

# becoming what we are

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Tom McCormick

## Differences of Geography and Experience

It was John Godfrey Saxe, a relatively obscure 19th century American poet, who told about 6 blind men inspecting an elephant. An inevitable argument arose as each imagined the whole elephant in terms of the part he touched.

Something of the same problem presents itself in any brief account of the Extension Service. We're talking about an organization that's over 60 years old, dating back to the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, but one with a long gestation period. And we're broadstroking a group that prides itself on a grass-roots approach; not simply on a state-by-state basis, but county-by-county. Each of us touches a different part of the elephant.

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In my own Vermont, which until recently had more cows than people, we're concerned about milk all the way from grass to the market, with more than passing interest in midwestern grain crops and railroad freight rates. And of course maple syrup, the discovery of the Indians, is something of a trademark. In Hawaii, meanwhile, Extension and the College of Tropical Agriculture are trying to double the productivity of 1.25 million acres of grasslands in the next decade. At the same time, Extension makes available a recipe for Pom Kim Chee, more recognizable as spring pickled cabbage, Korean style. Ethnic culture is an increasing concern for all of us.

But Extension people are divided by more than a continent; age leaves its imprint, shaping our experience.

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At a recent meeting of the northeast region of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors in Rochester, N.Y., the *Extension and Experiment Station* editors heard a report on tomorrow's communications hardware; the use of computers and laser beams to produce, among other things, printing without presses; and projected images without screens.

A few weeks later, one of those very editors would be visiting with Dean Emeritus Joseph Carrigan, who joined the Vermont Cooperative Extension Service in June, 1914, one month after its national birth. The immobility of the mud season was part of his early Extension life, but, by the time Carrigan retired, such was the pace of progress that he was to believe the amount of light energy striking the land would be the only true limiting factor in agriculture.

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### **Father of Extension**

Most say that our Abraham was Asahel Seaman Knapp (he became Seaman A. to eliminate the acronym), the ninth child of a pioneer family in Schroon, N.Y. Foreshadowing today's all-purpose agent, he was an educator, preacher, developer, salesman, and amateur politician, talents that led to his general recognition as Father of Extension—although Edward Danforth Eddy, in his land-grant history, suggests a much wider bestowal of honors.<sup>1</sup>

While it's true that every successful idea has many fathers, certainly it was Knapp who pulled together the various attempts at mass education for farmers and, above all, started a 70-acre demonstration plot on Walter Porter's farm in Terrell, Texas, February 26, 1903. As Knapp later said, "What a man hears he may doubt, what he sees he may possibly doubt, but what he does himself he cannot doubt."<sup>2</sup> It was this demonstration technique, literally a hands-on experience, that became the cornerstone of Extension.

Less discussed today, although equally important in those early days, was Knapp's success in securing private financial backing (before Smith-Lever) from the General Education Board, a prime source of Rockefeller money. And finally, through what charitably could be called fortuitous chance, 3 of 10 agricultural agents in South Carolina were placed in the district of U.S. Representative A. Frank Lever, who happily chanced to be a member of the House Committee of Agriculture.

Then, as now, there was considerable debate over whether the agency being born would be sufficiently academic. And then, as now, it was Extension that had the grass-roots support and the tangible results so prized by the people's representatives. The demonstration method triumphed.

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### **Extension's Infancy**

So that was agricultural Extension's birth. But, to return to Saxe's whimsy, what of the rest of the elephant?

Boys' corn clubs, followed by girls' canning clubs, foreshadowed 4-H. Illinois reported 2,000 boys enrolled in 1904. The first federally sponsored club came in Mississippi in 1907. Aiken County, South Carolina, had a girls' canning club in 1907 (Let it be freely conceded here that these citations are not graven in stone, the definitive word on who came first.<sup>3</sup>)

O. H. Benson, active in Iowa youth work, was called to Washington to serve as Knapp's associate in USDA and head up club work for northern and eastern states. He furnished the inspiration for the name 4-H and much of the organization that followed.

Agents who worked with the girls in canning quite naturally began to advise their mothers, as Knapp predicted. The year 1913 is generally considered to be the start of Extension work with adult homemakers in the South. Although a liberating force, it was not exactly a liberation movement in the present sense. The Home Bureau Creed had this goal, among several:

To maintain the highest ideals of home life; to count children the most important of crops; to so mother them that their bodies may be sound, their minds clear, their spirits happy, and their characters generous . . . .<sup>4</sup>

As with the Land-Grant College act of 1862, more than 200 years after the founding of Harvard, education for the people had taken a belated, but gigantic, leap forward. By 1915, there were 1,135 county agents. By 1945, historian Joseph C. Bailey was to call Cooperative Extension "the largest adult educational enterprise in the world."<sup>5</sup>

It's difficult today, in our world of pushbutton farming and linear programming, to realize how far we've come, and how fast. Until the Civil War, virtually all agricultural labor,

except for plowing, harrowing, and hauling, was performed by human muscle. Today, little more than a century later, the nation debates whether our quest for labor-saving devices has led to "hard tomatoes." Ironically, tomatoes were thought to be poisonous when the agricultural revolution began.

