

Leaders Worked Free For Farm Bureau

EDITOR'S NOTE: The manuscript which follows represents Chapter 14 of a 30-volume production by former Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman editor Ferdie Deering who, for the past year has compiled and is writing an in-depth history of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau. The book will be published this fall and will be available for sale to the public. We think you will find Mr. Deering's writings to be a treasure for your household.

When Oklahoma Farm Bureau was organized in 1943, one of every 10 persons living in the state was classified as a farmer or rancher and was eligible for membership. It was estimated that only 14 per cent of them belonged to any farm organization.

Today, the number of farms and ranches has declined from around 200,000 to 71,000 and only one person in 40 is classified as a farmer or rancher. Prospective members might be better able to pay dues than they were in the 1940s, but the number of prospects is fewer and more interests vie for their attention.

When the early workers went out to solicit members, they called on leading farmers and top ranchers first.

"I can remember those first few years, when we drove down every section line looking for members," said Eugene Jones of Kingfisher county. "We picked the best men, we thought, in every area and told them we were going to have a meeting the following week on a certain day. We asked them to gather at our farms or offered to go by and pick them up, so they could attend."

Roscoe Keiffer of Alfalfa county had similar recollections. "In the beginning the men were, almost without exception, good solid citizens, men who were making farming their business, and who had an interest in improving agriculture as an industry," he said. "They hoped to benefit from the movement if things got better, but they were looking for overall benefits, rather than personal gain."

"I spent a lot of days recruiting members," said Elmer Mannschreck of Caddo County. He and his father, Carl, were charter members. His son, Phil, presently is an OFB director. "We would line up a task force, set a date and all go out to try to get our neighbors and friends to join. Dan Arnold was pretty good at getting farmers to take time from their businesses to go out and work for Farm Bureau for free."

Did he know most of the farmers he called on?

"I knew every one of them," Mannschreck said. "At that time I knew every farmer within a 10-mile radius of where I lived. I never tried to promote insurance. It's a good service, but we emphasized that if we would get together and talk about what we wanted, we would be able to help farm people."

After Clarence Roberts had persuaded Lyman Hickman of Hennessey to join Farm Bureau, Hickman suggested they enlist the support of Edward Harrison, who lived in the south part of Kingfisher county.

"I don't want any part of it," Harrison told them. "It is just a Main street organization."

Hickman and Roberts persisted and eventually Harrison joined. He not only joined, but he and his family also became one of the most diligent Farm Bureau families. The Harrison-Hickman team became known as "The Farm Bureau War Horses." They signed 33 charter members and kept on until Kingfisher county had around 1,500 members.

These early workers paid their own expenses and didn't look back. Gasoline was low-priced but it took cash to buy it. Ed Harrison and Jim Cross, for example, would take some apples and go out to solicit memberships all day. They worked principally south of the Cimarron river, while Ed Harrison and Lyman Hickman worked together in communities north of the river. They sometimes helped in adjoining counties, too.

The confidence people had in those doing the soliciting was an important factor. Lyman Hickman would meet a friend on the street and boldly ask: "Give me \$5!"

"What for?" was the usual reply, as the friend reached for his billfold or checkbook.

"Well, we are organizing a new farmers' association to speak up for us and we want you to be a charter

member," Hickman would tell the prospect. He usually got the membership, not because they understood Farm Bureau, but because they trusted Lyman Hickman.

In an interview for this book, the question was raised with Ted Hickman, Eugene H. Jones, Keith Shipley and George Harrison, all longtime Kingfisher county FB workers, as to whether farmers would be willing to put forth such dedicated and persistent efforts in the 1980s.

"I'm afraid a lot of farmers would say they couldn't afford to spend the time," Ted Hickman said, "but I think they could now just as well as we could then. We might have trouble getting board members. I can't find a young farmer to take my place on the county board now."

Darrell McNutt, former OFB director from Kiowa county now living at Soper in southeastern Oklahoma, expressed somewhat the same opinion in a later interview.

"There was a commitment in Farm Bureau in those days that we don't see so often now," McNutt said. "All of us made trips to hold meetings in other counties and hardly anybody collected expenses."

"When a county would have a membership drive, six, eight or maybe 10 farmers would go out and work for two or three days. Now you can't get anybody to go out on a membership drive unless he has a chance to win a \$25 Stetson hat or some other prize. We are not as committed to certain ideas and ideals as we used to be."

Comanche county signed up the largest pre-organization membership, and then kept on signing up members. One reason was that Charley Bard and others carried membership books in their pockets and brought them out whenever and wherever they met prospective members.

Bard remembered one big drive in Comanche county when they had 40 captains, each with two workers. Bard was county FB treasurer and he said he carried home a shoe box containing \$850 in \$5 memberships.

This might have been the big membership drive chaired by Stanley Caha, although the following incident may have occurred at another time. Dates become uncertain after 25 or 30 years.

"We didn't have anybody who belonged to Farm Bureau from the northeast corner of Comanche county," Caha recalled. "We checked around and bumped into one old boy who lived up there and who seemed to be pretty well known and well liked. After we talked with him awhile, he agreed to help on the membership drive."

"The drive started off with a breakfast meeting," Caha said. "Then we came back to a dinner that night to turn in our memberships. This old boy from the northeast corner brought in several new memberships. Naturally, I was interested in seeing who signed up."

