

Reporter for the No. 1 Industry

LEO R. FEHLHAFFER

NO, IT'S NOT FARMING, although farm business is big business and still growing individually and collectively. The number one industry is agribusiness. Take the farmer, farm supplier, transporter, processor, warehouse, and final marketer into one group and you have people and money. At that point you can forget about justifying farm writing and broadcasting for urban-suburban audiences. Justify your work on the basis of the total industry. And lest I get taken to task for forgetting, add on the agronomic industries of forestry, outdoor recreation, and ecology. In fact, our scientific expertise goes into fisheries and mining to round out an area of reporting so large, any one or two farm broadcasters find it impossible to handle.

I have a copy of "Radio Education Pioneering in the Midwest," written by Albert A. Reed, LL.D. I have also had the pleasure of personally knowing some of the charter members of the National Farm Broadcasters Association. (It had a different title then.) I also have heard agricultural leaders like Sherwood O. Berg, dean of the University of Minnesota's Institute of Agriculture, tell of the spinoff of functions once performed by the farmer. Yes, that long list of parts of agribusiness once was one operation performed by the farmer.

So let's look at how we can again perform a service for the total agribusiness rather than stick with the small segment of population.

The challenge of broadcasting in agribusiness is to relate the total business to mass media and do it in such a way as to provide a real service. Larger farms, processors, and shippers have their own methods of getting access to new technology. They go directly to the researcher, not waiting for the farm reporter to get the latest from the local county agent. An agribusiness reporter has to make this same direct contact, creating an awareness of present research. Today's technologists want to know what the

researchers are studying, so they can relate to the final results or support the researcher with funds and legislative influence.

Stock market information should be gathered on the agribusiness reporter's beat along with business information related to the total field. Airline, rail, and water transportation activities, as they relate to agriculture, are all a part of the reporter's notes for dissemination.

Farm reporters have long been credited with support for the technical excellence needed in agriculture. Wouldn't the glamour of the needs of agribusiness be easier to demonstrate? Why limit our encouragement of youth to a small area of agriculture when we could actually relate to a larger segment.

Relating agribusiness to an urban culture continues to be a relevant concern for the reporter. The expanded horizon will still need its support and the urbanist will need encouragement to recognize the importance of this vast area of business.

Finally, horticulture, recreation, and other use of leisure time are all areas of direct interest to the urban audience. These side agronomic subjects provide a still broader base for the diversified reporter.

Historically, farm broadcasts were aired for the dairyman in the barn or the farmer at home for lunch. Commuter traffic forced the morning farm show back to pre-dawn times when any self-respecting milkman is still preoccupied with sleep or, at best, weather and wake-up coffee and comedy. He is far from serious, sustained thinking about business.

Today's agribusiness report should be a feature of the evening and night time news and hourly radio news slots throughout the day. Analysis of agribusiness stocks could have the respect of a Fox-Raff & Company report. The old farm page should be a feature of the business section with gardening and recreation going to their separate sections.

There are many new tasks facing this new breed. The biggest of all, likely, is convincing the traditional media gatekeepers that change is needed. This oft' times liberal arts executive knows only of the dirty-shoe farm man who talked long and sometimes inarticulately loud about chickens, pigs, calving, and other not too palatable subjects. Getting him to accept agribusiness reports of a new flavor will not be simple or without trauma. But it's the job at hand, if agriculture is to recapture the stature it once knew.