

BETTER COMMUNITY LIVING THROUGH
IMPROVED PUBLIC RELATIONS AND INFORMATION
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Had I delivered this talk a year ago, it would have been a discussion of a theory for building better rural communities. Tonight, it is based upon demonstrated proof that improved public relations and information can contribute much toward the building of community life in our rural areas. Public relations is nothing more than private relations extended beyond the individual's own homestead. I think that I shall confine my remarks to a single concrete example of how our publication has co-operated with other institutions and individuals to improve public relations and provide information that enabled rural neighborhoods to become better neighborhoods and encouraged them to do so.

In doing this, I think it would be well to tell you briefly what The Farmer-Stockman is, since many of you do not live in our great Southwest. The Farmer-Stockman is a monthly farm magazine, published at Oklahoma City, with a branch office at Dallas. We have a circulation of 265,000 farm families, about 50 per cent of whom live in Oklahoma, about 45 per cent in Texas, and the remainder in other states. We consider our publication a trade magazine whose job it is to provide information and a limited amount of entertainment for the farm families. We serve as a medium through which

research data and other useful information available from agricultural experiment stations, agricultural colleges, government agencies, and similar sources are passed on to farm families who can make practical application and benefit from the information.

We maintain a staff of considerable size to travel constantly over our territory to assemble and prepare such information. I mention this simply to give you an idea of our position in the field of public relations.

We do not consider our position and responsibility to be limited to the position of reporter in this capacity, however. We feel that we must also carry on an aggressive program to encourage people to seek and use information and to improve their mode of living and their relations with one another.

Progress has taken a heavy toll of community life throughout our rural sections. Not so many years ago farm people were extremely dependent upon one another. It was necessary that farm people be good neighbors in order to get along. That was more of an asset than we perhaps realized at the time. The coming of paved roads, consolidated schools with bus transportation, movies within convenient driving distance, high-speed automobiles and pick-up trucks, radios at home, and many other similar conveniences gave the families an independence that often caused them to lose the close contact

that had previously existed between their family and their neighbors' families. Community centers and community churches disappeared. The spirit of neighborliness disintegrated. Folks lived near each other, but did not know each other. They were no longer neighbors in the true sense of the word, and many neighborhoods completely lost their identity as an individual community.

It was our thought that rural people could enjoy the progress that was taking place and still retain the highly desirable elements of neighborliness and a good neighborhood. With this in mind, we enlisted the co-operation of the Extension Service of Oklahoma A. and M. College to develop what we have called the Rural Neighborhood Progress Contest. We found the Extension Service ready and willing to co-operate in such a program because it involved the application of the teaching that the Extension Service has been promoting for many, many years, and it employed the methods they have found to be most successful. These are the demonstration method and the method of encouraging people to do things for themselves.

Because we have a very substantial circulation in Texas, we felt it also desirable to work out a similar program for that state. We also enlisted the co-operation of the Extension Service of Texas A. and M. College, and devised a similar Rural Neighborhood Progress Contest for Texas. The two contests were conducted separately, with equal amounts

of prize money offered in each state, but they were so much alike that I shall confine my remarks here this evening to a description of the Oklahoma program.

First, the purpose of the contest was set forth to stimulate individual and neighborhood effort toward farm and home improvement. It had the ultimate objective of making the farm a more desirable and convenient way of life, as well as more stable and profitable to those engaged in the operation of our farms. It is our hope that efforts such as these will make farm life so attractive that our farm youth will be inclined to remain on the farm rather than to seek other means of earning a living.

Cash prizes for the contest were offered by The Farmer-Stockman, totaling \$3100.00 in Oklahoma, with a top District prize in each of the four extension districts of \$300.00. Cash awards were made down to sixth place. In addition to the District prize, a Grand Prize winner for the state was selected, winning an additional sweepstakes prize of \$700.00. This made a total of \$1,000.00 offered to the Grand Prize neighborhood of the state.

We had to begin by planning a rural neighborhood. This we did by stating that a group might participate by establishing a rural neighborhood, including all farm families living within the defined area, in co-operation with the Extension Service and county planning committee already in existence in many counties. Incorporated towns, villages,

and cities were excluded from the scoring, except as they provided markets, communications, schools, churches, and similar facilities for the rural families living within the designated neighborhood. We left the definition of the neighborhood up to the local people in co-operation with their county agents and home demonstration agents. Proof that they did a good job is shown by the fact that the judges did not find it necessary to disqualify a single entry because it was not a true rural neighborhood.

