

Cooperative Extension: A Historical Assessment

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Carlson has made a historical assessment of the Extension Service and determined that the early purposes of the organization were to increase agricultural production and maintain a rural way of life. But, Carlson concludes that Cooperative Extension has been unable to fulfill both goals, that indeed increasing agricultural production has led to the liquidation of a rural way of life and the development of corporate farms. The author uses the Congressional Record and other historical facts to support his conclusions.

The United States formalized its cooperative national support program for the Cooperative Extension Service in 1914 amid Congressional hopes that these federal moneys would help keep a large percentage of the population on the farm. To delay the move to the cities, Congress turned to Extension to help improve the quality of rural life.

Congress wanted the Cooperative Extension Service to increase agricultural production so the nation wouldn't have to send its capital abroad to buy food for its fast-growing urban population.¹ It also wanted Extension to help maintain a rural way of life, a sentimentalized pattern of living based on a 20th

century idea of life on a small farm in the 18th or 19th century.²

The Cooperative Extension Service, however, was unable to strike a balance between these two goals, emphasizing increased production to such an extent that it merely added further impetus to the trend toward corporate farming. The existence and well-meaning efforts of Cooperative Extension lulled the small farmer into thinking that someone was taking good care of his interests until it was too late for him to act. Extension's major accomplishment was preventing extensive reactionary political and mob action by farmers wishing to preserve the status quo. Instead of maintaining the rural way of life to which it

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was dedicated. Extension actually assisted in its liquidation.

Extension Established to Maintain Rural Way

An important purpose of the Smith-Lever Act that created the Cooperative Extension Service was to preserve rural America. Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, reflecting widespread opinion, offered his mellifluous oratory in behalf of the bill, proclaiming:

It is rare, indeed, that you find the golden-hearted patriot in the gilded palace [of the city]. He seldom comes from the insanitary [sic] section of the "soulless city"—from the congested tenement house.³

Vardaman and many other Americans in 1914 saw rural life as "the breeding place of the patriot" where fresh air and sunshine developed him physically and where a noble family life, quite unlike that in the city, developed in him a love of God, country, and flag.⁴ People so reared, providing they were Caucasian, would become the noble leaders of the nation, Vardaman contended.⁵ Thus, rural America required preservation.

These idealistic motives were combined with racist and economic motives in support of Cooperative Extension. Many cities harbored large enclaves of Eastern European immigrants who shared neither the Protestant religion nor some of the values then current in the United States. Because of this, the race-

conscious Vardaman worried about the most recent census which showed that the U.S. population had become for the first time predominantly urban—51 percent urban and 49 percent rural.⁶

Others who voted for the Extension bill were concerned about the potential economic ramifications of these figures. These congressmen feared the food supply would eventually fail to keep pace with urban demands.⁷

Cooperative Extension: The Practical Way

Congressman Asbury F. Lever of South Carolina was one who presented Cooperative Extension as a practical way to increase farm productivity and improve farm conditions sufficiently to make farm life more attractive. Lever argued that the agricultural colleges had accumulated knowledge of how to increase farm productivity,

. . . which, if made available to the farmers of this country and used by them, would work a complete and absolute revolution in the social, economic and financial condition of our rural population.⁸

Lever presented a bill for federal support of a formal, nationwide Cooperative Extension Service that would demonstrate to the farmer that scientific, efficient methods gained better production than the methods then in use.

When the Smith-Lever Act passed Congress, the administrators

of the new law had two possibly mutually exclusive concepts to reconcile—the development of increased productivity and the preservation of a rural way of life.⁹ It would be up to the leaders of Cooperative Extension to carry out these conflicting responsibilities.

Scientific Methods Emphasized

Extension sensed no incompatibility in its dual mandate. Extension agents and administrators assumed that the introduction of scientific methods of management and agriculture would increase productivity and bring a higher income to the small farmer. They reasoned, therefore, that improved methods would enhance the attraction of farming and maintain a rural way of life around a profitable, modern family farm.

That these assumptions were unsound now appears indisputable. Since the goal was to increase profits by improving productivity, this meant encouraging mechanization and the use of scientific farming techniques, such as chemical fertilizers and insecticides. It was clear that larger “family farms” would be necessary to use farm machinery efficiently and to purchase fertilizers and other supplies in economical quantities. By encouraging more scientific approaches to farming, Cooperative Extension furthered the trend toward larger, more efficient farms. The logical outcome was a lessened need for large numbers of farmers.

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Instead of maintaining a rural way of life, Cooperative Extension encouraged a struggle for survival that bled the population and the political power of the countryside and opened the way to the ultimate form of farming efficiency—the corporate farm. In this way, Extension helped destroy the very way of life it was dedicated to maintaining.

Rural Families Losing the Race

Although by 1948 Extension knew that rural families were losing the struggle for survival, it continued to encourage increased productivity on larger, more efficient farms.¹⁰ It was unwilling to go much further with the “failures” than helping ease the adjustment of those who were “not able to take full advantage of technological advancement” because of the lack of capital or ability.¹¹ Cooperative Extension wasn’t ready to admit that its own program was responsible, in part, for these “failures.”

