 or 2 feet made black by decaying vegetation. This black soil gradually changes to a subsoil of a yellowish till, and after 10 to 20 feet to dark blue. Limestone, found in boulders, pebbles, and also finely pulverized, contributes to the fertility.

In certain parts of the county, clay has been found which can be used for the making of bricks. In the 1870's, several acres of land near DeGraff were so used; the topsoil of 6 inches was removed, and the 5 feet of clay beneath provided material for the brick factory.

Climate and Rainfall Inasmuch as there is no weather station in the county, the norms as recorded by the U. S. Weather Station at Milan in Chippewa County are typical of the area. Over a period of 43 years, from 1893 to 1936, the annual precipitation at this station averaged 23.60 inches. The temperature norm over the same period was 42.8 degrees Fahrenheit. Average length of the growing season is about 132 days. The approximate date of the last killing frost is May 16, with the first killing frost occurring

about September 4. Monthly temperature and precipitation norms as recorded in the weather station in the adjoining county of Chippewa are given below.

## CLIMATIC RECORD (43 years)

| MONTHS   | Jan.  | Feb.  | Mar.  | Apr.  | May   | June  | July  | Aug.  | Sept. | Oct.  | Nov.  | Dec.  |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| TOWN<br>Milan<br>(alt.955)<br>Precipitation in<br>inches | .89   | .80   | 1.03  | 1.94  | 2.99  | 3.78  | 3.13  | 3.11  | 2.48  | 1.61  | .99   | .85   |
| Temperature<br>(Fahrenheit)                              | 10.6° | 14.2° | 28.6° | 45.2° | 56.5° | 65.7° | 70.7° | 68.6° | 59.9° | 47.3° | 30.4° | 16.5° |

Annual Precipitation 23.60 inches

Annual Temperature 42.8 degrees

SETTLEMENT AND  
RACIAL ORIGINS

In 1861 a group of Swedish immigrants came to Minnesota and settled on claims located in what are now Swift and Kandiyohi Counties. On Monson Lake during that same summer and fall were built the first two homes in Swift County, by two brothers, Anders Peter Broberg and Daniel Peter Broberg.

After the Civil War was over and fear of Indian outbreaks had subsided, the westward march of pioneers was renewed, and in 1870 the population of Chippewa County, which then included Swift, had reached 1,467.

These early settlers were mainly Scandinavians and Germans, many of them coming directly from the Union Army and others fresh from their mother country. Even today descendants of these two national groups compose the bulk of the population, as is shown below in the table of National Origins as taken from Population Trends in Minnesota by Murchie and Jarchow:

## NATIONAL ORIGINS FOR SWIFT COUNTY, 1930

|                |       |
|----------------|-------|
| British.....   | 611   |
| German.....    | 1,759 |
| Swedish.....   | 1,312 |
| Norwegian..... | 3,263 |



|              |     |
|--------------|-----|
| Danish.....  | 229 |
| Slav.....    | 172 |
| Finnish..... | 4   |

Swift reached its population peak in 1920, with 15,093 residents. In the following census of 1930, the total had fallen to 14,735.

#### COUNTY ORGANIZATION AND SUBDIVISIONS

The county is divided into 21 townships, arranged 7 across and 3 deep. Their names are Appleton, Benson, Camp Lake, Cashel, Clontarf, Dublin, Edison, Fairfield, Hayes, Hegbert, Kerkhoven, Kildare, Marysland, Moyer, Pillsbury, Shible, Six Mile Grove, Swenoda, Tara, Torning, and West Bank.

