

Before There Was A Farm Bureau...

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ferdie Deering, retired editor of the Oklahoma Farmer Stockman, has been commissioned to write a book on the history of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau. His unfinished manuscript is nearing 30 chapters and is expected to be published this Fall. The following is an excerpt from Chapter One of his untitled book.

The movement to organize the Oklahoma Farm Bureau arose in the worst possible time to form a new organization. Or perhaps it was the most favorable period, because the need was great for farmers to unite their voices so that the nation could hear them.

The movement reached a climax in a time of stress following a long period of distress. Low farm prices of the 1920's had fallen to starvation levels after the crash of 1929. Drouth and blizzards of dust frustrated farmers trying to raise crops, pastures or gardens. Soil and water conservation programs were just getting started.

Farmers who had loans on their land couldn't pay them. Those who needed to borrow money to survive had trouble finding willing lenders. Interest rates were high, often exceeding 6 percent. If mortgage holders didn't foreclose, farmers and ranchers faced the possibility that their land might be sold for taxes. Hundreds of thousands of bankrupt farmers joined the lines of job hunters and relief seekers in the cities.

As if all of these troubles were not enough, the United States was being drawn into the war started by Hitler in Europe when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor to set off hostilities in the Pacific.

After decades of surpluses, farmers suddenly were called upon to produce more food to help win the war. They were expected to do it with little new machinery or tractors, with rationed tires and gasoline, and shortages of nearly everything else. Binder twine was scarce. Baling wire was straightened and reused. Rural electrification was halted as copper went to war. Scrap iron was collected and sent to war plants. Farmers were advised: "Make bags last; these may be your last." To top it off, farm boys were drafted, leaving older men, women and children to do the farm work.

When Oklahoma Farm Bureau was formed by 968 charter members on February 2-3, 1942, most of them were much better acquainted with adversity than they were with prosperity.

The number of farms in Oklahoma had declined 17 percent between 1935 and 1940, a loss of more than 36,000 farms. A large part of these were tenants, but at least one-third of all farmers had cash incomes of less than \$1,000 per year.

Total cash farm income for Oklahoma in 1941 was reported at \$250 million, mostly from crops. This compares to \$3,130 million estimated for 1979, 65 percent of it coming from livestock and products.

Nearly half of the farms were mortgaged, with an average debt of \$2,185 per farm. Because Oklahoma farmers owed more than \$47 million, Editor Clarence Roberts was advising readers of The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman to "pay cash and pay debts."

Average size of Oklahoma farms then was 174 acres, compared to 486 acres in 1980. Most farmers lived adjacent to dirt roads, often miles from pavement. Farm homes were simple frame with brick or stone rare.

Electricity was on the way through the Rural Electrification Administration Law passed in 1935, but a 1941 survey showed that one Oklahoma farm in eight had electricity. Wiring for lights cost about \$10 per home but if outlets for appliances and the barn were added, installation ran as high as \$30. Minimum charges for electricity were \$3.50 per month. A Fort Cobb dairyman figured electricity saved him half a day's work and observed: "That's 50 cents, figuring labor at \$1 a day!"

Radios, washing machines and electric irons were the most common appliances. Half of the farms which had electricity had electric refrigerators. About one-fourth of the farms had phones but most had either an automobile or a truck, and quite a few had both.

A loaf of bread used a little more than a penny's worth

of wheat and sold for a dime. Milk retailed for 12 cents a quart. Beef cattle brought less than \$10 cwt., hogs a little more. Cotton was worth 17 cents a pound and wheat sometimes went over \$1 a bushel.

Lewis H. Munn and Roscoe Keiffer recall the low value of wheat in Alfalfa County in those days. Munn produced a bill of sale showing that he received \$70.52 for 251 bushels of wheat, 28 cents a bushel. But that wasn't his lowest market.

"One time I sold wheat for 14 cents a bushel," Munn said. "It wasn't worth anything. You couldn't get any money out of it. So when I finished harvest I just went ahead and put my wheat out for the next crop. It was near Christmas before I went to the elevator to see how much wheat I had. This was back in the wheat pool days, before the old corn and hog program. There was a change in the program, somehow, that caused them to take five cents a bushel off my wheat besides the storage costs. It netted me only 14 cents a bushel, and I had a gross of \$1.38 per acre for my crop."

That wasn't the whole story. Munn had to pay his brother and nephew for helping him. That cost more than the wheat brought.

Keiffer recalled selling one crop for 25 cents a bushel. "We had a fair crop that year, but there was a slump in prices," he said. "The next year I fed my whole wheat crop to the hogs. Of course, we didn't raise big yields then like we do now. Fertilizer makes a difference. Back then, if you got over 20 bushels per acre, you made pretty good. A lot of farmers didn't get over 10 or 15 bushels per acre. We were farming with horses. I was gone so much I kept a hired man all the time. Paid him \$20 a month and his board."

Darold Butler of Garvin county was initiated into farming when his father was killed in an accident. As the oldest son at home, he had to take over in 1931, and he remembers the Depression very well.

"In 1932, I sold oats for 10 cents a bushel at the thresher, corn for 20 cents a bushel," Butler said. "I had a contract to deliver 100 tons of No. 1 alfalfa to the Indian Seminary at Ardmore, \$8 a ton stacked in the loft. I was real proud to get that contract."

"As close as we were to Pauls Valley, there were men sitting in our lane every morning at daylight, carrying syrup buckets with cornbread or something in them for lunch. They were ready to work from sunup until sundown for \$1 a day, and we didn't have the dollars."