Caha thumbed through the cards and then asked the solicitor: "Where is your membership? I don't see your check in here."

"Well, I haven't decided whether or not I want to join yet," the volunteer responded rather nonchalantly.

On another drive, Caha and his team were making up a list of people to be contacted. When they came to one name, someone said: "Oh, there's no use going to see him. He won't join."

Caha said, "Well, let's go by anyway. Let's not pass up any of them." So they drove into the man's yard and invited him to sit in their car for a visit. They explained the FB story so well that he joined, went back into the house to change hats and went with them to help sign up others in his neighborhood that very day.

Once John I. Taylor called on a farmer whose mare was having trouble delivering a colt. He asked Taylor: "Can you help me?" John just rolled up his sleeves and together they pulled the foal. It was easy to sign up the new member after that.

Eugene Jones had a somewhat similar experience in Kingfisher county. The committee was checking a list of prospects when somebody said: "Gene, why don't you go see Mr. So-and-so?"

"That's the time," commented Lyman Hickman. "Send the young man who has never butted his head against the wall. He doesn't know it hurts." So Gene went to see this tough prospect.

When he arrived, the farmer was trying to get a herd of goats into a corral. Jones pitched in to help and never said a word about Farm Bureau until they had every goat in the pen. Then they talked.

"He was reputed to be a very close man, but he never argued at all," Jones said later. "He just said, 'Here's my \$5' and I don't think he or his wife missed an annual meeting as long as they lived."

Gleason Dudgeon of Kiowa county called on one gentleman three years straight before he signed him up. "He got so tired of seeing me come around that he

finally said, 'Go ahead and fill out the check' ". Dudgeon did and the man remained a member from then on.

Emmett Wray got a membership the hard way, too, but it didn't last. He and a teammate called on a farmer in the northern part of Blaine county. They spent more than an hour talking with him and finally the farmer pulled a \$5 bill out of his pocket and said:

"There! I'm going to take a membership." After they had written him up, the farmer told them: "Now get out of here! I'm just giving you this to get rid of you!" He didn't renew.

Bartering got into membership sign-ups, too. On one of their many trips together, Lewis Munn and Ralph Gfeller accidentally ran down a coyote on the highway east of Buffalo. They loaded the carcass into the car trunk and drove on into Buffalo.

Next morning Jack Short, OFMIC general agent for Harper county met with them to discuss the insurance program. Mr. G. told Jack about the coyote.

"I know a fellow who lives up north of town here who traps coyotes," Jack told them. "The county pays \$5 bounty on coyote ears and he might pay you something for the dead critter."

That sounded like a deal, so Munn and Short headed for the coyote hunter's place. They didn't forget Farm Bureau. They gave him the coyote on condition he would fork over \$5 to pay his Farm Bureau dues. He got back his \$5 when he collected the bounty.

There were some successes and some failures. Jim Ditmars recalls that Harmon county turned out to be a tough place to get started with members. Dan Arnold, for some reason, didn't want to start with Claude Ingram, a strong leader and former OFEA officer.

"That was a mistake," Ditmars said. "He fought us up and down the road in Harmon county. He was a scrapper. Otis Royal got us off high center. After Mr. Taylor and Mr. Arnold made their presentations in our membership meeting, everybody just sat on his hands. Nobody made a move. I'll never forget old Otis Royal. He came down to the front of the court room and told the crowd, somewhat harshly, that they'd better get out and get something done, or somebody would do it for them. They all jumped."

The first Farm Bureau meeting in Roger Mills county almost ended in a fist fight, Ditmars recalled. This was a strong Farmers Union county, with about eight local insurance agents, but the main cause of the dispute was something neither side opposed.

The Upper Washita region was campaigning for funds to advance the upstream dam conservation program. L.L. "Red" Males, local banker and nationally-known conservationist, was leading the parade.

In Washington, AFBF was engaged in a major hassle with the Soil Conservation Service over methods of operation and budgets. At the time, if a farmer applied for payments for terrace building, this practice would not be approved without a complete soil analysis and other tests. Approval of terracing plans might be delayed for a year.

Because of the vital role carried on by SCS on the Upper Washita, folks there seemed to feel that anybody who was on the outs with SCS must somehow be against the upstream dam program.

When the first moves were made to organize a Farm Bureau in Cheyenne the national conflict assumed local proportions of a somewhat personal nature. Sharp difference of opinion appeared. The first man elected Rogers Mills county FB president resigned soon afterward, but OFB finally made it plain that it was not against conservation and the two sides cooled down. The upstream dams were built and so was Farm Bureau.

Apparently Kiowa county was the first to raise Farm Bureau dues from the original \$5 per year. Kiowa was a strong county and had built a substantial membership by aggressive drives during the war years.

The resolutions committee dropped a surprise proposal into the 1948 Kiowa county annual meeting by suggesting that dues be boosted to \$7.50 a year to establish a county FB office. In spite of the shock, the proposal for a 50 percent increase in rates carried and Kiowa opened its county office above a bank in Hobart in January 1949.

The dues increase resulted in a temporary setback in membership, but this was overcome in a short time. Gleason Dudgeon, assisted by Mrs. Dudgeon, was designated as secretary "to run the office."

That they did it successfully was demonstrated by the fact that Dudgeon and C.L. "Jumbo" Kreiger, general agents for OFBMIC, consistently ranked at or near the top in number of policies written.