#### Principal towns and their populations are:

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Appleton, village.....                 | 1,625 |
| Benson, city....(the county seat)..... | 2,095 |
| Clontarf, village.....                 | 180   |
| Danvers, village.....                  | 177   |
| Holloway, village.....                 | 269   |
| Kerkhoven, village.....                | 553   |

Benson, the county seat, was settled in 1870 and by 1875 had a population of 300. In 1876 the United States land office was moved to Benson from Litchfield, which stimulated land business considerably. In spite of the hardships of frontier life, a severe grasshopper plague, and encounters with the fierce Sioux, wheat farming prospered. Benson became the shipping point for a 200-mile area, exporting 260,000 bushels in 1875. Today Benson is a thriving little city with its numerous business houses, churches, schools, modern utilities, and hotels.

Appleton which is on the Pomme de Terre River had its first railroad in 1879 and its first newspaper in 1880. It boasts the birthplace of Governor Benson, a library, three hotels, and a clean orderly city. Racially and culturally, it is fairly homogeneous. At the southwest edge of the city are the county fairgrounds, having a fine set of buildings. Milling is the important industry here.

#### TAXES

The total debt of Swift County and its subdivisions on December 31,

1935 was \$2,015,322.01 and was divided as follows: Townships, \$5,624.61; cities and villages, \$203,262.26; county, \$1,478,233.83; and school districts, \$328,201.31. Outside of the three metropolitan districts, Swift has the largest county debt in the State. The total taxable value of \$11,179,432 in 1931 decreased to \$6,850,616 in 1935. The average tax rate was boosted from 51.45 mills in 1931 to 69.23 mills in 1935, but the actual levy was reduced from \$581,811 in 1931 to \$479,260 in 1935, the reduction in valuation more than offsetting the increase in the tax rate.

Perhaps more than any other single item, the per capita debt of Swift County, which is \$136.77, shows the true tax situation. Again/ it leads the State, with the exception of the three metropolitan districts. The total debt was 29.42 percent of the total taxable value in 1935, while accumulated delinquent taxes were only \$738,554.

The farm mortgage debt of the county was \$2,405,036 (1930), representing 61.2 percent of the owner-operated farms.

#### MARKETS AND TRADE CENTERS

The most important trading centers within the county are Benson and Appleton. The principal markets, however, are outside the county. Willmar, only 31 miles from Benson, provides an adequate market for the products of the Swift County farmer. Falling within the 200-mile trading area of the Twin City metropolitan district, Swift County also finds a primary market there. Through cooperative marketing associations, products are shipped to the cities for further distribution.

#### COOPERATIVES (canneries)

In Swift County the cooperative movement has successfully invaded most of the important marketing fields. Below is a list of the cooperatives, their location and type:

#### ELEVATORS:

Farmers Co-op. Elev. Co.  
Benson Market Co.  
Farmers Co-op. Elev. Co.

Appleton  
Benson  
Danvers

|                             |           |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| De Graff Farmers Elev. Co.  | De Graff  |
| Holloway Market Co.         | Holloway  |
| Kerkhoven Farmers Elev. Co. | Kerkhoven |
| Murdock Farmers Elev. Co.   | Murdock   |

CO-OP STORES:

|                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| Farmers Co-op. Store | Appleton  |
| Farmers Co-op. Store | Benson    |
| Farmers Exchange     | Kerkhoven |

SHIPPING LIVESTOCK ASSOCIATIONS CO-OP.:

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Appleton Livestock-Shipping Association  | Appleton  |
| Tri-County " " "                         | "         |
| Livestock-Shipping Association           | Benson    |
| Clontarf " "                             | Clontarf  |
| Danvers " "                              | Danvers   |
| De Graff Livestock-Shipping Association  | De Graff  |
| Holloway " "                             | Holloway  |
| Kerkhoven Livestock-Shipping Association | Kerkhoven |
| Murdock Farms Shipping Association       | Murdock   |

CREAMERIES:

|                                       |           |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Appleton Co-op. Creamery Association  | Appleton  |
| Benson Co-op. " "                     | Benson    |
| Benson Produce Co. (Independent)      | "         |
| Candy Kitchen Dairy (Independent)     | Appleton  |
| Holloway Creamery (Independent)       | Holloway  |
| Kerkhoven Co-op. Creamery Association | Kerkhoven |
| Murdock Farmers Co-op. Creamery       | Murdock   |
| Swift Falls Co-op. Association        | Benson    |

