

Ferdie J. Deering

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County Agents Bring Better Farming

A MERICANS eat better and live better because our nation's agricultural industry has been able to produce more than we can consume.

Some of the key professional people who brought this about are in convention in Oklahoma City this week. They are members of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents.

Inventions such as the steel plow and the reaper greatly advanced productive capacity of farms, but the move that really got agriculture on the way up was the Land Grant College legislation that helped each state establish an agricultural and mechanical college.

The Morrill Act of 1862 provided endowments of land and money for the agricultural and mechanical colleges, and the Hatch Act of 1887 added state agricultural experiment stations.

While still a territory, Oklahoma established a land grant college at Stillwater in 1893. John Fields, director of the experiment station, immediately began publishing a farm paper on his own to carry modern

farming information to homesteaders.

This helped, but more was needed. In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act to create an "agricultural extension service" or county agent system to deliver research results directly to farmers.

Through this cooperative federal, state and county setup, a branch of Oklahoma State University operates in each county. This may sound simpler than it was. Many farmers eagerly welcomed county agents, but skeptics wanted nothing to do with "book farmers."

The earliest agents made their rounds by horse and buggy and Model-T Fords over muddy or dusty roads. They organized small groups of farm boys into "corn clubs" or "pig clubs" that sometimes convinced the boys' fathers that maybe there was something to book farming after all. From these clubs the 4-H club program was developed.

Women were organized into "home demonstration clubs," where the ladies learned to grow better gardens and can the vegetables, cull poultry, sew, upholster furni-

ture and acquire other homemaking skills.

County agents did whatever was necessary, persuading farmers to try new crop varieties and show neighbors the results, staging demonstrations of doctoring livestock and helping to terrace fields. At fairs, county agents often put up stock pens and exhibits personally, helped with the judging, and stayed until the debris was cleaned up.

Now, with farmers living in town and urban workers living in rural areas, county agents have a considerably broader set of problems to handle. Their public acceptance is better, their staffs are larger, and they have immediate access to the latest information.

Agricultural research and its application are major reasons why American farm productivity continues to increase.

They may be called "County Extension Directors" now, but to many people these Cooperative Extension Service workers will always be regarded as "County Agents," who "sell" better farming to any who will "buy!"