



The County Agent and the Nebraska Farm Bureau

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society).
You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Floyd Rodine, "The County Agent and the Nebraska Farm Bureau," *Nebraska History* 36 (1955): 205-212

Article Summary: The Extension Service in Nebraska was largely responsible for the formation of Farm Bureau units in the various counties.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Carl Tefft, Chris Melius

Nebraska Place Names: Seward County, Gage County

Keywords: county agricultural agent, Farm Bureau, Extension Service, Smith-Lever Act, Farmers' Union, Agricultural College (University Farm), Federal Department of Agriculture, Corn Belt Liberty League, Farm Council

THE COUNTY AGENT AND THE NEBRASKA FARM BUREAU

BY FLOYD RODINE

THE relationship of the county agricultural agent to the Farm Bureau is a problem that has received much attention. This relationship has been the focus of attack not only by interests inimical to the farmers' welfare but also by rival farm organizations. The attack has been carried out on the local, state, and national level. The county agent and the state extension personnel were largely responsible in the early years (1913-1920) for the origin and growth of the county Farm Bureau. Federal authorities emphasized the need for an organized group of farm people in each county to assist in planning an educational program based upon their needs, aided by extension people whose training and experience would be helpful to them. At no time, however, was there any intention to discriminate in behalf of any particular group of farmers. These people were to be selected by local people who would be aided, if they so desired, by capable extension representatives. Such a plan and organization was also desired by many supervisors or county commissioners who were criticized sufficiently for their regular lines of work without taking on any additional duty which they did not understand and which at the time was very controversial.

The principal argument used against the Farm Bureau-Extension relationship was that a man supported by federal and local taxation should not be permitted to take an active part in the upbuilding of an organization of a private nature. Although county agents were paid with public funds, they

Floyd Rodine is assistant professor of history at Central Washington State College, Ellensburg, Washington. This article is based upon a doctoral dissertation prepared at the University of Nebraska under the supervision of Professor James L. Sellers.

were instrumental in building up the local Farm Bureau organization. Other farm organizations, therefore, felt justified in protesting the Farm Bureau-Extension relationship on both the state and national levels.¹

The history of the Extension Service and the rise of the county Farm Bureau in Nebraska is somewhat representative of many of the other midwestern states. The relationship between the two in Nebraska never became as integrated as it did in states such as Iowa where the Farm Bureau and the Agricultural Extension Service are joined by state law.² Such laws have opened the entire Farm Bureau organization to criticism.³

Seward and Gage counties vie for the honor of having the first county agent in the state of Nebraska. Available records show that it was Gage County, in February 1913, which obtained the first county agent through the co-operation of the Federal Department of Agriculture. Seward County was probably the first to form a "farm management association" to sponsor this type of work.⁴ This forerunner of the Farm Bureau was organized in Seward County in February 1913.

Modified extension activity in both Seward and Gage counties took place before the Smith-Lever bill became law, but it was carried on in anticipation of the passage of this bill. Smith-Lever gave tremendous impetus to farm education through extension work since it provided federal funds for that purpose. The procedure used was as follows: upon petition of 10 per cent of the farm landowners of the county, the county commissioners were given the right to appropriate, if they so desired, funds for the employment of a county farm demonstrator. The demonstrator was under the general supervision of the State Extension Service director. It was thought that such supervision would provide a more

¹T. Saloutos, and J. D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939* (Madison, 1951), p. 220.

²Iowa has a state law requiring a county Farm Bureau to have a certain number of members before it is able to obtain a county agent.

³John Beecher, "Who's Behind the Farm Bureau?" *New Republic*, June 28, 1943, p. 855.

⁴J. F. Lawrence, letter to A. E. Sheldon, August 4, 1922 (Ms., Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation office, Lincoln).

uniform and consistent system of instruction throughout the various participating counties.

With this direction, the county agents did aid in setting up various farm associations and bureaus and felt justified in defending them until this organization within their county left the educational field and engaged in activities not in keeping with broad constructive activities of better farming methods and better farm and home living conditions. Likewise, the State Extension Service felt justified in promoting and defending the State Farm Bureau organization as long as it served these broad educational needs.