OIL CO-OP. COMPANIES:

|                      |         |
|----------------------|---------|
| Swift Co-op. Oil Co. | Benson  |
| Swift Co-op. Oil Co. | Murdock |

CO-OP. INSURANCE COMPANIES:

|                              |          |
|------------------------------|----------|
| Kerkhoven and Hayes Ins. Co. | Murdock  |
| Lake Grove Ins. Co.          | Waubun   |
| Shible Ins. Co.              | Appleton |

There is also a joint National Farm Loan Association and Production Credit Association, and one National Farm Loan Association.

TRANSPORTATION

Two Federal highways, US 59 and US 12, pass through the county, as do five State Highways, State 7, 9, 23, 29, and 119. US 12 (paved to Benson), entering the county from the southeast corner takes a diagonal course to Benson, passing through Kerkhoven, Murdock, De Graff and then



goes westward through Danvers to the county border. US 59 (graveled) enters the county on the south as State 7 to Appleton; from Appleton north, it resumes as US 59 to Morris in Stevens County. State 29 (graveled), crossing the county in a due north and south direction, passes through the county seat at Benson. Just north of Benson, State 23 (graded and gravelled) joins State 29 from the east. State 9 takes a northwest course from Benson through Clontarf and passes over the county line. State 9 and US 12 are the only paved highways in the county. State 119 (graveled), entering from the southwest corner, passes through Appleton and runs straight north where it meets US 12.

This network of highways, gravelled and paved, plus the improved, dirt side roads, provide ample means for the farmer to get about quickly in his daily routine of marketing or commuting.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND AGENCIES

Emergency relief expenditures for the period from July 1934 to

June 1935 amounted to \$792,000, with 7,779 persons on the rolls. (Market Data Handbook, 1936. Dept of Commerce)

Churches Of the 25 churches listed, Catholic and Lutheran predominate. They are divided as follows: Catholic, 8; Lutheran, 7; Congregational, 3; Episcopalian, 2; Evangelical, 2; Presbyterian, 1; Swedish Baptist, 1; and Methodist Episcopal, 1.

Schools Swift County is proportioned into 93 school districts, which is an average of 4.4 school districts per township. As in other counties, the State pays 75 percent of school transportation costs in the consolidated districts, of which there are four, Appleton, Kerkhoven, Benson, and Murdock. The average State-aid per pupil is about \$20.00. Of the 88 ungraded elementary schools in the county, 40 have a 7-month term. There is a senior high-school in each of the following towns: Holloway, Benson, Appleton, Murdock, and Kerkhoven.

## FAIR

The Swift County Fair is held at Appleton during the week of August 19. It is sponsored by the Swift County Agricultural Society.

## FARM INCOME

Originally a wheat-producing county, Swift has more recently seen the possibility of increased income through diversified agriculture. The crop year of 1929 brought Swift County a \$4,593,281 income, of which \$2,639,351 or 57.45 percent was derived from the sale of livestock and livestock-products. Field crops accounted for only 29.60 percent of that income. Swift County derives a larger percent<sup>age</sup> of its income from crops than does the State as a whole, the percentage for the State being 21.38. The State average income derived from livestock and livestock-products is 64.07 percent.

## CENSUS REPORTS

A statistically average farm in Swift County consists of 236.8 acres, and is valued at \$8,938, an average of \$37.74 per acre, according to the U.S. Agricultural Census. Cattle and poultry on this farm include 15 head of cattle, 8 of which are milk cows; 7 hogs; 5 horses, and a flock of 75 chickens. Every sixth farm has 24 sheep.

