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ABSTRACT

The United States formalized its cooperative national support program for agricultural extension in 1941. The hope was to increase agricultural production and to help maintain a rural way of life in the United States. The Cooperative Extension Service was unable to strike a balance between these two goals, emphasizing increased production to such a degree that Extension merely added a further impetus to the trend toward corporate farming. The main accomplishment of Agricultural Extension was the prevention of extensive reactionary political and mob action by farmers wishing to maintain the status quo in the nation's agriculture. Instead of maintaining the rural way of life to which it was dedicated, the Agricultural Extension Service actually assisted in its liquidation. [Not available in hardcopy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (eb)

Failure in Success:

An Assessment of Agricultural Extension in the United States

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The United States formalized its cooperative national support program for agricultural extension in 1914 amid Congressional hopes that these federal moneys would help to keep a large percentage of the population on the farm. To slow the run to the cities, Congress recognized that it would have to help to improve the quality of rural life to give people more inducement to remain on the farms. And it turned to agricultural extension as the means for improving the farmer's life. Congress wanted the Agricultural Extension Service to increase agricultural production so that the nation would not need to send its capital abroad simply to feed its fast-growing urban population.[1] It also wanted Agricultural Extension to help maintain a rural way of life in the United States, a much sentimentalized pattern of living based on twentieth century notions of life on the small farms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[2] The Cooperative Extension Service was unable to strike a balance between these two goals, emphasizing increased production to such a degree that Extension merely added a further impetus to the trend toward corporate farming. Furthermore, 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. The major accomplishment of Agricultural Extension was the prevention of extensive reactionary political and mob action by farmers wishing to maintain the status quo in the nation's agriculture. This historical study will show that instead of maintaining the rural way of life to which it was dedicated the Agricultural Extension Service actually assisted in its liquidation.

It is clear that an important purpose of the Smith-Lever Act that created the Cooperative Extension Service in the U. S. was to preserve rural America. Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, reflecting widespread opinion, offered his mellifluous oratory in behalf of the bill, proclaiming that "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] No, 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 combined with racist and economic motives in support of Agricultural Extension in the U. S. Probably because many of the nation's 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, the race-conscious Vardaman worried over the most recent census which was generally interpreted to show that the United States population had for the first time shifted to predominantly urban by a two per cent margin--fifty-one per cent urban and forty-nine per cent rural.[6] Others who voted for the Extension bill expressed concern over the potential economic ramifications of these figures that showed a rapidly growing urban population and a farm population in relative decline. These congressmen feared that the food supply would eventually fail to keep pace with urban demands.[7]

Congressman Asbury F. Lever of South Carolina was one of those who presented Agricultural Extension as a practical means to increase farm productivity and to improve farm conditions sufficiently to enhance the attraction of farm life. Lever argued that the agricultural colleges of the nation 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 was one of those presenting a bill for federal support of a formal, nationwide Cooperative Extension Service that would get scientific information to the farmer. He wanted Extension to go onto the land of the nation's farmers with demonstration projects to show the farmer in a practical way that scientific, efficient methods gained better production than the methods then in use.

When the Smith-Lever bill passed Congress, the administrators of the new law had these 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 as to how they would carry out these mandates.

Extension implemented the policy by emphasizing the introduction of scientific methods both of management and of agriculture. Apparently Extension agents and administrators assumed that increased productivity would bring improved income which could purchase an improved standard of living, thus enhance the attraction of farming and maintain a rural way of life around a profitable, modern family farm. This seems to have been the intellectual basis of Agricultural Extension, for Extension workers clearly wished to preserve rural values.

That their assumptions were unsound now appears indisputable. Since the goal was to be improved profits by means of improved productivity, this meant the encouragement of mechanization and the use of such scientific farming techniques as chemical fertilizers and insecticides. For the efficient use of farm machinery and for the purchase of fertilizers and other such supplies in economical quantities, it was clear that larger farms would be necessary. Thus, by encouraging these more scientific approaches to farming, Extension furthered the trend toward larger, more efficient farms. The logical outcome of larger, efficient, mechanized farms would be a lessened need for large numbers of farmers. Extension, instead of maintaining a rural way of life, encouraged a struggle for survival on the farm which wound up bleeding the population and the political power from the countryside and opening the way to the ultimate form of farming efficiency, the corporate farm. By encouraging increased production which could be accomplished on fewer but larger farms and on less total land than formerly, Extension contributed to the destruction of the very rural way of life it was dedicated to maintaining.

