

Resolutions: A Chart For The Course

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ferdie Deering, former editor of the Oklahoma Farmer Stockman, is author of a new book, now in production, about Oklahoma Farm Bureau's history. The book is scheduled for release in November. The following manuscript is excerpted from Chapter 20 of the 30 volume production. We hope you will find it interesting.

A chassis is the framework upon which is mounted the body, and working parts, the roof, walls and floors. By that definition, the resolutions procedure of Oklahoma Farm Bureau is its chassis.

Although many people became members of OFB in order to obtain insurance with OFBMIC or to utilize other services, from its beginning the policy-making procedure has been OFB's strongpoint, its fundamental reason for being.

"They started at the grassroots and everyone had his say," said Francis W. Kannady of Tulsa County, former OFB director and board secretary. "Delegates to the state convention represented what the counties had adopted. That was the reason I was in there — so we would have a voice. I felt like OFB was developed to give farmers about as strong a voice as any organization there was and it has proven out that they do have."

That sentiment has been expressed many times in interviews for this book. Often it was stated as "from the grassroots up."

"The procedure for making the policy is the one that has made Farm Bureau viable," said Darold Butler of Garvin County.

"Those who disagree have opportunities to express themselves," said Stanley Caha of Comanche County. "They have input into the discussions and a chance to persuade people to agree with them."

Buster Brown of Tulsa County, one of the earliest OFB members, said: "You get involved and vote on policies."

"Even those who might not attend resolutions meetings continue to pay their dues, so that could be an indication that they do not disagree — strongly, anyway," said Carl Owens of Garvin County, an OFB director.

Many times the idea of an individual farmer has been carried through county resolutions meetings to the OFB state convention and to the AFBF, eventually resulting in legislation or other action.

Back in 1947, The Farmer-Stockman reported such an instance in which J.H. Cox, Bryan County farmer, initiated a national movement. It occurred to him that farm-to-market roads should be built FIRST along school bus and rural mail routes.

As an individual, Cox had limited influence in Congress, but he brought up the subject in the Bryan County FB meeting. His suggestion was adopted as a resolution. The OFB convention adopted the same idea. So did the AFBF, and Congress passed a law to make it so.

Lee Tyler recalled that a law amending the federal farm program originated with the Haskell County FB after a scandal involving illegal sale of cotton acreage allotments occurred in Texas in the 1950s. One Haskell County farmer had become involved, and Farm Bureau members agreed that allotment sales should be legalized.

Mart Fowler then was Haskell County FB president. He brought the resolution to the state OFB convention, where it passed. AFBF concurred, and a law was passed.

"We boys out in the counties have seen little grassroots resolutions that are important to us bring changes," said Ted Hickman of Kingfisher County. "We have followed them through and have seen a number of them made into laws that benefited agriculture."

"I will never forget one time when Bob York, who was active in Kingfisher County Farm Bureau, got stopped down at Oklahoma City for speeding in his

pickup," Hickman continued. "At the time, state law said a car could go 55 mph at night but a pick-up only 50 mph."

"They gave Bob York a ticket for following a car that was going 55 mph and they fined him. He was mad and at the next Farm Bureau meeting he offered a resolution that the speed limit for pickups should be made 55 mph, the same as for cars."

"Bob followed the resolution to the state convention," Hickman said, "and then followed it into the legislature. It was just a little thing, but he was determined and in 1955 he got the law changed."

Charley Hollopeter had a ready-made problem when he became first president of Kay County Farm Bureau in 1946.

"I had just acquired a deed to my grandfather's homestead in Tillman County," Hollopeter said. "When I prepared to sell it, I found that it would cost me more than \$130 to have the abstract brought up to date. The abstract was the size of a mail order catalog and the cost was 10 cents per sheet."

"Roy Grantham was our state senator and Grant Craig was our state representative. Kay County Farm Bureau originated a resolution and the state convention adopted it. Grantham and Craig prepared a bill which provided that after 40 years of peaceful occupancy you didn't have to go back any further to prove title to your land."

"There was a certain amount of lobbying against it, but the bill passed and became law," Hollopeter recalled.

He was a conservation specialist as well as a farmer and he was named to head the OFB committee on land and water use later. The committee found conflicts of interest that needed compromising.

"There was a tug of war at all times between the cities wanting rights and our committee, more or less, fell into the spot of trying to protect farmers' interests," Hollopeter recalled.

One outcome of this struggle was a sort of informal coalition that included Hollopeter and Legal Counsel Frank Carter, representing OFB; Harrell Allen of Ada, a state leader in soil and water conservation; Prof. Joe Rarick of the University of Oklahoma; and sometimes representatives of the Oklahoma Farmers Union and Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association. This group helped draft water legislation and Hollopeter says "We were successful in writing the first draft of the Oklahoma water law" that later was enacted by the legislature.