Because of the tremendous variation in size of farms and density of population in Oklahoma, we could not set the size of the neighborhood either on the basis of a specified number of families or on the basis of a specified area. We had neighborhoods participating in the contest ranging from a dozen families to more than 100. The areas ranged from eight or ten square miles to 150 square miles in the wheat growing sections. Our observation of the progress made by the various communities, however, demonstrates that the most successful programs were carried on by rural neighborhoods composed of thirty to sixty farm families living adjacent to one another.

In order to organize the neighborhood and include all groups, we required that a neighborhood progress club or committee be set up, including at least one man, one woman, one boy, and one girl, each coming from a different family within the neighborhood. They held the offices of chairman,

vice chairmen, and secretary. Other officers were named as the neighborhood saw fit, but these were required.

Progress was recorded on the basis of a detailed analysis made of the neighborhood at the beginning of the year and another at the end of the year. This work was done by the people living in the neighborhood, with the guidance and assistance of the county extension agents. The points on which the neighborhoods were scored included a possible score of 1,000 points on each of ten separate divisions. They were as follows:

1. PROGRESS IN SOIL IMPROVEMENT AND CONSERVATION.

This included results because of both individual and group efforts to terrace, contour farm, build dams, or other conservation means to stop erosion, and improvement of the soil within the neighborhood.

2. PROGRESS IN LIVESTOCK IMPROVEMENT. Credit was given for introduction of better grades of stock in all phases of livestock production, including poultry and turkeys, both individually and on a neighborhood basis. It also included establishment of dairy sire rings, feeding, management, etc.

3. PROGRESS IN CROP AND PASTURE IMPROVEMENT.

Accomplishments because of work to improve quality of seed planted in neighborhood, uniformity such as one-variety cotton communities, overseeding of native pastures, and similar work not previously credited under soil conservation were credited here.

4. PROGRESS IN FARMSTEAD IMPROVEMENT. Credit was given for painting and repair of buildings, for neatness of premises on all farms in the neighborhood, for neat, well-kept fences, and fence rows, and for landscaping of farmstead. There were three main sub-divisions.

- A. Improvement of rural housing.
- B. Progress in yard improvement and farmstead beautification.
- C. Progress in improvement of other farm buildings and improvements.

5. PROGRESS IN FARM AND HOME EQUIPMENT. Results of efforts to bring rural electrification into the neighborhood and modernize the farm home, addition of convenient and labor-saving equipment to make farm life more attractive to family members were credited. Such things as butane gas, natural gas, and other labor-saving devices counted.

6. PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES. Lack of personal support for schools has resulted in poorer rural education. Progress toward adequate educational facilities through neighborhood effort were credited here, as were educational activities. Such activities were credited even though the schools were located outside neighborhood boundaries.

7. PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH AND OTHER RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES. The life of strong and happy rural neighborhoods usually centers around the churches. Progress made by the church and religious organizations in the neighborhood to better fill their places were credited under this division.

Community programs counted, even though the churches were located outside neighborhood boundaries.

8. PROGRESS TOWARD BETTER RURAL ROADS AND COMMUNICATIONS. One severe handicap of many farms is their inaccessibility in bad weather. Good roads will come only when neighbors take steps to develop them. Those neighborhoods that made progress through their own efforts got credit. Roads built by neighborhood group action counted more than county roads; county roads more than state or federal roads. This section also recorded phones, radios, newspapers, magazines, and similar communications.

9. PARTICIPATION IN GROUP ACTIVITIES. Credit was given for contributions to neighborhood progress through participation in and with organized groups, such as farmers organizations, co-operative marketing groups, women's clubs of all kinds, 4-H and FFA, rural health groups, and other co-operative groups and similar activities.

10. PROGRESS IN ORIGINAL AND UNIQUE NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVITIES. This was an open division and included credit for neighborhood projects which contributed to betterment of the area and its residents, and which did not properly fit under any of the headings listed above.

In order that you might get a picture of what a neighborhood can accomplish, let me review, briefly, what was achieved in the prize-winning neighborhood for Oklahoma. It is the Goldsby neighborhood of McClain County. Goldsby

began by organizing according to the rules and enlisting the assistance of Mr. L. J. James, the very capable county extension agent, and Miss Edith Huffer, the equally versatile county home demonstration agent.

When Goldsby neighborhood entered the Rural Neighborhood Progress Contest in January, 1947, only three neighborhood activities were carried on. There was a home demonstration club, an annual Christmas play, and an annual box supper to support the play. Other than these things, no community events had been held in more than 11 years.

