

SUTTON COUNTY. Sutton County is in west central Texas. Its geographic center is at 30°31' north latitude and 100°38' west longitude, 135 miles northwest of San Antonio and seventy miles south of San Angelo. Sutton County covers 1,455 square miles on the western edge of the [Edwards Plateau](#); elevations range from 1,900 to 2,300 feet. Soils are generally shallow and stony, though deep loams are found along watercourses and irregular outcrops of limestone. The most important of the county's natural resources are moderate-sized oil and gas reserves, which came into significant production in the late 1960s and 1970s. Though range grasses constitute the most common form of vegetation, the area is distinguished from a true grassland by the existence of isolated stands of shin oak, juniper, and mesquite. The region was originally home to a wide variety of game animals and predators, most significantly deer, quail, dove, wild turkey, plover, coyotes, timber wolves, and bobcats. Periodically herds of antelope and [buffalo](#) wandered onto the Edwards Plateau, though they were not native to the region. The single most significant factor in the development of Sutton County has been the scarcity of water. Precipitation averages just twenty inches annually, and severe droughts occur regularly. Meager rainfall is further depleted by rapid evaporation due to the plateau's constant, dry winds. Consequently, the county is completely dependent for its water supply upon deep wells that tap the Edwards Trinity Aquifer. Sutton County's climate is that of a subtropical steppe, characterized by wide daily temperature fluctuations. The January average low is 32° F, and the July average high is 96°. The growing season is 235 days long. Generally, the county receives about two inches of snow each year.

Human beings have inhabited the southern Great Plains and Edwards Plateau for at least 10,000 years. Archeological digs indicate that Paleo-Indians ranged across the area from about 9500 B.C. until around 5000 B.C., at which time their culture was supplanted by the earliest stage of the Archaic culture. One significant archeological discovery is the Next Week Site, just south of Interstate Highway 10 in the eastern part of the county. The site, discovered and excavated in early 1975, is a burned-rock midden containing evidence of mortars and pestles, as well as other tools connected with the processing of plant

foods. Europeans first contacted Indians of the southern plains in the sixteenth century. At that time the groups who roamed the Edwards Plateau were known collectively as the Tonkawas. In the seventeenth century, the Lipan Apaches moved into the region and quickly forced the Tonkawas to restrict their hunting and gathering activities to Central Texas. The period of Lipan supremacy was brief, however. By the mid-nineteenth century competition for resources again heated up as the Comanches migrated southward onto the Texas plains. They subdued the Lipan Apaches and within a generation had all but sealed off the bison-rich [Llano Estacado](#). The Lipans, forced to restrict their activities to the Edwards Plateau, which was meager in plant resources and nearly devoid of bison, attempted to supplement their diet by raiding local herds of domesticated cattle. The Texas government, in accordance with its general Indian policy, responded by trying to drive the Lipans from the state. To this end, the state built a series of forts across the Edwards Plateau, including Fort Terrett in the eastern part of what was to become Sutton County. This policy, combined with declining animal herds, disease, and Comanche aggression, drove the Lipans from Texas by the end of the [Civil War](#). By the time white ranchers discovered the potential of the Edwards Plateau as a grazing area, it was virtually uninhabited.

Anglo-Americans began moving into the area in the early 1870s. Initially attracted by the availability of water in various places along the Devils River, ranchers were soon drawn by the rich, unoccupied pastureland of the western Edwards Plateau. So successful were the herds that grazed in Sutton County, then a part of Crockett County, that by 1878 the region was known as Cattleman's Paradise, a nickname that was soon changed to Stockman's Paradise, since both sheep and cattle ranching were important. With the tremendous growth of the cattle industry in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the available rangeland across Texas was occupied quickly and in time fenced off into ranches. This trend was reflected in Sutton County but was slowed by the lack of accessible water. In 1882 a traveler reported that the Birtrong Ranch, which depended on Wall's Well, a seep discovered by Tom Birtrong and Ed Wall in 1881, was the area's only ranch. By 1885 there were eleven, all but one located near the region's few sources of groundwater. That one exception was

