

Critique: History or Speculation?

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Cosgriffe says that Carlson hasn't really written a historical assessment, but has raised some important issues that any educational institution should consider. Cosgriffe suggests that when using the historical approach there are pitfalls to avoid—unclear definitions, overlooking fundamental causes, concluding without adequate data, going beyond evidence in making conclusions. He concludes that Carlson's article may stimulate Extension practitioners to be more sensitive about developing meaningful objectives and evaluating progress toward them.

Robert Carlson, whose article appears in this *Journal* issue, asserts that he has written a historical assessment of Cooperative Extension. Has he? I think not. He has failed to observe many of the canons of the historical method. He has not been a careful historian. Yet his assessment can be useful to the Cooperative Extension Service—and other adult education institutions—simply by pointing out evaluative issues for any educational institution to consider.

The main purpose of this critique, however, is to appraise Carlson's assessment. I will describe the need for careful analysis, problems and pitfalls confronting the histo-

rian, my views of Carlson as a historian, errors in his assessment, and values of his paper.

Need for Careful Analysis

It seems difficult for the non-historian to evaluate a historian's methodology.¹ Readers interviewed about Carlson's article responded to it in two ways: (1) they were titillated or (2) they rejected his ideas out of hand. In both situations, readers did not appraise Carlson's methodology; they judged his work by whether they "resonated" with his conclusions. More substantial inquiry seems required to judge the adequacy of Carlson's analysis.

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Problems and Pitfalls

History is any effort to account for the past actions or activities of man.² It is a kind of research or inquiry. It attempts to recreate the past, but it's never complete and never absolutely precise. It consists in fastening on something we don't know and trying to discover it.³ History proceeds by the interpretation of evidence.⁴ Of course, there are plenty of difficulties finding and selecting evidence and interpreting it.

Problems that historians face in making interpretations are plenty: The historian may overlook or misinterpret source materials; factual and statistical data available to him may be fragmentary; institutional purposes and procedures change and may not be stated clearly. The historian must deal with faulty memories, unclear definitions, vanity, deception, bias, and irrelevance in making his interpretations. Unlike the physical scientist, he cannot place himself outside his investigation. His own perceptions and biases thus affect his investigation.

The historian may overlook fundamental causes as he focuses on immediate causes, or he may mistake immediate causes for fundamental ones. He may oversimplify by attributing complex phenomena to a single cause.

Objective interpretation leading to the establishment of cause and effect relationships is extremely trying and difficult in other ways. The historian may consciously or unconsciously start with precon-

ceived notions about a subject. He may gather evidence that tends to support these notions. Instead of trying to disprove his assumptions, he may attempt to prove they are true. He may argue possible effects of causes from silence or absence of evidence to the contrary. Finally, the historian may tend to use analogy—experience drawn from another time or place and compared with contemporary events. Arguments based on such comparisons are dangerous. Similarities between events occurring at different times may be more apparent than real and the analogy may be superficial.

The careful historian is thereby one who does *not* conclude anything without adequate data, does *not* go beyond evidence in making conclusions, does *not* base conclusions on atypical evidence, or conclude on facts applicable to only one part of the whole, does *not* conclude on facts that don't fit the times, does *not* use past standards to judge present-day events or present-day standards to judge past events, does *not* expect facts about a person or institution in one situation to be true in another, does *not* try to prove his hypothesis, does *not* generalize from a single or from few facts, and does *not* compare things that are not comparable.

Views of Carlson as Historian

My own conclusion after reading Carlson's article is that he chose to be gadfly more than historian. His motives for doing so are un-

clear. Is he attempting to arouse emotions and thus create change? Is he simply an ambitious man trying to make a name for himself? Is he such an unusual or creative person that he sees matters differently from most people and must write about his views and attempt to justify them to maintain his integrity?

Or, did he simply commit these typical errors of many writers—selecting data that support only his own biases, ignoring major sources of information, failing to define clearly his terms, generalizing from single causation and arguing from silence. In any case, he has not presented an objective and careful historical assessment.

Errors in Carlson's Assessment

What errors did Carlson make, and do they make a difference in his conclusions? I find that Carlson goes astray in dealing with each of five major points. These major points and the errors he makes surrounding each of them are identified below.

