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VOL. XXXIX

WASHINGTON, D. C., JANUARY 1955

No. 1

Keeping up with . . .

Rural Reading

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BEST direct influence upon farm folks for all sorts of changes and improvements is "word of mouth" over the line fence or at a rural gathering. The next best, as many tests have proved, is the standard farm journal or "farm paper" whose total mass circulation in the open country runs well over twenty million. That's better than four of these periodicals per census farm. Material, social, and spiritual influences spring from numerous sources today, but with the farm paper occupying the key position. Not that the farmer has little access to other reliable information sources in this age of grandiose publicity programs via press, screen and airways. He has plenty, often verging on the "too much."

It simmers down to this: The farm paper is a tradition and a familiar custom of long and generally respected standing. It came out to the farm before any other major educational force. It holds fast to farm attention in most cases like few other mediums. As a trade or occupational medium, it enters into the life of the whole family—unlike most of the standard technical

workers' periodicals.

Naturally it can't do it all. There is also a place on the farm for the modern communications services—especially in great emergencies and for instant application, as well as for simon-pure entertainment. The farm paper never hopes to compete in the realm of spot announcements, of course, but it has visions of serving up a little relish with

its meat, or pastime pleasantries along with production problems.

Another avenue for rural readership has bobbed up in recent years. It is the "farm department" of the metropolitan newspaper. The last time we counted up, there were about 275 writers listed in the annual newspaper directory as bona fide skippers of these agricultural columns. But thus far there are no appreciable signs that farm folks are relying more upon such media than upon the friendly old farm press. This varies with the locality and the type of man involved and the degree of recognition he gets from his boss.

The presence of these newer information avenues reaching the farmer serves, no doubt, to key up the farm paper staff and oblige it to be alert and cognizant of the kind of competition that could be troublesome. The weakness of the usual newspaper farm department as a factor in the picture lies mainly in two things—that the farm writer too often has other chores to do on split time, and the editorial scribes on the sheet often lack the incentive or the background to comment upon or point up the current agricultural doings and pending programs.

THERE are two functions typical of the field of the farm department newspaper that carry a wallop. One is the fact that they are able—but not always willing—to reach food consumers with the right kind of farm facts. This could help do away with much that is prejudicial to the farmer's interest as a producer. Then the city newspaper gets itself into the political arena more steadily and fluently than does the average farm paper. Most farm papers have been conservative on handling partisan issues or candidate claims, except to accept their paid insertions. They are learning, however, that public questions can't be ignored with ostrich behavior, and they are willing to risk "stop-my-paper" threats by taking sides occasionally on moot questions. Of course, with regard to regular farm economic

programs resulting from legislation, the farm papers all indulge more or less. That's because the parity price and commodity loan features have become woven into our whole national fabric—like taxes, highways, and public schools.

All sorts of variable positions are taken by farm paper editors on the issues and administrative dictums involved in soil conservation, rural electricity, production credit, loans to disadvantaged farmers—and even the co-operative extension service.

A FEW farm papers frankly admit there is too large a percentage of the farm dwellers making far too little income, with a relatively few making the most. They know that hosts of farm folks eke out their living from off-farm employment. But only here and there are there any active campaigns set going to raise the levels, and nothing that compares with the campaigns in behalf of research, farm safety, and that big one of long ago—the parcel post. This is merely a passing observation and not a carping criticism. The Good Book says that we shall always have the poor with us—and maybe the education and training of a poorer operator may bring him into the upper brackets. Anyhow, it's education more than legislation that seems to govern the attitudes of our farm press today.

You cannot possibly compare the bulky farm papers of today with the little books that circulated out in the sticks when we were young. Yet there are some honest and homely values which you can use to find out why the basic wealth of the farm paper lies in the good will of its steady readers. Behind that you can't ever forget that almost every state and section can look back with pride to certain vivid characters whose lives were linked with the farm press in the nineteenth century. Much of this accumulated force and influence stems from editors like Herbert Myrick, Herbert Collingwood, E. T. Meredith, Orange Judd, Leonidas K. Polk, Edmund Ruffin, and Uncle Henry

Wallace—and countless more. Some editors of equal respect and influence perform today in the conning towers of our forward farm magazines. So it may truly be said that rural journalism attracts a high order of intelligence and a deep sense of responsibility to the reduced ranks of “embattled” farmers today.



