The Montague County Grape Experiment Station

The Texas Agricultural Fruit Research and Demonstration Farm was established by the Texas State Legislature in 1937. On May 29, 1937, the Montague County Commissioners Court granted a 25-acre easement to Texas A&M University on a portion of the existing County Poor Farm for the research station, which began operation on January 1, 1938. The County authorized without cost the Poor Farm workers for plowing and cultivating the first season until a small tractor was acquired in the fall. During the first year, an office and laboratory building was constructed out of native sandstone, and a water well was drilled and pump installed. By November, the County had added 31 additional acres to the Grape Experiment Station, making it possible to extend the work to include additional horticultural research. The Poor Farm closed in 1939, and the remaining farm property not included in the 56 acres for the Experiment Station was leased or sold by the County. By 1940, the station had 323 kinds of grapes growing, a young fruit orchard with several varieties of peaches, plums, apples, and pears, and plans were underway to secure a grape juice bottling plant for the area (which never came to fruition). In 1940, the WPA constructed a home for the caretaker.

In 1947, the Montague Fruit Experimental Station began hosting an annual 2-day Grape Festival to showcase the work underway in developing new and better methods of growing fruit crops. Farmers toured the Station in small groups, and the event culminated in the selection of a festival queen and her court. Several thousand people toured the station during these events, including 16 county agents in 1958, the largest aggregation of county agents ever to visit one experimental farm.By 1949, over 400 varieites of grapes, some 90 different varieties of peaches, and a number of plum, apple, pear and berry varieties were under observation, but grapes were the chief interest of the station since all grape experimentation for the State of Texas was centered here, and Montague was the leading grape producing county in Texas. In 1951 another home was constructed for the Superintendent.

The Montague County Grape Experiment Station became well known throughout the nation – no other experimental station in Texas studied grapes on such a large scale, with over a thousand different kinds of grapes being grown and studied, more than half of them named varietals. Here was maintained one of the largest collections of grape varieties in the country. Scientific studies were made of varietal adaptability and breeding, fertilization, pruning, training of vines, use of cover crops in providing humus, spacing, rootstock investigations and elevation and terrace plantings.

When the grape industry began to decline in the early 1950s the station turned its attention to peaches and apples. For years, Texas peach growers had been needing a peach which would escape late spring freezes. In 1952, the Montague Station developed the Ranger peach variety, which was both late blooming and of good quality, producing crops when the popular Elberta peach variety failed. In the late 1960s, A&M officials instructed U.A. Randolph to destroy and pull out all the grape vines on the station and concentrate on other fruit production. The annual Grape Festival was also discontinued along with the grapes.

Uriel A. Randolph was the station's first horticulturist and served the station as Superintendent for 32 years. He was instrumental in developing the famous Ranger peach variety and the Holland variety of apple. His efforts were a boon to local farmers, and the local peach and apple industry thrived. Today, peaches are the leading deciduous fruit crop grown in Texas, and it is estimated that there are more than one million trees planted statewide with annual production exceeding one million bushels.

The Montague County Experiment Station was closed on February 1, 1986, because of state budgetary constraints. The site now is overgrown and abandoned, on land still owned by Montague County, but the importance of Montague's Experiment Station to American agriculture cannot be overstated.