Intent of Congress

Carlson chooses to focus a major part of his argument on the intent of Congress for creating the Cooperative Extension Service. In characterizing the intent, he makes the error of biased selection of data. This error is evidenced by his presenting the thinking of two men as representative of all congressional thinking, his neglecting to report the

thinking of legislators whose views perhaps opposed his own biases and perceptions, and his ignoring Congress' final definition of the purpose of Cooperative Extension as given in the final legislation.

Carlson chose to quote two legislators, Vardaman and Lever. Why did he choose to quote these two men, Vardaman much more often than Lever, when he might have quoted many other legislators of the period?⁵ He might have, for example, quoted Representative Adair of Indiana who said,

The fact is, agriculture is the foundation of all prosperity . . . all of the business I have depends upon the farmer, and if he is not profitable my business is likewise unprofitable.⁶

Adair said the Cooperative Extension Service was needed because:

In practical effect it undertakes to provide such machinery as will bring to the attention of the farmer, the farmer's wife and children, in the most striking manner, such demonstrated truths and practices of successful agriculture which, *lived up to* [italics mine] make rural living desirable and profitable as an occupation.⁷

He might also have quoted Senator Evans, who, in opposing the act, said:

It rather struck me that the bill was designed for the benefit and advancement of the teachers more than for the benefit and advancement of the man who toils the soil. I have not heard any

strenuous petitions on the part of the farmers in behalf of the bill.⁸

The point here is that many different and opposite views of the need for a Cooperative Extension Service are presented in the hearings and debate leading to the establishment of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. One may find a view to support nearly any argument or bias. Carlson was highly selective of the views he chose.

Carlson errs further in indicating that a few individuals were representative of the Congress when he says,

Congress wanted the Cooperative Extension Service to increase agricultural production so that the nation wouldn't have to send its capital abroad to buy food for its fast-growing urban population.⁹

In the next sentence he said, "It also wanted Extension to help maintain a rural way of life . . ." ¹⁰ His footnotes indicate his source of these statements is 15 pages of the *Congressional Record*. My review of these pages indicates that while a number of different individuals gave their own opinions, these members did not necessarily represent the whole of Congress.

Knowledge of the debates leading to the formal passage of an act is helpful to the scholar in appraising the intent of the act. Yet the act finally signed into law, not the debates, expresses best the intent of the act. It represents the final and most nearly complete representation of congressional intent. The

act guides institutional effort. Carlson did mention the Smith-Lever Act in a footnote. But compare his statement with the actual wording of the Smith-Lever Act which follows:

The giving of instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics and subjects relating thereto to persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities, and imparting information on said subjects through demonstrations, publications, and otherwise, and for the necessary printing and distribution of information in connection with the foregoing; and this work shall be carried on in such manner as may be mutually agreed upon by the Secretary of Agriculture and the State Agricultural college or colleges receiving the benefits of this Act.¹¹

Carlson, in his footnote, states:

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.¹²

Note the differences! The act does not mention rural America. Carlson does. The act expresses "the giving of instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics and *subjects relating thereto* [italics mine]." Carlson does not mention the possibility of other subjects. Small mat-

ters? I think not. Carlson seems intent on interpreting Extension's purpose as "maintaining a rural way of life." Defining Extension's initial purpose as that of maintaining a rural way of life 50+ years after the fact and then attacking the institution because it did not meet his definition¹³ of purpose hardly seems scholarly. Also, his view does not recognize that institutional purposes may change to meet new circumstances or because of new legislation.

Description of Extension Program

Carlson errs again in his effort to describe the program scope of the Cooperative Extension Service. In doing so, he apparently ignores major sources of information. He states:

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 [Carlson's interpretation of the Smith-Lever Act].¹⁴

Surprisingly, Carlson seems unaware that Cooperative Extension Service did more than "introduce scientific methods both of management and of agriculture." Perhaps his dependence on secondary sources (his footnotes suggest he didn't utilize Extension reports or testimony of individuals acquainted with Extension, but depended mostly on the writings of others about this institution)

caused him to take this narrow view of Extension's educational scope.