Foreign student observers coming over for a look-in on the strange operations of our farm paper craftsmen have told me that they do not much like all the big advertising spreads, more especially when the ads are mingled in with the reading matter. The foreign fellows prefer to have all the paid stuff tucked into the first and last sections of the book. One of them asked if our farm papers were not mainly “hucksters.”

THE best reply to make to that is to state circulation figures and costs. The practical farm paper today must have sufficient revenue and some to spare. Otherwise, the quality of the contents and the ability of its staff to seek and find the best and latest aids to agriculture would dwindle and decline. A magazine that is rich enough to be independent is in a better position to advance some revolutionary and progressive causes and programs than the poor and timid one. And it takes a stout income to maintain modern farm magazines with their skillful artists and layout specialists. Years ago I heard farmers complain that their farm papers were badly printed and hard to read. The old belief that “anything is good enough to sell to farmers”

is a silly motto that vanished with the peddler’s wagon.

One of the tests of any successful venture lies in the response it receives. Somebody told me awhile back that he thought fewer farmers wrote to their favorite farm paper as compared to times long ago. He claimed that in the early pioneer days the farmers exchanged experiences through the columns of their single family farm journal, writing long missives in great detail.

TO this my answer would be that winter was a shut-in time for many of the pioneers and they probably had more time to settle down with pen in hand than the active farm operator today who has less help and much more on his mind to engage his daily attention. But when it comes to short, peppery, and challenging notes, pithy and provocative, I take my hat off to the present-day subscriber. He seldom has time or mood for telling other farmers how he does this and that, but he is quick to find flaws in logic or attack the writer who draws the wrong conclusions in the farm paper.

But this did not satisfy the inquiring friend aforesaid. He said the old-timer did not have the facilities for communication that modern readers have, so his conclusion was that the real reason for less correspondence from farms today is simply that the average farm paper has lost “that personal touch.” He believes that the articles are so impersonal that they don’t mean much to a real human being interested in a human contact on ideas. “People do not write a salmon can factory, and that’s about what some of our magazines resemble today—mere manufacturing facilities,” he declared.

This adverse idea of his set me to wondering. So with your help, let’s scan a few pages of the latest current state and national farm papers. We’ll hunt for titles and sentiments and language that tell us whether or not there

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is justification for the belief that farm journalism now is unlikely to have a warm, human, and understanding appeal.

Farm papers retain the religious and reverent theme. Three of the Christmastime papers I have before me featured the second chapter of Luke, with suitable pictorial embellishment. The national paper used the Christmas tree and original farm family scenes. That's hardly what we would call impersonal.

Take the editorial pages next. "Ike Is for Peace" declares: "This is the time for farmers to get behind President Eisenhower and his campaign for world peace. The war hounds in Congress are after him. Fortunately, the war party has only a minority in Congress—but their voices are loud. Not many farmers realize how close we came to World War III in the last few months." Can you name an issue closer to the family circle and the fate of loved ones than this?

HERE is one that also hits us close to the vest. "Can We Enjoy a Boom Without a Bust?" It states: "Does America always have to have a big business boom followed by a big bust? Chances are that there will always be ups and downs, but it does seem that prompt, intelligent action can help smooth out the peaks and valleys. Maybe America will learn to be less selfish and greedy in a boom, so it won't be so humbled and hungry when the tide turns."

In a third paper appears a tribute to a departed dairy breed leader, a reverent review of the things he accomplished to convert the dual-purpose Brown Swiss cattle to the true dairy type and conformation. Such a piece has double value in a personal way. It encourages young folks to plan their lives with definite progressive programs in mind. It points up the fact that de-

voted individuals can still render yeoman service, even in this era of mass and power and super-duper objectives.

