

## Points of View

### Carlson Answers Cosgriffe

History is useful for researching, analyzing, and criticizing the field of adult education. Traditionally, however, its role has been to glorify and legitimize the profession. To innovate with analytical history in this field, a good starting place might logically be Cooperative Extension, long on record in favor of "innovation."

It was therefore surprising to have my historical assessment of Extension in the Fall issue of the *Journal* depicted as merely "titillating" to some Extensionists and dismissed "out of hand" by others. The author of the critique rejected me as a person "who sees matters differently from most people." The attack revealed a failure to appreciate the potential of analytical history for providing an understanding of present-day Cooperative Extension.

The role of the historian of Extension is to explain the present in terms of the past and to dialogue with other historians interested in the organization. Different historians will emphasize different information and mix it with their own values to arrive at different conclusions. The Extensionist can read these different interpreta-



tions and become sensitive to the issues they deal with.

The major issue of my article was the failure of Cooperative Extension in the United States to prevent a mass exodus from the farm. The critique of my article argued that: (1) the Smith-Lever Act itself didn't set this goal for Extension, (2) supporters advanced many reasons for establishing the institution, (3) documentation is absent for my claim that Extension helped to defuse a potential revolt on the farms, (4) the corporate "super-farm" poses no threat to the rural way of life, and (5) the rural-urban shift is in the national interest. These are all reasonable questions to advance in regard to my analysis, and a dialogue would be most helpful.

The critique went wrong in misusing the jargon of historiography to blur the points at issue. It "charged" me, in essence, with arguing a thesis, ignoring extraneous data, and making a narrow and incisive analysis on a broad base of data. In scholarly sounding terminology, the critique thus attacked me for doing what a good historian should do.

The historian can't ignore the nearly total rural commitment displayed by Cooperative Extension until

recently. He therefore has to set his analysis on a broader base than the wording of the Smith-Lever Act.

While many reasons were advanced in support of Extension, I judged from the record that they were less important in the institution's development than the desire to increase productivity and to maintain a rural way of life. My job as a historian wasn't to chronicle the debates over Extension policy, but to make sense out of them for the reader.

Although institutional goals often change over time, I found little evidence that Extensionists ever favored the rural-urban shift. I developed the thesis that Extension played an unwitting role in helping to defuse a potential farmer revolt and in helping liquidate the small farmer. Having formed this interpretation on the basis of evidence, my job as historian was to marshal my facts to "prove" my thesis.

Argument may proceed from logic as well as from documents. It's fair to assume that farmers will respond to government as others have responded in the past. Unless people have faith that the government is working in behalf of their goals, they're likely to take action against it. I showed that Extension provided farmers with such a confidence in government, one that enabled them to accept changes they opposed.

In suggesting that corporate farms like CBK Industries are likely to further the rural-urban shift, I merely projected my analysis into the future. No law of historiography prevents such a projection. In choosing to tell

the story of the Extensionists and their millions of small-farmer clients who wished to maintain parity for the rural way of life, I judged their viewpoint to be at least as important as that which justifies Extension's role in the rural-urban shift in the name of a higher gross national product. No rule of historiography precludes the viewpoint I've taken. The only "law" preventing my emphases and conclusions is the law of narrow professionalism that seeks to discredit truth and innovation if they question the conventional wisdom regarding one's institution.

I don't suggest that my study is the final word on Cooperative Extension. All a researcher can provide are new dimensions and new insights. I hope Extensionists will work with me at the University of Saskatchewan and with other analytical historians of the field to explore the subject further. My historical assessment should help Extensionists reflect whether their work is really advancing the goals that are of interest to them.

ROBERT A. CARLSON  
*Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

#### Agrees with Editorial Position

Dear Jerry:

Thanks for your comments on the Editor's Page of the *Journal of Extension*, Summer, 1970.

Closely tied with the "real-issues" bit is truly the whole proposition of becoming better teachers. I think you are absolutely correct!

RALPH C. DOBBS  
*Columbia, Missouri*