## Extension Today

And since those early days?

Few would deny that Extension has been an effective conveyor belt for information. With the agricultural colleges training the researchers and with the Experiment Stations unlocking the wonders of the soil beneath us and opening the horizons above us, Extension has had the vital role of bringing the fruits of knowledge to the people. In short order, the finding of the laboratory becomes the practice of the farmer. While Knapp himself barely escaped the farm to pursue ill-regarded book learning funded by the hope-chest savings of a loving sister, today's American farmer feeds 60 other people, freeing manpower that makes possible both our high standard of living and the mass collegiate population.

Canning and corn clubs have evolved into self-directed projects in everything from car mechanics to geology. And the modern homemaker, also freed by machinery and knowledge, is now served by consumer specialists and offered a host of arts and crafts. (Some, by the turn of the wheel of history, are the same skills so commonplace on American farms at the very start of the Extension idea.)

## The Big Picture

If this, then, is the big picture—a populace freed from toil to pursue higher education and the cultural amenities, Extension's other side, its rare adaptability, shouldn't be overlooked. If nothing else, Extension has been responsive to the times.

In June, 1917, there were 1,466 agents nationwide. By October, more than 1,600 emergency agents, including 600 women, had been added. By the following June, about 80% of the counties had agricultural agents and more than half had home agents. Herbert Hoover was to call Extension and USDA "the world's greatest educational institution."<sup>6</sup>

In the 1920s, Extension lent a hand to the cooperative movement. Farm forestry was added to the program. And by 1930, 4-H enrollment was up to 825,000. But in the 30s, trouble appeared on the far side of plenty; production in the promised land had exceeded demand. Agriculture was caught in the coils of the worldwide depression.

The New Deal came in with laws to control production, and with crop insurance, soil conservation, school lunches,

farm credit, crop storage, and rural electrification. It was the county agent who usually set up the machinery for the programs at the local level.

Then, suddenly, it was instant replay time—another World War, low food supplies, and Victory Gardens. Home agents aided the work of the Women's Land Army and young people served as Victory Farm Volunteers.

In the 50s, agricultural production expanded again, but along with it came more attention to other rural problems and farm-city relationships. Marketing, distribution, and utilization took on more importance. Rural development programs conceived in this decade grew to prominence in the Great Society dream of the 60s. Young people added worldwide dimension as they went abroad as International Farm Youth Exchange (IFYE) delegates. People once more worried about agricultural surpluses and the cost of grain bins

### **New Concerns**

Recently, we've seen a host of new concerns, starting with the growing attention to the environment and second thoughts about mechanized agriculture. Extension is involved in many special programs aimed at breaking the poverty cycle and bringing nutritional education to the back roads. And although one of the first two agents was black, civil rights still requires monitoring and women's liberation raises puzzling new questions. Here and there women become agricultural agents, while men join the home economics profession. ZPG is instantly recognized as Zero Population Growth.

We continue to live with a boom-and-bust mentality, alternately projecting famine or price-depressing surplus, our fears globally amplified by the televised evening news.

Underneath it all is a yearning for the good old days, days never seen by most, in the belief that they were simpler and, overall, better.

But perhaps it's better to go home spiritually than physically and face our problems by considering the advice Knapp gave his first agents:

Sometimes farmers have peculiar views about agriculture. They farm by the moon. Never try to disillusion them. Let them believe in farming by the moon or the stars, if they will faithfully try our methods. It does not pay to waste good breath on such matters. Avoid discussing politics or churches. Never put on airs. Be a plain man with an abundance of good practical sense. Put your arguments in a sensible, practical way. Secure the village influence and induce the citizens to give active aid.<sup>7</sup>

## Built to Weather Storm

Extension today rests on the tripod of federal, state, and local funds, just as it did in the beginning, thanks to the foresight and the wisdom of Smith-Lever, the first legislation to require state matching funds. With joint federal and local appointments, backed by local advisors and one million volunteers, Extension would seem to be built soundly enough to weather any storm. In fact, Udell suggests that imitation of Cooperative Extension may offer academia its best hope for a new golden age.<sup>8</sup>

A nice thought, and flattering, as we in Extension start the long march to the Tricentennial, happily, each to our own drummer.

## Footnotes

1. Edward Danforth Eddy, Jr., *Colleges for Our Land and Time: The Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 132.
2. Lyman Noordhoff and E. G. Winner, *50 Years of Cooperative Extension, 1914-1964* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, USDA), p. 5.
3. It quickly becomes obvious, in even a cursory review of the literature, that the main elements of Extension evolved rather than sprang full bodied from the brow of Zeus.
4. Lincoln David Kelsey and Cannon Chiles Hearne, *Cooperative Extension Work*, 3rd ed. (Ithaca, New York: Comstock Publishing Associates, 1963), p. 38.
5. Noordhoff and Winner, *50 Years of Cooperative Extension, 1914-1964*, p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
7. Joseph Cannon Bailey, *Seaman A. Knapp: Schoolmaster of Agriculture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 213.
8. Gerald G. Udell, "The Golden Age of Academia," *Journal of Extension*, XIV (January/February, 1976), 23.