In the middle of the book, space is given to a branch experiment station philosopher. He dips into the holiday message: "By becoming Men of Good Will can we achieve peace in our own family? Will a family representing Men of Good Will be an influence for peace in our own community? Does it mean that we must wait until God or the diplomats get around to it before we can have Peace on Earth? Or does it have a personal message to us? We can tell the rest of the family how to act. But when we have a grouch or trouble or disappointments, who feels it first? Do we snap at the kids because we are unhappy? Do we growl at the good wife because our pet plans went wrong? Do we chew out the hired man because the price of pigs went down just as we were ready to sell? If I can truly become a Man of Good Will perhaps I can find the promised Peace on Earth."

Coming over into the production sections, one of the papers publishes a handy comparison for several years showing "returns over feed costs" from 100 hens as compared to that from 10,000 pounds of pork—40 hogs at 250 pounds each. The average turns out to be \$212 for 100 hens and \$590 over feed cost for 40 hogs. But then it touches on the personal situation on a farm that may make the raising of chickens preferable—recognizing the factor of human aptitude, liking for the job, and acquired skill in doing it.

BACK in the household zone of one state paper there is a fine, upstanding report about the affairs of the Helping Hand Club—a 26-year-old volunteer enterprise engaged in by readers to aid needy youngsters who cannot get help elsewhere. The Club in its career of

personal giving and helping has cared for 263 children and provided cash amounting to \$73,000 to cover hospital costs.

Then there are carloads of letters from readers in these current issues within reach. From the farm home come vital ideas for making Christmas mean more than it does in kindness, forgiveness, and charity. One Dakota woman sent in a photo of their rural mail box decorated with a bright sprig of pine and a big red bow of ribbon. The goodies and the tasties embodied in the columns of tempting recipes sent in by happy housewives surely lend a personal flavor to the occasion.

WELL displayed and written, there appears a story about the West Virginia State 4-H camp or rural center, open and used for 365 days a year among the eternal hills. Its 500 acres comprise the first state 4-H camp in the nation. The site at Jackson's Mill was the original boyhood home of General Thomas Jonathan Jackson—Stonewall to history. Certainly this article has a lot of personal interest owing to the mighty host of eager club members and leaders who always admire the best in achievement.

Readers of one of the journals find sensible discussion about corn acreage allotments—a point in which every farmer in the Midwest must be vitally interested. Their slant on it appears to be that farmers think corn allotments interfere with rotations and also mean a reduction in available feed for livestock. Personal ideas by several active farm operators and feeders are given—straight from the “horse’s mouth” to make practical reading.

In another magazine a reader gives a slam-bang comment about something he overheard a city slicker say. This knowing gent was overheard stating loudly, “We must get rid of all that corn in those tin cans. We are spending millions to keep more corn than we’ll ever need.” The reader asks whose corn is it and how much is there of it?

This year’s corn holdover of 900 million bushels would keep us going about 14 weeks, and the expected reserve of 700 million bushels in 1955 would last us about 11 weeks. A half-bad corn year like that of 1947, he says, would wipe out all our reserves and leave us with a corn deficit. Too much corn in “them tin cans?” Maybe hardly enough.

Of late the leading farm magazines have spent hours every day studying ways to make their sheets more readable and attractive. They have consulted some of the noted specialists who lay out the designs on the trestle board for the largest national slick paper outfits.

Headlines, subheads, letter styles, sizes and arrangements, photo cropping and displaying, page design and the proper use of color print overlay—as well as a whole grist of new ideas that are just becoming popular—these are the tools they work with to help the farmer get more out of the tools he works with.

BUT the best sign is that of healthy rivalry and a realization that the past is just prologue to the future. To come with open minds to any task is sensible. To live on old laurels is nonsense. Hence the better farm papers are not relying on what somebody else wrote or planned to write 30 and 40 years ago. They are obliged to keep step with the fastest moving of all industries—mechanized agriculture. They live in the present and keep a wise eye to the future as well. Reinforced with new blood and bright young folks ready to get out a paper that the home folks will be proud to read, the general situation is encouraging and alive with promise.

But the real fate of the farm paper rests with the farmer and his family. They move up or down alongside of him. With the recent break in the clouds of pessimism over business conditions, and the almost unanimous plea for peace in our time, we can safely feel that the farmer and his trade papers are in for a Happy New Year.