Departures from the farm in large numbers were inevitable because of the expansion required for a farmer to utilize successfully the new agricultural techniques. The question was simply which individuals would succeed and which would fail. The 1948 national report acknowledging these “failures” was smugly unaware that Extension had any responsibility for the situation. The organization, instead, took pride in the small “mom-and-pop” commercial farm operations—the

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so-called "family farms" that had expanded and implemented the efficient procedures advocated by Extension.

The same drive for efficiency that produced the family farm led, in the 1960s, to a still more advanced level of efficiency, the corporate farm. Pioneered by such corporations as CBK Industries and Gates Rubber Company, these firms bought farmland around the country, hired managers, and equipped company crews of traveling farmhands with modern machinery to work these large holdings.¹²

Farm Factories Next

This development may well augur the introduction of a more efficient "farm factory" approach as a replacement for most of the family farms, just as the more efficient supermarkets often replaced "mom-and-pop" grocery stores and as large corporate industry often replaced smaller family enterprise. Some agricultural economists have favored such a development on the farm, looking forward to a nation of 500,000 farms rather than the present 3.5 million or the nearly 7 million of 20 years ago.¹³

This was the point to which the emphasis on productivity and efficient management had led by 1970. In the name of the farmer's own good, Cooperative Extension and society brought the small farmer to his own destruction.

The family farm was dying. It was of little use for some of its lob-

byists to "prove" the inefficiency of corporate farms by showing their failure to make profits in the pioneer stage.¹⁴ Even the promise of a U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to provide political defense of the family farm against corporate farming was of no avail. The president of the National Farmers Organization saw the handwriting on the wall and warned: "Unless the family type farmer joins together to get a fair price for his product, corporate farming is inevitable."¹⁵

But, with a presently estimated 500,000 to 600,000 annual migration to the cities and recent Supreme Court one-man, one-vote decisions, the U.S. farmer has lost much of his former political power.¹⁶

It was in this weakening of "farm power" that Extension played its most important role.

Cooperative Extension's major accomplishment over the years was to give the small farmer the feeling that society and the government really cared about his plight. While the Extension agent and the home economist helped the farm family to see better ways to live and to farm, they held out hope for a better life through farming. Cooperative Extension emphasized a possible upward mobility through farming, which a minority proved was possible. It kept the average farmer hard at work and hopeful of expanding like his more affluent neighbors at the very time the cost-price squeeze was tightening around him.

As the number of farms in the United States decreased, the size in-

creased.¹⁷ One by one the small farmers sold out and left for the cities or for jobs as tenants or migrant workers. By the time the farmer recognized his hopes were unrealistic, it was too late for effective mass action at the polls or at the barricades.

Defuses Potential Farmer Revolt

By its sincere but futile efforts to maintain a rural way of life, Cooperative Extension helped to defuse a potential farmer revolt in the United States. By giving farmers a false hope that adopting new techniques of farming and farm management would preserve their family farms, Extension furthered the transformation from a rural to an urban society in a way that avoided violence.

One could argue that in encouraging conditions that peacefully motivated large numbers off the land into the cities, Extension enriched the lives of those who left the drudgery of the farm for a better life in the city. One could also reason that Extension preserved the rural way of life in helping a tiny remnant of family farms to survive by emphasizing specialty crops or by incorporating as family enterprises, and expanding and competing on a level with the corporate farms. Such arguments, however, would have found little favor with those who enacted the Smith-Lever Act.

Probably no effective synthesis of Cooperative Extension's twin mandates to increase productivity

and maintain a rural way of life was possible. Unfortunately, Extension workers and administrators were unaware that such a problem even existed until it was too late for alternative actions. Extension deserved an important share in what to the minds of extensionists was the dubious distinction of having peacefully transformed America into the urban society of the late 20th century.

Footnotes

1. U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 63d Cong., 2d Sess. (1914), LI, Part 2, 1932-47. Another important motivation for support of Cooperative Extension was the Democratic party's desire to placate farmers who were unhappy with the Democrats for lowering import duties on foodstuffs in the Underwood Tariff passed the year before.
2. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 63d Cong., 2d Sess. (1914), LI, Part 2, 3036 and 3040.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3036.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 3036-3042.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 3036.
7. U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 63d Cong., 2d Sess. (1914), LI, Part 2, 1933 and 1935.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1937.
9. The new law mentioned only the diffusion of information regarding agriculture and home economics and the encouragement of the application of this knowledge by rural America. But the legislative history of the bill clearly mandated Cooperative Extension to

- encourage both increased productivity and the preservation of a rural way of life.
10. U.S., Department of Agriculture and Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, *Joint Committee on Extension Programs, Policies and Goals Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), pp. 58 and 59.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. Josef H. Hebert, "U.S. Farmers Join to Oppose 'Corporate Farms' Threat," *The Capital Times* [Madison, Wisconsin], January 4, 1968, p. 16.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. National Farmers Union, "The Myth of Corporate Efficiency," *Washington News Letter*, XIV (December 1, 1967).
 15. Hebert, "U.S. Farmers Join."
 16. "Decreasing Rural Population Spells Trouble Ahead for Nation's Cities," *The Capital Times* [Madison, Wisconsin], November 20, 1967, p. 45.
 17. William Noble Clark, "Who Will Operate Our Commercial Farms of 1975?" (lecture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, November 19, 1964), pp. 9 and 17.