

Whither Goest the CES?

The time is seemingly at hand for agricultural extension
to lend its skills and resources to a truly
university- community-wide outreach

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AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION is one of the oldest, probably the largest, certainly the most fully developed, and perhaps the most effective adult education activity in the United States. Yet agricultural extension is increasingly being called into account by both the academic community and the public to explain whither it intends to go in a changing milieu that seemingly calls for dramatic adjustments on the part of servers and served.

There are two broad ways to look at the continuing requirement for agricultural extension work. In both approaches we can use figures to prove diametrically opposite conclusions.

CES IS FINISHED

In the days of its beginnings, agricultural extension was operating in a country that was about two-thirds rural. Today we are approximately two-thirds urban. The rural-farm population has dropped from 30 per cent of the nation's people so late as 1920 to 7.5 per cent in 1960. The per cent of the U.S. labor force engaged in agriculture has skidded in the same period from 26 to 6.6 per cent. We are losing farms at the rate of about 120,000 a year. The U.S. De-

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Department of Agriculture estimates there are now less than 3,000,000 *bona fide* farm operations in the country.¹

These farmers are producing agricultural crops at a rate that piles up mountainous surpluses. In a seemingly frantic attempt to maintain the economy, the federal government on the one hand purchases and stores some agricultural surpluses and on the other pays farmers not to cultivate all their acres—all with tax monies. Yet American farmers even now are not producing as efficiently or effectively as they could were they to apply all that is presently known about agricultural technology.

Viewed from this perspective, some observers conclude that agricultural extension has worked itself out of a job. Is it not ridiculous, some say, that an increasing array of extension workers carries ever more technological know-how to decreasing numbers of farmers who already produce more food and fiber than their fellow citizens can use, meanwhile draining the wetlands, grazing the woodlots, and usurping the fields that an industrial society needs for *lebensraum*.

According to this assessment, it would make more sense for agricultural extension to fold its tents in the countryside and steal away to the suburbs and the cities, where modern people and problems cluster, and where the mechanisms of the Cooperative Extension Service could be directed toward helping find solutions to the vexations of the urbanite. Either that, or simply allow the program to atrophy.

CES IS JUST GETTING STARTED

Of the almost two million acres of land in the continental United States, no less than 90 per cent are devoted to farming, grazing, and forestry.² Although we have lost in numbers of farms, most of the land has stayed in production, as larger, more efficient farm operators continue to expand. This can be said to be the great geographic domain of agricultural extension. When the key raw materials of the American economy are grouped by origin and ranked by order of value, agriculture has a clear first place.³ Food is by far the largest single item in the American family budget, taking somewhat

¹ Calvin L. Beale and Donald J. Bogue, *Recent Population Trends in the United States*, Agricultural Economic Report No. 23 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1963), p. 46.

² Marion Clawson *et al.*, *Land for the Future* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), p. 442.

³ Hans H. Landsberg, Leonard L. Fischman, and Joseph L. Fisher, *Resources in America's Future* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), p. 338.

over a fifth of all consumer expenditures, after taxes.⁴ This is the great economic domain of agricultural extension.

At the beginning of the 1960's the 180 million people of the United States enjoyed a level of living high beyond precedent for either their own country or any other. By the year 2000 the United States probably will have well over 300 million people who will want and expect even higher levels of living than those today—better diets, better housing, more consumer goods of all kinds, better education and cultural opportunities, more facilities for recreation, and so on. Can the United States over the balance of the 20th Century count on enough agricultural production to provide the basis for a rising standard of living in the face of continued demands for defense, for the exploration of outer space, for assistance to less developed countries overseas, and for more land for urban uses?

This is the question faced recently by Resources for the Future, Inc., a non-profit research center supported by the Ford Foundation. At the risk of oversimplifying the conclusions of the Corporation, it can be said that "continuing progress in (agricultural) technology and spread of skills and knowledge are the *sine qua non* of a continuing high standard of living based on an ample food supply available at a reasonable percentage of personal income."⁵

Using this point of departure, some observers conclude that agricultural extension is just getting started. If it is to contribute to meeting the food and fiber needs of America, A.D. 2000, they say agricultural extension must hue to its last—relocating producing areas, introducing new crop varieties, promoting the use of fertilizer, attacking the ravages of insects, diseases, and weeds, improving machinery, conserving the soil, and on down the list of practices.

According to this assessment, for agricultural extension to fire with so-called "total" area redevelopment programs or even with suburban lawn problems is a miscarriage of mission and public funds. Better that sister agencies be formed to accomplish for the city dweller what agricultural extension has sought to do for farmers, leaving the Cooperative Extension Service to concentrate on what it knows best, what it is best set up to accomplish, and what most needs doing—maintaining the viability of American agricultural production.