Although Extension by 1948 took note of the problems of those rural families who were losing out in the race toward "successful" farming, the Extension institution continued to cater to what it felt was the strengthening of rural life by encouraging increased productivity on larger, more efficient farms.[10] Extension had helped to create the efficient commercial farming operations it termed "the family farm," and it was apparently unwilling to go much farther 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 of ability.[11] Agricultural Extension in the United States was not ready to admit that its own program was responsible, in part, for these "failures." Such departures from the farm in large numbers were inevitable because of the expansion required for a farmer to utilize successfully the new agricultural techniques that Agricultural Extension was encouraging. The question was simply which individuals would succeed and which would fail. The 1948 national report acknowledging the existence of the "failures" was smugly unaware of any responsibility by Agricultural Extension for the situation. Extension workers, instead, took pride in the small "mom and pop" commercial farm operations that proved the fittest in the struggle for survival encouraged by Agricultural Extension's policies.

The same drive for efficiency that led to the family farm, however, proceeded in the 1960's to a more advanced level of effectiveness, the corporate farm. Pioneered by such corporations as IT&T Industries and Gates Rubber Company, these new ventures bought farm land around the country, hired managers and equipped company crews of traveling farmhands with highly efficient modern machines to work these holdings.[12] 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 replaced "mom and pop" grocery stores in the cities and as large corporate industry often replaced smaller family enterprise in the cities. 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 seven million of twenty years ago.[13]

This was the point to which the emphasis on productivity and efficient management had led by the 1960's. In the name of the farmer's own good, Agricultural Extension and American society brought the farmer to his own destruction.

Although the farm organization lobbyists "proved" the inefficiency of the corporate farm by showing its failure to make profits in its pioneer stage and although a U. S. secretary of agriculture promised political defense of the family farm against corporate farming,[14] the president of the National Farmers Organization warned that "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] And it was in this weakening of "farm power" that Agricultural Extension played its major role in the U. S.

The major accomplishment of Agricultural Extension over the years was to give the small farmer the feeling that Americans and the U. S. government really cared about his plight. While the Agricultural 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. By emphasizing a possible upward mobility through farming, which a minority of farmers proved was possible, Agricultural Extension 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 farms in the U. S. decreased in numbers but increased in size over the years,[17] one by one the

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

By its sincere but futile efforts to maintain a rural way of life, Agricultural Extension helped to defuse a potential farmer revolt in the United States. By giving farmers a false hope that adoption of new techniques of farming and farm management would preserve their family farms, Agricultural Extension furthered the transformation of the United States from a rural to an urban society in a way that avoided violence. Still, one could argue that in encouraging conditions that peacefully motivated large numbers off the land into the cities Agricultural 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 Agricultural 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, expanding, and competing on a level with the corporate farms. Such arguments would have found little favor with those who enacted the Smith-Lever Act. Probably no effective synthesis was possible of Agricultural Extension's twin mandates to increase productivity and maintain a rural way of life. Agricultural Extension, though, was generally unaware that such a problem even existed until it was too late for alternative actions. Agricultural 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 twentieth century.

1 See Congressional Record--House, 63d Congress, 2d Session, January 19, 1914, pp. 1932-1947. Another important motivation for support of Agricultural Extension at the time was the desire of the Democratic Party majority to placate farmers who were unhappy with the Democrats for lowering import duties on foodstuffs from abroad in the Underwood Tariff passed the year before.

2 See, for example, Senator James K. Vardaman's rural background and his comments in support of the Agricultural Extension bill in the Congressional Record--Senate, 63d Congress, 2d Session, February 6, 1914, pp. 3036 and 3040.

3 Ibid., p. 3036.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp. 3036-3042.

6 Ibid., p. 3036.

7 See Congressional Record--House, 63d Congress, 2d Session, January 19, 1914, pp. 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 Agricultural 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, August, 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.

16 For the migration figures, see Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman, cited in Congressional Quarterly, "Decreasing Rural Population Spells Trouble Ahead for Nation's Cities," in The Capital Times, Madison, Wisconsin, November 20, 1967, p. 45.

17 William Noble Clark, emeritus associate director of the University of Wisconsin Experiment Station, "Who Will Operate Our Commercial Farms of 1975?" lecture at the University of Wisconsin, November 19, 1964, pp. 9 and 17.