the ranch of A. J. Winkler, who in 1884 had drilled a well, successfully tapping the water table. Henceforth, ranching on the Edwards Plateau was closely tied to well water, its extraction made easier by the development of the wind-powered water pump and the horse-powered drill. Increasing numbers of ranchers moved to the area and, in order to protect their water supplies as well as their range grass from roaming herds, began to fence off their holdings. By 1898, scarcely ten years after the erection of the first fence, almost all of the area's 120 ranches were fenced. The discovery of a reliable water supply also stimulated settlement. The area around Winkler's Well became a small frontier town, which by 1887 had twenty families and a number of buildings, including a Masonic lodge that doubled as a schoolhouse. At about the same time Charles G. Adams, a merchant and sometime rancher from Fort McKavett, moved to the area and settled two miles north of Winkler's Well. Adams seems to have moved into the area with the intention of founding a town and perhaps profiting from land sales. Initially, his plan seemed doomed to failure, since the site, which he named Sonora, had an insufficient water supply to attract many settlers. In 1887 the Texas legislature established Sutton County, which was carved out of eastern Crockett County and named after Confederate officer [John S. Sutton](#). The establishment of Sutton County set off a new round of competition between the interests at Winkler's Well, now called Wentworth, and Sonora, over the location of the county seat. Initially Wentworth had the advantage, but in 1889 Charles Adams was successful in drilling a well on the Sonora courthouse property. With its water supply assured, Sonora proceeded to entice settlers with land grants. This program proved decisive, for by the time of the 1890 election Sonora had a large enough population to assure that it, not Wentworth, would be the county seat. By 1900 Wentworth had ceased to exist.

The 1890s were a period of rapid growth for Sutton County. Sonora established itself as the principal marketing and social center. By 1894 there were three to six horse-powered well-drilling rigs operating around the county at one time. Between 1890 and 1900 the county's cattle inventory surged from around 11,000 to more than 63,000. Numbers of hogs, mules, goats, chickens, and horses also showed a dramatic increase during the 1890s. Sheep totals, however, declined from 136,372 to 98,281. The first three decades of the twentieth

century saw the end of the leased range, its replacement by privately owned ranches, and a dramatic growth in the size of herds. The greater availability of water, the movement to fence off landholdings, and the low price of land stimulated the growth. In 1900, for example, state school land sold for a dollar an acre, roughly the price of eight pounds of wool. Land purchases were made even more feasible by the introduction of 3 percent forty-year loans. Consequently, large ranchers were able to purchase virtually all of Sutton County's lands. Even though the [Homestead Law](#) and its amendments limited ranch sizes to four, or at most eight, sections, ranchers were able to get around these restrictions by taking up their full quota under the law and leasing or merely occupying additional sections. On the other sections, generally under the control of railroads or absentee landlords, the large rancher encouraged his cowboys, herders, or laborers to file for ownership under the law. Though technically independent, these small holdings were effectively part of the large ranch owners' ranges. By the early 1920s 58 percent of the county's ninety-seven ranches were larger than eight sections. Of those, ten ranchers controlled lands in excess of thirty-two sections each, some 672 sections altogether, over one-third of the county's land area. As holdings grew larger, so also did herds. In Sutton County, unlike much of the Texas plains, sheep and later goat ranching dominated the local livestock industry. From 1900 to 1930 the number of sheep increased from 98,281 to 364,958. Similarly, the goat population grew from just 12,197 in 1900 to 95,585 three decades later. At the same time the number of milk cows declined from 901 to 142, while all other cattle decreased to 28,664 from a high in 1900 of 62,738. To some extent the increasing dominance of sheep herding resulted from the introduction of mechanical shearing in 1901. This labor-saving development allowed sheep raisers to expand their herds to the maximum that the land could support. Goat raising owed its dramatic growth to the importation of the Angora variety in the early 1900s. This stimulated the development of a local mohair industry, which, combined with the wool harvest, established Sutton County as an important center in the production of animal fibers (*see* [WOOL AND MOHAIR INDUSTRY](#)). So important was this industry that in 1916 the Thirty-fourth Texas Legislature, in association with Texas A&M University, established an

experimental station, dedicated to researching livestock diseases and methods of improving production, on five sections of land in the central part of the county. This project continues to provide a valuable service to ranchers in Sutton County and across the state (*see* [TEXAS AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION](#)).

