

What Is Farm Group's Future?

By Ferdie J. Deering

Will the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) become institutionalized and begin to work conservatively through established channels for traditional goals? Or will supporters attempt to

Last of Series

reach their goal of parity through established farm organizations?

Dr. Luther Tweeten, regents professor of agricultural economics at Oklahoma State University, has traced farm protest movements back to Colonial times in America. He expects the first out-

come. "Usually, protests begin with an effort to withhold farm products from the marketplace," Tweeten says. "They have generally been unsuccessful in these efforts because of the independent nature of farmers, the heterogeneous structure of farming and because of the perishability of farm commodities."

Once the farmers have attempted holding patterns, they turn to the political arena, he says, and try to influence legislation to relieve their plight. This has happened on a number of occasions.

George Stone, president of Oklahoma Farmers Union, says his organization began in 1902 as a revolt against speculators who were "cornering the markets" and manipulating farm prices.

"Our official name still is the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America," Stone says. "We have always been for 100 percent of parity, and

no compromise. Without help from the established farm organizations, the AAM wouldn't have got to first base either on higher target prices or on liberalized farm credit."

A strong point of established farm groups is that their policies are determined by members. "The general farm organizations make an honest effort to find out what members think," says Ken McFall, executive secretary of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau.

Ellis Freeny, executive vice president of Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association, says that organization's officers and staff are bound by policies set by members.

"Our officers must be responsible and act on facts, not on emotions," Freeny said. "This is different from organizations without leadership and without membership."

Policies of the Oklahoma Wheat Growers Association and other commodity groups are established at annual conventions of members.

AAM supporters accused general farm organizations of being too much concerned with insurance and other services. Leaders defend these activities as wanted and needed by member members.

The Oklahoma Farm Bureau insurance program was launched when farmers could not obtain certain types of policies at reasonable rates, said Jim Lockett, president. Commercial firms have broadened their coverage but OFB members want to keep their own company, he added.

George Stone noted that the Farmers Union Insurance Co. belongs to its members "and

the profits are all theirs."

The Farmers Union formerly operated cotton gins, retail grocery and supply stores, sometimes pooling crops for marketing. The state organization has disposed of these businesses, but local cooperatives continue to provide some such services.

The Farm Bureau relies upon its insurance branch as a "stabilizer" to help support other services, says McFall. It also provides outlets to supply members with oil, grease, tires and batteries.

A livestock marketing service launched in 1970 was closed out last year after losing some \$350,000. Lockett said its efforts to improve producers' incomes by pooling odd lots of animals and making direct sales did not achieve enough volume to make it self-sustaining.

The Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association maintains the state brand registry and provides members with brand inspection services to help run down and prosecute cattle thieves.

A negative aspect of the AAM strike was that it provided anti-farm interests with a platform from which to air their complaints, valid or not. Incidents such as loose goats in Washington, the bridge

blockade at McAllen, Texas, eggs thrown at the secretary of agriculture, and charges that farmers fail to report 10 percent of their income were emphasized in news coverage.

A Department of Agriculture study that was widely publicized in consuming areas estimated that if farmers received 100 percent of parity, food prices would go up 20 percent, export sales would drop sharply, and nearly 75 million acres would be idled.

Political opportunists, many of them candidates, announced support of the strike, but usually overlooked other organizations.

Farm prices may determine whether AAM will develop into a stable farm organization, with officers, membership and a program. At a national rally in Oklahoma City in May, delegates resolved "to attempt to gain control of established farm organizations at the local level." Either course remains a possibility.

If AAM chooses to work for its goals within existing organizations, new members probably will be welcomed. These associations are proud of their systems whereby the majority of members determine policies, and new or different ideas would not be rejected without a vote.

#4
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81 JUL 21 1978
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