The Goldsby Neighborhood Progress Club was organized, with 43 families, and meetings have been held at the schoolhouse every two weeks during 1947. At each meeting, reports of the committees were made and projects and events planned.

At the beginning of the contest, the Goldsby neighborhood listed as things they did not have, but wanted, a church, a Sunday school, a school kitchen, a community building, complete with stoves and chairs, electric lights for school yard, a community park, a one-variety cotton program, a cotton insect control program, a soil fertility improvement program, livestock disease and parasite control program, farm and home buildings painted, mail boxes painted and lettered, community and farmstead roads improved, a 4-H club organized, telephone service extended to more homes, highway signs to be erected, organize a junior neighbors club, start a rodent control program, and to provide entertainment for neighboring families.

These things they set up as goals, and at the end of the year, by working together, they proudly looked over the list and checked off each item: "Achieved." In addition, they added other projects from time to time that helped to make Goldsby's progress outstanding among many progressive neighborhoods participating in the 1947 program.

The families of Goldsby community are justly proud of results of their work, and readily agree that the tangible accomplishments and the neighborly spirit they have developed are greater in value than the awards which prompted them to begin their ambitious program.

"What we have accomplished this year can be done by other communities, and must be accomplished so that there can be a better America," the Goldsby committee stated in its final report to the judges.

The Goldsby neighborhood adopted the motto "If you want a better neighbor, be a better neighbor." They had this motto printed on stickers, and everybody in the neighborhood put one on his car to let the world know they were moving forward as a neighborhood.

The variety of things that can be accomplished by rural neighborhoods in a program such as this is almost endless. Most of the neighborhoods surprised themselves and amazed everybody else at what they were able to achieve when they began working together. Let me summarize briefly what some of these neighborhoods did in their progress program:

Round Grove, Kay county, dug a drainage canal co-operatively, held young people's recreation program, and obtained a site for a community center.

Antelope Valley, Noble-Garfield counties, built a new church, with several denominations joining together on the project.

Banner, Kingfisher county, built an all-weather outlet to trading centers.

Mutual, Woodward county, organized a Farmers and Merchants club to improve relations between farmers and business men of the community.

Rose Valley, Grant county, carried out community-wide soil improvement project.

Johnson, McClain county, vaccinated all dogs against rabies, and 54 of the 63 farmers joined crop improvement association.

Bulo, Beckham county, women canned vegetables in summer for school lunch program.

Newcastle, McClain county, formed a Men's Booster Club to parallel women's club in promoting fellowship, goodwill and improved living conditions in the neighborhood.

Pleasant Valley, Cleveland county, launched a perpetual 4-H club pig improvement program, tested cattle for Bangs disease, and culled poultry flocks.

Ong, Seminole county, broke up "small cliques" by enlisting the entire neighborhood behind a general improvement program.

Sobol, Pushmataha county, created a new atmosphere "socially and morally" through group action, the men built new seats for the church, and a young people's addition was built.

Stapp-Zoe, LeFlore county, improved homes and farmsteads by cleaning up and landscaping, and adding electricity. A community building has been planned.

Boyer, Pottawatomie county, worked together on major farm jobs, such as threshing, farmers trading work and the women keeping them fed.

Kanima, Haskell county, organized several activities for young people, including a Sunday school, singing classes, and study league.

Ward's Chapel, Atoka county, organized 4-H clubs, and provided Sunday night prayer meetings when no preaching services were held.

Verdigris, Rogers county, halted the dumping of trash along county roads and cleared brush at dangerous highway intersections.

We feel that this entire program is simply a concrete application of disseminating information and improving public relations for the building of better rural communities. Although we have carried on many different types of programs similar to this in the past, we have never sponsored any program which has produced as much in the way of positive tangible and lasting results as this neighborhood program has accomplished. It

involved nothing new in the way of approach. Every item on which the neighborhood was scored is one which has been promoted in various ways by various institutions for many years. I think the key to it lies in the fact that it required an organized effort to do the things that they knew they ought to do anyway. It brought about a community unity, a spirit of co-operation that had not existed previously in many of these communities. It had the distinct advantage of providing something worthwhile for every community which participated in proportion to the effort the people there put forth to make their own neighborhood a better place in which to live. We have observed that every neighborhood which won a cash prize achieved a program of its own that exceeded in value many times the amount of money which the contest offered them. What has been done in Oklahoma can be done in many other states.

Democracy is the best form of government because it means a free people. A good neighborhood is a democratic neighborhood. It is also a progressive neighborhood. It all begins with good neighbors. We believe that we are continually making Oklahoma a better neighborhood in which to live, and thus we are making a real contribution toward a better America and a better world.