As the livestock industry became more firmly established, residents looked for ways to transport their products to markets outside the county. The movement to connect Sonora with San Angelo, Del Rio, and the outside world by rail began in 1908 with a proposal from the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railway. However, from 1908 until its demise as an independent company in 1928, while the Orient line drifted in and out of bankruptcy, virtually no progress was made on the project. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe acquired the Orient line in 1928 and by 1930 had succeeded in completing the San Angelo-Sonora portion of the original project. This railroad served Sonora and Sutton County until 1977, when declining profits forced the Santa Fe line to close the Sonora-San Angelo connection. In general, settlement in Sutton County has been decentralized, reflecting the predominance of ranching. Yet its only city, Sonora, traditionally has been an important population center as well as the locus of social, economic, and political activity. After a disastrous fire in 1902, the town enjoyed a quarter century of growth, from just over 700 to nearly 1,800 residents. Whereas only about 40 percent of Sutton County's inhabitants were residents of Sonora in the first decade of the twentieth century, by 1930 well over 60 percent called themselves Sonorans. By 1930 Sonora had taken on a distinctly urban look, with stone buildings, a modern water-supply system, a number of churches, a new school building, two newspapers, a well-established bank, and several prosperous mercantile establishments.

But growth was not without its consequences. By the late 1920s years of overgrazing had resulted in serious soil erosion, and destruction of the natural ground cover effectively prevented the land from holding the sparse precipitation. As a result, in dry times water was almost nonexistent, and in wet times violent runoff from the streams swept away the shallow layer of topsoil. Runoff in the Devils River valley eroded so much topsoil that this region, one of the most prolific pecan-producing areas in Texas, became an arid, treeless,

semidesert. Overgrazing had the further consequence of driving away wildlife, as deer, quail, and other animals were unable to compete with man and domesticated animals for the increasingly scarce resources. Moreover, concerted attempts to exterminate natural predators, principally wolves, coyotes, and bobcats, had largely succeeded by the mid-1920s.

It was the onset of the [Great Depression](#), however, rather than destructive land-use patterns, that finally put a halt to Sutton County's rapid growth. In areas that depended upon production of food and animal products for livelihood, the contraction of the money supply after the stock market crash was compounded by disastrously low commodity prices. In 1923 wool was selling for fifty-five cents a pound, after reaching a high of seventy-two cents a pound in May 1920; but the price dropped to nineteen cents by 1929 and just three to six cents in 1932, if it could be sold at all. Lambs, worth between two and three cents a pound, and calves, nearly impossible to sell even at four to six cents a pound, were almost without value—a disaster for indebted ranchers. As a result, under the direction of the [Agricultural Adjustment Administration](#), ranchers were persuaded to destroy and bury much of their livestock. It was hoped that reducing the supply would raise commodity prices. Despite the cruelly ironic spectacle of destroying sources of food while millions of Americans went without adequate nutrition, the AAA's program did stimulate a modest recovery. Wool prices had risen to eighteen to twenty-five cents a pound by 1933 and continued to rise, albeit sporadically, for the rest of the decade. However, even with the nearly full recovery that followed [World War II](#), the livestock industry in Sutton County never again approached its predepression rate of growth. In Sonora the impact of the depression was less severe. City population remained steady, and relatively few businesses failed. To some extent Sonora's continuing economic strength resulted from the establishment of the Sonora Wool and Mohair Company in 1930. This enterprise, a cooperative venture among county livestock managers, helped to stabilize commodity prices while providing Sonora with a viable economic base. The Sonora Wool and Mohair Company continues to handle most of the region's production of animal fibers and sponsors a variety of community events. Sonora also benefited from federally sponsored relief programs. [Work Projects Administration](#) endeavors

included the construction of a fire station and city hall and modifications to the municipal waterworks and light plant. In 1936 the city was able to complete the L. W. Elliot School.