Thus the Extension Service in Nebraska was largely responsible for the formation of the Farm Bureau units in the various counties. Extension Service saw the need of a co-operating farm organization to aid the agent in his educational work. The agents believed that, if they were to be of maximum help to the farmers, continuous consultation between the two was necessary. In Nebraska all farm people regardless of organizational affiliation were welcomed in educational activities except in cases where their presence was a disturbing factor, and these cases were few. This led to regular meetings of the men who were especially interested in improved methods of agriculture. The Smith-Lever Act referred to such groups of men when it provided financial grants for extension work in states which were willing to match federal funds. Federal funds could be matched with state, county or local funds or with funds supplied by "interested groups of citizens." The Farm Bureau leaders recognized that their local units could qualify for Smith-Lever aid and, sensing the advantages that such an association would afford, they quickly adopted a program of active co-operation with the county agent.⁵

Since the organization which was co-operating with the agent was known as the county Farm Bureau, it was recognized as the leader in this work.⁶ The Extension Service

⁵Helen Fuller, "Who Speaks for the Farmers?" *New Republic*, February 23, 1942, p. 267.

⁶W. H. Brokaw, address entitled, "Growth of the Farm Bureau and Its Relation to the Extension Service," January 6, 1922 (Ms., Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation office, Lincoln). Brokaw is retired Extension Service director.

encouraged this co-operation and help because the men who belonged to the early Farm Bureaus were the men interested in what the agent had to offer and, therefore, were the chief benefactors of the Extension Services. In many counties, for example, the Farmers' Union wanted to abolish the Extension Service because many farmers resented county agents whom they called "book farmers."⁷ On the other hand, the Extension Service fought every movement of the Farm Bureau to make of their organization anything but an educational organization. W. H. Brokaw, director of Extension Service throughout the Twenties, made every effort to keep his agents from selling Farm Bureau tires and other articles handled by the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation. Sales activities of this type were in direct violation of the rules and wishes of the Extension Service director.

The county Farm Bureau, then, was a voluntary organization of people engaged in farming. The Farm Bureau was non-secret, non-partisan and non-sectarian.⁸ The organization, according to its original policy, refrained from engaging in commercial activities (although it soon deserted this policy). The county Farm Bureau was primarily interested in promoting co-operative extension work in agriculture and home economics through the state College of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture. The basis for this co-operation had been provided by the Smith-Lever Act and was further supported by later state and federal legislation. The county Farm Bureau could, therefore, co-operate with the Extension Service of the Agricultural College and the Federal Department of Agriculture by contributing of its funds toward the maintenance of one or more extension agents in the county.

The extension director, as a joint representative of the College of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture, was authorized to enter into co-operative agreements with county officials and organizations such as the Farm Bureau. This co-operation was provided for by Section Two of the Smith-Lever Act which states:

⁷W. H. Brokaw, interview, January 10, 1952.

⁸*Idem.*

that cooperative agricultural extension work shall consist of the giving of instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics to persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities, and imparting to such persons information on said subjects through field demonstration, publication and otherwise and this work shall be carried on in such a manner as may be mutually agreed upon by the Secretary of Agriculture and the State Agricultural Colleges receiving the benefits of this Act.

By 1917 there were a considerable number of county Farm Bureaus and Farm Associations throughout the state. A. E. Anderson, county agent from the University Farm in Lincoln, wanted to unite the various counties so that a uniform agricultural program might be developed. Thus, a small group of men met in Lincoln on January 8, 1917 at the University Farm (as the College of Agriculture was then known). On motion by J. F. Lawrence, representative of the farmers of Dawes County, an organization known as the State Association of County Farm Bureaus was formed. So, the genesis of the state Farm Bureau Federation can be traced to the College of Agriculture and the Extension Service.

Since the Nebraska Federation was a service organization, the Farm Bureau officials believed they could best serve agriculture by co-operating with the Extension Service in bringing its benefits to the farmers of Nebraska. The Extension Service was happy to receive this co-operation. On several occasions, extension appropriations would have been cut almost to the point of killing the entire program had not the Farm Bureau lobbyists applied pressure on the members of the Nebraska State Legislature for continued support. Another indication of co-operation is the fact that the Executive Board of the Nebraska Federation invited the director of the Extension Service to attend their regular board meetings.