Extension education efforts from its inception included the establishment of marketing and bargaining cooperatives. Home economics work designed to help rural women improve their nutrition, health, homes, and appearances was established soon after the Smith-Lever Act was passed. Before 1920, 4-H Club work was an important activity of Extension's services. Farm bureaus were organized by Extension agents prior to 1920 and thereafter to help farmers take combined action to improve the quality of rural life. Later, farm bureaus influenced legislation.

Rural Way of Life

Carlson's major point is that Extension failed in maintaining a rural way of life. In making this point, he commits the double error of failing to define his terms, and of attributing an effect to a single cause.

What does he mean by "rural way of life"? He seems to equate this "rural way of life" to the maintenance of the number of family type farms in existence in 1914—a dubious definition.

He states further that since the number of farms decreased, Extension is at fault:

Instead of maintaining a rural way of life, Cooperative Extension encouraged a struggle for survival that bled the population . . . and opened the way to the ulti-

mate form of farming efficiency—the corporate farm.¹⁵

The Smith-Lever Act said nothing about maintaining either a rural way of life or the farm population. Yet even accepting Carlson's doubtful proposition that Extension had the responsibility to do so, one can still find an additional error in his assessment.

Carlson seems to attribute the reason for a declining farm population and the establishment of corporate farms to a single cause—the Cooperative Extension Service. Certainly, most people recognize several causes for these complex phenomena: Many governmental and private institutions have influenced farming, credit institutions guide farmers, young people seek occupations different from their parents, farmers retire or die and family members discontinue farming, equipment companies introduce new machines designed for large holdings, depressions occur—and on and on.

Corporate Farm Takeover?

Carlson states that “. . . Extension . . . opened the way to the ultimate form of farming efficiency—the corporate farm.”¹⁶ Carlson infers that the establishment of corporation farms is a dire threat, and resulted from Extension's failure to maintain rural life and because Extension fostered farming efficiency. In so doing he not only generalizes from a single cause (Extension),

but provides his own straw man to advance his argument.

What is the extent of corporate farming in the United States? What are the reasons for the establishment of corporations? Answers to these questions should help us understand the extent of the “threat” and the reasons for it. But, before we answer these questions, let's define the term corporation farms by describing the types.

Corporate farms are of three types: (1) closely held family corporations engaged primarily in farming, (2) closely held, often family-type, corporations combining a farming enterprise with other business activity, and (3) publicly traded corporations typically involved in farm production and in an agricultural supply or processing activity, but in a few cases organized explicitly to engage primarily in farming.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture identifies a total of 11,500 corporations engaged in farming in 47 states (excluding California, Alaska, and Hawaii, for which data are as yet unpublished). The total for the 50 states is expected to reach 14,000 or about 1 percent of the 1,443,000 commercial farms and ranches (1964 figures). For the 47 states, 68 percent of all corporate farms and ranches were family corporations. Less than 100 corporations producing farm products had their capital stock listed and traded on organized stock exchanges.¹⁷

The reader may now judge for himself if a total of 14,000 corpo-

rate farms of a total of 3,157,850 commercial and noncommercial farms¹⁸ (1964 figures) represents a significant threat to farmers, especially when 68 percent of all corporate farms and ranches were family corporations. In the 56 years of Cooperative Extension's existence, about 1 percent of the commercial farms have been incorporated.

A Missouri study of family farm corporations in 1968 reported that 50 percent of the families incorporated to facilitate farm transfer and estate management, 30 percent for tax considerations, and 16 percent to limit liability.¹⁹ A Minnesota study corroborated these results. Achieving farming efficiency seems of much less importance than other factors for farm incorporation. Cooperative Extension, contrary to Carlson's views, seemingly had little to do with farmers' decisions to incorporate.

Defused Farmer Revolt

Carlson states:

. . . 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 . . .²⁰

Here is an example of the classic "argument from silence" or argument from absence of evidence to the contrary.