Lewis Munn remembered that on one occasion, after attending a hearing on water legislation at the capitol, Hollopeter called on him at his office in the OFB building.

"There is to be a hearing next week on domestic uses of water, and I think you should be there," Munn said Hollopeter told him. "There is no guideline or definition regarding this and a committee has been directed to submit a proposal at the next hearing."

The definition proposed, in substance, defined domestic use of water in an amount sufficient to satisfy household needs, water a home garden up to a certain size, plus enough to water one milk cow and riding stock.

This would present a problem and tremendous cost to stockmen, whether the stream was running or dry. OFB opposed the definition and after a tough battle, it was amended to allow domestic water use in amounts sufficient to water livestock up to the normal carrying capacity of the pasture. This is an example of how OFB headed off bad regulation simply by serving as "an alert watchdog."

If there is a weakness in the OFB resolutions procedure, it is that many members do not avail themselves of opportunities to express their views and needs by attending and participating.

In an editorial titled "From the Grassroots Up," written in 1949, President John I. Taylor declared that it not only was an opportunity for OFB members to participate in the resolutions process, but that "It is your duty."

It seems to be generally true that no more than 10 to 20 percent of Farm Bureau members in a county will attend and take part in an annual meeting where policies are discussed and decided.

"This is a problem of some concern to us," said Ken Qualls, OFB director. "If you had a large group

of unhappy, dissatisfied members, dissatisfied with the program, with the direction of the organization, you might have a massive turn-out of members to protest, to attempt to make a change, or else a mass exodus of membership. But our membership has grown statewide year after year."

Before resolutions may be considered by the OFB committee to offices and assignment as delegates; while in other counties leaders have to draft members to fill these positions.

"One of our jobs and challenges at the state level is to motivate those counties which aren't active and to show them why it is to their interest and advantage to become so," Lockett said.

In helping his daughter to write an essay on problems of leadership, OFB Director and Secretary Loren Wehrenberg of Garfield County pointed out that many capable people who should be involved in leadership don't take part. Instead, they may gripe about the way things go or about actions taken.

"I pointed out to her that if they don't take part in an organization, they aren't entitled to complain if things don't go their way, because they didn't do anything to change them," he said. Wehrenberg thinks this problem is not exclusive to Farm Bureau.

In spite of the absentees, OFB leaders are convinced that resolutions reliably reflect the thinking of the majority of members.

"You might be surprised how many folks will have some input into the resolutions process," said OFB Director Don Sherrill of Osage County. "They may not go to the county resolutions meeting, but a lot of them will talk to those who do go and may get their ideas brought up even if they are not present."

In its early years, the matter of handling resolutions was a very simple and direct procedure for OFB. The program for the second annual convention Nov. 1-3, 1943, called for commodity group discussions most of the first day.

Reports of officers and outside speakers took up most of the second day. At 3:30 p.m. that day, the resolutions committee was appointed. Resolutions were acted upon that afternoon and next morning.

This was possible because the number of resolutions had not become as voluminous as they were after more counties were organized. Just 31 resolutions were adopted that year. By 1947, the number had grown to 52. The total for 1979 was 108, plus scores of carryover policies that were not discussed because there were no requests for them to be revised or revoked.

Over the years, there appears to be no subject relating to agriculture or to citizenship in general that has not been touched upon in some way by resolutions or activities of OFB. A mere listing of topics that have been handled in resolutions would occupy many pages and files of accumulated data on many of these subjects run into the thousands of pages.

As Farm Bureau grew, the task of the resolutions committee became increasingly larger and more difficult. Committee members had little time at the convention for anything but committee work.

At the 1953 convention, Charley Roff, master of ceremonies at the evening program, announced at its conclusion in his customary baritone twang: "The resolutions committee will now return to its cell to finish its work." His announcement might have sounded somewhat like a sentence, but that was the way the work as done.

"At that time, I was information director and I couldn't write my stories about what the convention would consider until the resolutions committee had completed its report," OFB Executive Secretary Ken McFall remembered. "This usually was about midnight Monday. I have sat up all night in a hotel room writing stories about what the resolutions said."

After he became executive secretary in 1959, McFall discussed this problem with Lewis H. Munn, then OFB president, and the board adopted their recommendation that the resolutions committee meet the week prior to the convention to process resolutions from the counties.

This relieved the pressure of time on the committee and gave staff time to assemble the resolutions and print the catalog for the delegates to consider. This was a major advancement.