**The Agricultural Golden Age -1900-1920**

The American Agricultural Golden Age is a period of time in American history when the average gross income of farmers more than doubled and the value of their farms more than tripled. This golden era was influenced mostly by legislation passed by Congress and by continual advances in farm equipment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There were three major pieces of legislation that contributed to the success of agriculture during this period. The first piece of legislation that would eventually lead to the Golden Age was The Homestead Act of 1862. The Act was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln, giving any U.S. citizen or citizen seeker a way to claim 160 acres of government land, as long as they had never fought against the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) During this time, when many immigrants came to the United States and so were able to get land and cultivate that land through the new act. This act gave mostly rain prone land or low-lying land that ran along rivers. A new act, the Enlarged Homestead Act, was signed into law in 1909 and let citizens lay claim to 320 acres of very dry land, mostly in the West. The final piece of legislation that contributed to the success was the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916, giving 640 acres of land to people who wanted to use the land for ranching. In all about 10%, or 270,000,000 acres, of U.S. land was given as homesteads.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The final influence on the agricultural success at the time was the invention of the tractor. The first engine-powered tractor was built in 1868 and was steam powered and only operated by one man, a step up from earlier tractors.[[4]](#footnote-4) The invention of this steam-powered tractor led to the invention of the first gas-powered tractor by John Froehlich, an Iowa farmer, in 1892, allowing him to plow 72,000 barrels of grain that fall. When he tried to sale these tractors, however, only 2 were sold due mainly to the high price of them. He eventually quit the business, and the Waterloo company used his design to advance more tractors.[[5]](#footnote-5) Froehlich’s design inspired much of the tractor industry, including the John Deere two-cylinder tractor. As the popularity of machine operated farming equipment grew, people were able to farm their lands faster and this, paired with the legislation, equaled great success for agriculture.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The success of the golden age was great but also meant the farmers were hit harder and earlier in the Great Depression. Because farmers had seen a large increase in average income, they had predicted this to continue and had major debt and expenses from purchasing this new farm equipment which caused them to be hit much harder than many others. In addition, the excess plowing by amateur farmers on very dry land led to the Dust Bowl of the 30s. Homes, lands and crops were damaged and covered by eroded soil and farmers now struggled to make ends meet.

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