Carlson's argument goes something like this. Farmers would have revolted either at the "polls or at the barricades,"²¹ except for intervention by Extension. So in the absence of an event not occurring (mob action), Carlson concludes that Extension was responsible for

. . . what to the minds of extensionists was the dubious distinction of having peacefully transformed America into the urban society of the late 20th century.²²

Obviously, a revolt did not occur and Carlson does not offer convincing evidence that one would have. He expects the reader, however, to accept his speculation that Extension defused what did not happen.

He also tends to assume that it is too late, and the numbers of farmers today (3,157,850) are too small for an agrarian revolt to occur—even though the "average farmer [has] recognized his hopes [are] unrealistic."²³ He then assumes that because something he thinks is possibly desirable is not happening, it is impossible of accomplishment.

Further, he does not tell us what purpose an agrarian revolt would have achieved. One can only assume he would have had farmers demand and receive financial support to maintain small inefficient "mom-and-pop" farms. Farmers would then be supported by a much smaller national economic base—less industry and fewer services under this assumption. The shift in manpower resources of recent decades from farming to other forms of productivity has greatly increased

the national product and made possible increased services in both rural and urban areas.

Values of Carlson's Paper

Carlson has provided a useful paper (in ways he may not have intended) simply because his paper raises important issues for any educational institution to consider.

His paper suggests that an institution's purpose—both expressed and unexpressed—should be evaluated.

It suggests that an institution should be sensitive to any latent and unforeseen effects it is creating and establish means for being sensitive to them. It should simultaneously be aware of its total effect on systems beyond the immediate target audience and on society in general.

It suggests that historical analysis could be a useful tool for evaluating an institution's purposes and efforts.

Carlson demonstrates that historical analysis is a difficult tool to use effectively, and must be employed with great caution, and that the results of employing this tool must be interpreted with even greater caution.

Summary

Carlson has exposed himself to attack in his paper because he seems to have employed a "state-the-extreme-to-get-attention" strategy. Thus he shows courage. His approach should stimulate many read-

ers to think about Extension's contributions. Carlson may have made Extension practitioners more sensitive to the need to develop meaningful objectives and evaluate progress toward them.

It's too bad, however, that he chose to consider his paper "a historical assessment." It's not that; it's simply a speculative piece about the Cooperative Extension Service and its contributions.

I have pointed out places where data and events have been misused to jump to conclusions. Hopefully, the reader will now spot on his own other gaps in Carlson's assessment.

Footnotes

1. Individuals desiring to know more about the development of history might refer to two paperbacks: R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, A Galaxy Book (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 1-339 and Herbert J. Muller, *The Uses of the Past* (New York, New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 11-384.
2. Herman G. Richey, "Methods and Materials of Documentary Research" (class notes, The University of Chicago, Illinois, 1961).
3. R. G. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
5. *Hearings, Report and Debate*, "Smith-Lever Act of 1914, U.S. House of Representatives" (reproduced: Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Agricultural Extension

- Service, 1959), quotes directly the *Congressional Record* and will provide the reader a ready source of information about the hearings and debate leading to passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 2067.
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 3086.
 9. Robert A. Carlson, "Cooperative Extension: A Historical Assessment," *Journal of Extension*, VIII (Fall, 1970), p. 10.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Federal Legislation, Regulations, and Rulings Affecting Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics*, No. 285 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1946), p. 8.
 12. Carlson, "Historical Assessment," pp. 14 and 15.
 13. Carlson seems particularly adverse to defining his terms. Nowhere does he define rural way of life. Later he does not define corporation farming. He seems to be giving the term "rural way of life" a quantitative meaning; that is, rural farm numbers declined, consequently the rural way of life declined. Qualitatively, few would argue the proposition that the quality of rural way of life has improved.
 14. Carlson, "Historical Assessment," p. 12.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. Philip M. Raup, "Policies Toward Corporations in Farming, Part III," in *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies* (Chicago, Illinois: Farm Foundation, 1969), p. 75.
 18. Commercial farms and ranches are those grossing \$10,000 or more annually; noncommercial farms and ranches gross under \$10,000 annually.
 19. Raup, "Policies Toward Corporations in Farming," p. 77.
 20. Carlson, "Historical Assessment," p. 10.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Ibid.*