After World War II the county entered a new era of economic growth. This prosperity was especially pronounced in Sonora, which between 1955 and 1961 constructed a hospital, a municipal airport, and a flood-control project consisting of thirteen dams. At the same time the county's [oil and gas industry](#), a small-scale project since its beginnings in the 1920s, began a period of steady growth that peaked in the mid-1970s. In the late 1950s the county was already exporting from 25 to 38 million cubic feet of natural gas annually, and between 1948 and 1961 Sutton County's total crude oil production topped 104,000 barrels. In 1966 revenues from petroleum production approached \$1 million, and many of the county's 3,738 residents were employed in the oil and gas industry. Still more benefitted indirectly from the industry's contribution to the economy. In the mid-1970s, however, the Arab oil embargo and the previous undervaluation of oil lands stimulated an explosion of oil and gas exploration in Sutton County. As oil firms moved to Sonora and drilling rigs sprang up across the county, the economy underwent a drastic expansion. Whereas receipts from mineral (mainly natural gas) extraction totaled roughly \$3.2 million in 1972, by 1975 this figure had jumped to nearly \$41 million. At the same time over 400 miles of pipelines were constructed. Production peaked in 1977, when revenue topped \$63.3 million. Subsequently, as price controls and market saturation rendered exploration relatively unprofitable, Sutton County's petroleum industry entered a period of decline. The oil boom did have lasting consequences, however. Most significantly, the favorable economic conditions attracted large numbers of people, especially to Sonora. From 1970 to 1977 the city's population grew from 2,600 to an estimated 6,000. The city was confronted with a severe housing shortage, and many oil-industry laborers were forced to live in mobile homes. The oil boom also enabled Sonora to upgrade its city utility system and schools.

Perhaps the most important development in Sutton County in the postdepression era, however, has been a gradual change in land use. In 1946 the state established the Edwards Plateau Soil Conservation District, which was

composed of all of Sutton and part of Edwards County and was operated by five ranchers, who identified problems, outlined possible solutions, and requested assistance from state and federal agencies. Soil conservation was stimulated further by the severe drought of 1950–56, which virtually cleared the range of grass and forced ranchers to reduce their herds substantially. By the late 1950s the district had devised soil and water conservation plans, as well as programs aimed at range improvement, brush control, water development, cross fencing, range pitting, and seeding. The association also helped sponsor a flood-control project and continues to fund a variety of contests designed to aid schoolchildren interested in ranching. The movement toward protecting and reinvigorating Sutton County's natural landscape was paralleled by efforts to reintroduce wildlife. In 1938 ranchers formed the Edwards Plateau Game and Wildlife Management Association. This organization, like the Soil Conservation District, sponsored educational programs to promote game conservation and worked to secure legislation that would encourage efforts at restoring the region's ecological balance. Deer were released in the county in 1940 with the provision that the area be made a game preserve for ten years. Throughout the 1940s ranchers obtained deer from private sources and continued to stock the land. So successful was this program that by 1950, with a deer population estimated at seventeen per square mile, hunting was reintroduced. Since then the deer population has continued to grow, and hunting has become a major source of income for Sutton County.

Despite the importance of hunting and the brief period of petroleum prosperity, however, the Sutton County economy continues to be based on sheep and goat products. In 1950 sheep numbered 281,703, and there were some 95,680 goats, almost all of the Angora variety. By 1969, however, competition from synthetics and range-conservation efforts had combined to force a reduction of sheep to 97,476. Goats remained steady at 94,960. By 1982 only 60,800 sheep grazed in Sutton County. The number of goats had also decreased, though not so sharply. Nevertheless, in the 1980s the county ranked fourth in the state for Angora goat and mohair production and tenth in sheep and wool. County ranchers also keep some cattle, but, at about 25,000 head since the end of World War II, the county is not an important beef-producing area. Agriculture is

relatively unimportant to the local economy. Aridity and shallow, stony soils make farming so difficult, expensive, and harmful to the environment that as of 1982 less than one percent of the county's land was under cultivation. Crops produced are limited to small quantities of cereal grains, mainly wheat and sorghums, and pecans. On several occasions in the twentieth century attempts have been made to grow cotton, but all have ended in failure. Also unsuccessful have been attempts to cultivate grapes and several types of fruit trees.

Ethnically, most of Sutton County's residents are of Mexican or Anglo-American stock. From 1890 through 1940 Mexicans were by far the largest group of immigrants entering Sutton County from outside the United States. By 1980, 2,071 of the county's total population of 5,130 claimed Mexican ancestry. In 2014 the population was 3,972. About 37.8 percent were Anglo, 0.9 percent African American, and 61.1 percent Hispanic. Until after World War II the county vote was solidly Democratic in national elections, aside from supporting Herbert Hoover in 1928. In 1952, however, the county went for [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), and since then only in 1960 and 1964 have Democrats carried Sutton County. Sonora continues to be the center of community activity, with a population of 2,999 in 2014. Just outside of town are the [Caverns of Sonora](#), some seven miles of caves with exotic limestone formations, which are visited by more than 7,500 persons annually. The caverns and hunting account for most of the county's tourist traffic. *See also* [GOAT RANCHING](#), and [SHEEP RANCHING](#).