The surplus of labor disappeared when the war started and wage rates went up. Clarence Roberts wrote in an editorial: "To get help to finish up the harvest, farmers paid \$3 to \$5 a day for labor, and it was hard to get at that."

Lyle Hague told of firing one \$7 a day hay hand who kept breaking handles out of pitchforks that cost as much as \$2 apiece. After the third accident in one day, Hague told him, "You had just as well go on back to town. You're not breaking even on pitchforks!"

Marion A. Jeffrey of Canadian county remembers a trip he took to the 1933 World Fair in Chicago. On the train going across Illinois he admired the beautiful farming country around Bloomington.

"Well, if this country is in such dire straits, who is paying for the paint on all of those buildings?" Jeffrey commented to the stranger sitting beside him.

"My insurance company," the man replied. "We own every farm you have looked at in the last 10 minutes. Which ones do you want? We are not in the farming business and we've got to get out of it. We have foreclosed on all of these farms."

Jeffrey said he didn't think there was that much foreclosure in Oklahoma, but banks and insurance companies did take over a lot of farms. They were anxious to get rid of the farms. At that time, corporations were barred from owning Oklahoma agricultural land for more than seven years. They sold to anyone who would make payments.

This apparently accelerated the soil erosion problem that dated back to statehood and which had been intensified by the drouth of the 1930s. "The tenants were just barely making a living on the land they could rent," observed Lewis Munn. "They didn't take care of the soil, and when insurance companies sold the foreclosed farms, many of the buyers either didn't know how or didn't care about taking care of the soil. The companies just wanted to get rid of the farms."

Land was cheap then. Good pasture land sold for \$25 or \$30 an acre, and it took pretty good crop land to bring more than \$100. Good farmers began acquiring tracts nearby and combining them to get more production, hoping to offset low prices with high volume. One ranch of more than 6,000 acres in Coal county was put together at prices ranging from \$1 to \$3 an acre, and none higher.

Even so, it was not easy to pay for land. Lyle Hague of Cherokee and his wife contracted to buy a certain quarter section of good wheat land from his parents in 1931 for \$18,500.

"Fifteen minutes after that, wheat went down to a quarter a bushel," Hague said. "I'm going to tell you something. My Dad made me pay for that land. It was pretty rough to buy it and pay for it with wheat at 25 cents a bushel."

It was the war, rather than the domestic political and economic situation, that brought the Great Depression to an end.

"Food comes first and the growing of food for all who fight the common enemy is no less important than the skill of those who man the ships and planes," Clarence Roberts editorialized as farmers struggled with shortages of money, machinery and manpower to meet the goals set for them.

For 1942, they were asked to produce 15 percent more beef, 5 percent more hogs, 21 percent less wheat and 6 percent less cotton, 83 percent more peanuts, more gardens, more chickens, more eggs, more milk, and more oats, corn and hay.

Ceilings were placed on farm commodities, as well as on most other products, but farm prices seldom bumped the ceiling in spite of gains. "The cheap food which the public ate in the 1930s, based on farmer prices which ruined or wrecked the farming industry, are causing some consumers to crab about present food prices," Roberts wrote. "Food is up. Many items cost 10 to 20 per cent more than a year ago."

The Farmer-Stockman was publishing patriotic articles as well as farm features. A series by David Cushman Coyle warned that "We may lose our freedom and come under the terror of the Nazis, like so many other nations, unless we can give each other the satisfaction of belonging or standing together."

Such messages seemed to underscore the need for a strong representative farm organization in Oklahoma. But farm organizations weren't seeing things alike, most farmers did not belong to any of them, and agriculture generally felt its voice was being ignored.

The American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Grange, and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives united under the banner "Free Farmers, Inc." to battle the CIO's efforts to enroll dairy workers in Oklahoma and other states into John L. Lewis's United Mine Workers Union. And farm groups pretty well agreed that ceilings ought to be placed on union wages if they were to be put on prices of farm products. Agriculture was left out in setting up the Office of Price Administration, but representatives were added after AFBF and other farm groups protested.

In the early 1940s, AFBF, the Grange, National Cooperative Milk Producers Association, and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives were identified as "The Big Four" in Washington. They stood more or less united on many issues. The National Farmers Union stood very much alone, but it was regarded as being close to the liberal wing of the Democratic administration.

AFBF was in hot conflict with the Farm Security Administration over policies and methods, and later tangled with other agencies. AFBF wanted commodity loans boosted to 85 percent of parity; NFU opposed this, favoring an income certificate plan. AFBF wanted the Farm Credit Administration taken out of USDA; NFU didn't. AFBF favored administration of farm programs by a five-man non-partisan board within USDA; NFU didn't. AFBF and NFU also differed over how food rationing stamps should be handled, and over many other timely issues.

In the summer of 1941, Congress enacted the law AFBF wanted to support cotton prices at 85 percent of parity. This caused Clarence Roberts to write: "The fight for this bill was led by the American Farm Bureau Federation and victory is due largely to it. Too bad that we don't have in Oklahoma a strong Farm Bureau, ready to line up with other states in fighting to protect the American farm industry in such matters."

Undoubtedly, many Oklahoma farmers felt the need for a means to unite their voices to influence legislation and agricultural policies, but effective channels did not seem to be available through existing farm organizations.

Charles Bard, charter member of Oklahoma Farm Bureau from Comanche county, commented that he was aware of such a need. When asked whether he and his neighbors had discussed an organization before he had heard about the OFB movement, Bard replied:

"No. We just griped among ourselves!"