Interests opposed to the Farm Bureau lost no time in voicing their criticisms of the activity of the state Federation in its support of the Extension Service. E. A. Burnett, at that time Dean of the College of Agriculture, defended this relationship and clearly stated the Extension Service viewpoint:

The University of Nebraska in its desire to promote what it considers to be a worthy institution has lent its moral support to the Farm Bureau and believes it to be working along consistent and conservative lines for agricultural progress. It has not taken part in the organization's drives further than to endorse the movement through its representatives. It has not solicited Farm Bureau memberships.⁹

Opposition to the Farm Bureau-Extension relationship continued throughout the 1920's and reached its peak in the year 1933. In that year, there was a concerted effort both on the state and national level for the repeal of the Farm Bureau-Extension laws and a complete abandonment of extension work. The lobby which demanded complete abandonment of the work was conducted primarily on the national level and was headed by Peter Carey, President of the Chicago Board of Trade. He, in turn, was aided by many grain exchanges, boards of trade, livestock exchanges and some state veterinary associations. The Farm Bureau defended its relationship with extension work and gave the following reasons for this nation-wide opposition:

Boards of trade and grain exchanges, etc., were strong supporters of the county agent as long as he devoted his time entirely to education in better production methods, but, when Extension Service followed out the further provision of the Smith-Lever Act which authorized them to assist the farmers in an educational way in better methods of marketing and distribution, they immediately came out in opposition to extension work.¹⁰

In Nebraska, the opposition group was composed of certain farm organizations, private marketing agencies, etc. This group wanted the Farm Bureau-Extension question placed on a ballot for a statewide vote. Farm Bureau officials were successful in preventing this, as they argued that an educational work such as the Extension Service should not be thrown into the political arena. They did agree, however, that a majority of farm operators within a county must approve of an appropriation and, also, that the signees could have their names removed at any time by notifying the county clerk. In this way, those who wanted extension

⁹E. A. Burnett, address of March 16, 1921 (Ms., Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation office, Lincoln).

¹⁰*Bureau Farmer*, April 1933, p. 10.

benefits would have to petition for them, and the majority of farmers in the county would decide what they wanted. The bill,¹¹ as finally accepted, included the above mentioned provisions which, in actual practice, changed the Farm Bureau-Extension relationship very little.

Although the relationship between Extension Service and Farm Bureau work in Nebraska was never officially integrated, the Law of 1939 (L. B. 212) is generally regarded as the "separation" of the two organizations.¹² Both the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau were tiring of the constant criticism directed at their relationship, and the Extension Service openly favored passage of a bill which would remedy the situation. There was a friendly relationship continuing as the fields of action were slowly changing, but it gradually became apparent that because of the general misunderstanding and distrust of certain elements there must be a newly named group responsible for extension activities. The Farm Bureau, therefore, finally accepted passage of L.B. 212 as a compromise measure. Previous to this compromise bill, the Corn Belt Liberty League had introduced into the legislature a bill which would have abolished the county Farm Bureaus and curtailed Extension Service. The hearing for this bill had been stormy. The Farm Council (representing the various farm organizations in the state) then arranged this compromise bill which was endorsed by the Nebraska Federation and by most of the forces in opposition to the Farm Bureau. L. B. 212 gave the farmers the option of whether or not they wished to call the county co-operating agency the county Farm Bureau; it made voting procedure and elections more specific and, in general, it arranged for the Extension Service to be independent of any specific farm group.

The two Liberty League spokesman, Carl Tefft of Avoca and Chris Melius of Powell, seemed to be satisfied with the bill. They said their intention had been to eliminate the confusion which had existed between the Extension Service and the county, state, and national Farm

¹¹Laws of Nebraska, *Creation of Farm Bureaus and Cooperative Extension work*, 49th Session (1933), Senate File 309, p. 56.

¹²W. H. Brokaw, interview, January 10, 1952.

Bureaus and to insure the Extension Service against domination by any farm organization.¹³

After the compromise was brought about by the Farm Council, the bill was easily passed into law. Since L.B. 212 there has been a minimum of friction between rival farm organizations over the extension problem. The law was amended once in 1947¹⁴ to raise the maximum amount that the county board could set aside in the general fund of the county extension budget. It is L.B. 212, then, that must be credited with finally clarifying the relationship between the Nebraska Farm Bureau and the Extension Service. Since this change has taken place a great number of persons who are influential in Farm Bureau, as well as in Farmers Union, Grange and other agencies, continue their interest and assistance in educational programs sponsored by extension people.¹⁵

¹³*Nebraska Agriculture*, March 30, 1939, p. 1.

¹⁴Laws of Nebraska, *Relating to County Extension Work*, 60th Session (1947), L. B. 405, pp. 57-59.

¹⁵W. H. Brokaw, letter of March 25, 1955.