Acreage in production of field crops is as follows: Corn, 49 acres, 70 percent of which is harvested for grain; oats, 50 acres; barley, 22 acres; flax, 10 acres; and every fourth farm will have 60 acres in wheat. Occasional crops of potatoes and rye will be found. Each farm has 32 acres in hay, 36 acres in pasture, and 8 acres of idle or fallow land. Farmyards and buildings occupy the remaining acreage.

## AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| Population, 1930 (County).....          | 14,735        |
| Area.....                               | 474,240 acres |
| Population density per square mile..... | 19.9 (1930)   |

County Seat -- Benson

Farm Development

|  |               |
|--|---------------|
| Number of farms, 1935.....                 | 1,890         |
| " " " " , 1930.....                        | 1,844         |
| Land in farms, 1935..... 94.4 percent..... | 447,599 acres |
| Average size of farms 1935.....            | 236.8 acres   |
| " " " " 1930.....                          | 242.5 acres   |

Farm Values

|                                     |           |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Average value per acre, 1935.....\$ | 37.74     |
| " " " " , 1930.....                 | 58.21     |
| Average value per farm, 1935.....   | 8,938.00  |
| " " " " , 1930.....                 | 14,116.00 |

The Tax Picture, 1935

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Total taxable value, 1935.....\$                       | 6,850,616.00 |
| Total general tax levy, 1935.....                      | 479,260.00   |
| Average tax rate, 1935.....                            | 69.23 mills  |
| Total debt of county and subdivisions, 1935.....       | 2,015,322.01 |
| Per capita debt, 1935.....                             | 136.77       |
| County bonds.....                                      | 1,478,233.83 |
| The total debt was 29.42 percent of the taxable value. |              |
| Accumulated taxes.....                                 | 738,554.00   |

Tenancy and Mortgage

Farm mortgage debt, 1930 (farms operated by owner)...\$ 2,405,036.00  
 Of the farms operated by owners, 61.2 percent were mortgaged.  
 Tenants occupied 49.3 percent of the farms in 1935.



Farm Income - 1930 Census

Average farm income .....\$ 2,490.93

## Sources of income:

|                      |              |        |         |
|----------------------|--------------|--------|---------|
| All.....             | \$ 4,593,281 | 100.00 | percent |
| Crops.....           | 1,358,813    | 29.60  | "       |
| Livestock sold.....  | 1,636,505    | 35.62  | "       |
| Livestock products.. | 1,002,846    | 21.83  | "       |
| Forest products..... | 4,211        | .09    | "       |
| Farm products used.. | 590,906      | 12.86  | "       |

Livestock Holdings - 1935

| <u>Animals</u>                 | <u>Farms reporting</u> | <u>Number</u> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Milk cows                      | 1,774                  | 14,706        |
| Cattle and cows of all<br>ages | 1,801                  | 27,650        |
| Swine                          | 1,618                  | 13,305        |
| Sheep                          | 278                    | 6,773         |
| Mules                          | 86                     | 220           |
| Horses                         | 1,737                  | 9,617         |

The 1934 Crop (U. S. Census)

| <u>Crops</u>  | <u>Farms reporting</u> | <u>Bushels</u> | <u>Acres</u> | <u>Tons</u> |
|---|------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|
| Wheat   | 215                    | 9,904          | 4,344        |             |
| Oats  | 188                    | 25,192         | 5,998        |             |
| Barley  | 120                    | 7,912          | 1,967        |             |
| Rye   | 6                      | 259            | 123          |             |
| Flax  | 226                    | 10,176         | 4,236        |             |
| All hay and sorghums<br>for forage  |                        |                | 48,485       | 18,398      |
| (The ravages of drought are evident when the latter figures<br>are compared with the figures for the crop year of 1929<br>which show 56,071 tons produced on 58,881 acres.) |                        |                |              |             |
| Corn  | 1,642                  | 75,966         |              |             |
| Irish potatoes  | 649                    | 17,722         | 767          |             |

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