THE UPSHOT

Which of these two views is correct? It is difficult to argue with

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

the basic conclusions of *Resources for the Future*. If we accept their premises we must accord to agricultural extension an essential role in the next 40 years in bringing about the continuing and substantial improvements in crop yields required to feed a growing population. It does not necessarily follow, however, that agricultural extension can view itself as simply "more of the same." For one thing, its clientele is qualitatively as well as quantitatively different. The surviving agricultural entrepreneur is at least as savvy as the run-of-the-mill county agent, and his problems are more akin to those of a businessman than to those of a traditional dirt farmer. For another, the industries dependent on and supportive of agriculture are increasingly in the field with independent research and educational programs. Finally, cultural extension will itself increase as we learn more about interpersonal communications.⁶ It took nearly 15 years for hybrid corn to move from university test plots to mass acreage. Today the lag between discovery and application is frequently no more than a year or two, as farmers "buy any new product if someone will show them how it will cost out to their advantage."⁷ These and other changes call for an "agonizing reappraisal" of the nature and scope of university extension services to rural America.

Indeed, this is probably the place to point out that it is no longer valid to draw a sharp distinction between "urban" and "rural" America, and hence between the agencies that serve the two regions. Farm and farmer stereotypes are passé. So are city images. A rapidly advancing homogenization of the American people and a radical growth in suburbanization are erasing most of the clear differences between country and metropolis.⁸ Census takers can no longer clearly identify the geographic dividing lines. What distinctions remain will become hazier. The farmer is no more a man set apart in a rural class. The morning dew, the midday sun, the evening sunset are no more the emotional rewards held exclusively by farmers. City folks are fleeing to the fields, taking a contract to pay for the houses on large lots which form strip cities along the highways. Urban infringement on farming is wryly illustrated by the incident of the farmer whose cows were dying from consuming golf balls.⁹ Farmers and suburbanites alike commute to factories which are out in the open country under sky and clouds, surrounded by

⁶ Everett M. Rogers, "How Research Can Improve Practice: A Case Study," *Theory Into Practice*, I (April, 1962), 93.

⁷ Victor Wartman, "The Farm Market," *Printer's Ink*, CCLXXVII (May 1, 1964), 28.

⁸ Landsberg *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁹ Edward Higbee, *Farms and Farmers in an Urban Age* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1963), p. 120.

grass and parking lots. Both shop at the same composite centers which are recreations of Main Street on the fringes of the cities. Both share common sewer, water, school, and road problems. Each relies on the other in the operation of the American economy. As legislatures are redistricted, even politics will lose some of its hallowed schisms. City and country are now tied together with a myriad of overlapping memberships and communications. An annexation of understandings has followed the annexation of territories: the city dweller seems less "depraved," the rural resident less "noble." Community problems have moved from the private realm of government, the planning commission, and new forms of regional agreements. The growing interest of farm organizations in the broad philosophies of government rather than the pursuit of limited and precise goals seems to preclude as lively a concern as they once had for the parochial needs of agricultural extension.¹⁰ In this new America of urban belts, adult education agencies will either reflect changing configurations, inter-related problems, and new needs, or they will go the way of the passenger pigeon.

Many decades ago, Ezra Cornell commented on the opening of his university that there was not a single thing finished. This would seem an apt motto even today for our Land-Grant institutions in their agricultural extension enterprise. Coke urges the retention of the "strongest possible" agricultural extension program, and asks that agricultural extension not dilute itself by trying to "cover the waterfront." He rejects personalized agricultural extension to the non-agricultural population. Rather, he calls for a consolidation with general extension to provide a single off-campus educational service to an urbanized America.¹¹

The Cooperative Extension Service is, without question, a magnificent instrument for informal education for action. It is perhaps the only arrangement in the United States capable of simultaneous local, state, and national education, and the only one which is so richly back-stopped by centers of permanent competence. Yet this instrument represents only a segment of the university and reaches only a segment of society. The time is seemingly at hand for agricultural extension to lend its considerable skills and resources to the fashioning of a truly university-wide, community-wide outreach enterprise.

¹⁰ Paul A. Miller, "The Agricultural Colleges of the United States," *Proceedings of the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities, Vol. II, LXXV* (1961), 30-33.

¹¹ J. Earl Coke, "The Evaluation of Agriculture in the Land-Grant Institutions," *Proceedings of the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities, Vol. II, LXXV* (1961), 13.