

# Farm Live-In Program

James L. Bramblett

THE FARM LIVE-IN PROGRAM, co-sponsored by the University of Georgia Extension Service and the USDA Office of Communications, was conducted from October 16 to June 30 of last year, reaching an estimated 867,450 readers at a cost of 1.2 cents per reader. Forty-one photographs, ten in color, showed farmers in action on beef, dairy, turkey, and row-crop farms while 13 front page stories told about Georgia agriculture during the '70's.

It all started when Barry Jones, rural development editor, submitted a proposal to the Office of Communications asking for project funding. His proposal called for reporters to live on a farm for a period of time, preferably one week. During or after their visit, they would develop interpretative articles about farm life and the agricultural dimensions of current public issues affecting farm and non-farm citizens.

The project offered a wide range of approaches, a range as wide as the ideas of those involved.

Basically, it was not a publicity venture or an effort to use public media to air agricultural viewpoints. Nor was it an effort to romanticize rural life and rural people. Both of these goals are narrow and self-serving and are not apt to be reached even if pursued.

A more promising approach was to view the news media as independent observers of public life. Their focus was upon important issues, many involving agriculture, affecting their audiences. Therefore, the emphasis was about important issues and problems shared by farm and non-farm citizens.

The program allowed the reporters to write their stories pro or

con, in our eyes, or they could write no stories at all. Our role was to serve only as a liaison between the farm family and the reporter. This approach had the following advantages:

1. It assured the news media their role of independent reporting.
2. It emphasized the interdependence and mutual interest of farm and non-farm sectors and put rural-urban conflicts into a larger context of shared concerns and problem solving.
3. It added news value and substance to the coverage that "Live-In" reporters provide by helping them focus upon timely specific public issues that had agricultural dimension.

Starting in mid-October all of the potential Extension participants were informed of the project and its goals. Support of the district agricultural agents as well as the county agents was requested before we contacted the papers. Also, support of the Georgia Press Association was solicited and obtained. The Executive Manager of the Press Association disseminated, on two occasions, information on the project, through her confidential news letter to all member newspapers.

Next, initial contacts were made in person with the managing editors of the urban papers. The program guidelines were presented as flexibly as possible in order to adapt the program to the newspaper's busy schedule. Serving only in a motivational capacity, we injected ideas and assisted the editors in planning THEIR "Farm Live-In" program.

Interest ranged from mild to high with only one paper showing absolutely no interest. The editors indicated spring planting season as the time they wished to participate. So, between the first of the year and spring we prepared an information packet containing statistical, historical, and current newsworthy data. The material was used to stimulate the reporters as well as provide statistical material that could be incorporated into stories.

As spring planting season approached, contacts with the participating managing editors were reestablished. They selected their reporters and we secured the farm families.

Reporters from eight of the 15 metropolitan papers wrote features for their papers. Thirteen front page stories, five full page features and ten front page process color photographs were published. How often do we get front page color? Not only was the concept of rural life relayed through the print media to urban residents but it was given top priority by the news agencies.

Far greater than the initial agricultural exposure is the awareness of agriculture and rural life that was conveyed to the reporters, editors, and newspaper executives. The relationship established with these communicators is considered one of the most important aspects of the program. Also, the program reminded the reporters that they can still find "down on the farm" the facts about rural living and their impact upon the American Way of Life.

After the program was over we analyzed the interest and willingness of newspaper executives to cooperate with the key aspects of the program and made the following conclusions.

A "Farm Live-In" program should be initiated three months before planting season. This gives the coordinator time to establish contacts with the papers, decide upon the definite farmer-reporter arrangements, and secure the farm families before planting season. An alternate starting date would be three months prior to harvest season. But spring should take precedence over fall, because the reporters can keep their stories in sequence—planting through harvesting.

We suggest that a farm visit should last one week; however, only one of our reporters stayed for a full week, uninterrupted. Another stayed Monday through Wednesday of three consecutive weeks, and on three different farms.

Keep the duration flexible for the papers—arrangements can be made with the farmers. After all we have many more good farmers than we have newspapers.

If two papers, morning and evening, are owned by the same corporation, it is unlikely that both will participate. But don't rule out the possibility; both Columbus papers participated in the project.

Our program was initially designed to be coordinated by a grad-

uate student. Forget it. Extensive travel is necessary for personal contacts which are a must if the program is to be successful. However, in a four-quarter school system a student might be able to do limited course work during the winter and summer since travel can be minimized at these times.

Also, the proposal was designed to provide a stipend for the host family, to cover the cost of the reporter's food and lodging. The county agent in each county determined whether or not the stipend should be offered. All of the host families graciously accepted the reporters and were reluctant to receive the stipend. Therefore, we don't think it is necessary to provide these gratuities.

Now that the initial endeavor is over, we hope the "Farm Live-In" program will continue to serve as a catalyst in securing in-depth coverage of life affecting urban consumers.