

Human Obstacles Facing Editors

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GIVE ME YOUR MONEY—and no questions!

To go with that abrupt demand you envision a tough hombre with a mask on his face and a gun in his hand.

In actual practice—but with complete innocence—that could apply to many of our land-grant extension and experiment station colleagues.

Sounds unfair? Not at all.

We refer, of course, to that chronic bete noire of the agricultural college editor—the extension specialist or the research scientist who is forever screaming for more funds for his activities (and especially in the salary budget) yet who is invariably “too busy” to help the ag editor tell the public about his work.

Back to our lead quote, and you see the connection: He wants the public’s money, but he doesn’t wish to take the time and effort to tell the public about how that money is being spent.

We’ll challenge any ag editor to say he hasn’t run into that situation time and time again. The actual circumstances differ, but the pattern is the same:

1. Good old Sam. Sam has been county agent up in that mountainous county for over 20 years. He never has an item in the county papers. He doesn’t get out a county news letter. His colleagues all agree, “Well, there are five big ranchers who really run that county, and Old Sam has all of them tucked away in his vest pocket.

Fine, excepting that there are 2,800 other people in that county, taxpayers, who are never told how their share of particular tax item—county, state, and federal support of the county agent—is spent. Sam’s work in helping the ranchers through better livestock management, better range management, is of value in a vague sort of way to all residents of the county. It may make meat cheaper or better quality, or may help those big ranchers to pay their taxes to the county treasurer. The work Sam does is good. But of 2,805 residents of the county, Sam feels answerable to only five.

2. Lagging Larry. Larry is superintendent of the branch experiment station, and he is doing a good job. It is tough to meet all the crosswinds of pressures which a branch station superintendent must meet—project workers, farmers, community, local extension personnel, the farm machinery and ag chemical boys—but Larry does all right. He has to be a good housekeeper while riding herd on a staff over which he has no actual control.

Also, he schedules field days.

To the ag editor, a field day should be scheduled months ahead of the date it is held, with plenty of time for advance publicity. After all, the purpose of the day is to show farmers and others what is being done on the place, and you can't show 'em unless you get them there in the first place.

But Lagging Larry is a precise person. He wants a field day at the right moment, when calendar and weather conspire to make things look perfect, the corn verdant, the alfalfa in first bloom, the oats headed, the whole place looking its best.

So he schedules a field day, usually with a phone call or note to four or five project workers, “. . . I think next Thursday ought to be about right. . . .” and he points out that they should have mimeographed material available to hand out to the visitors. As an afterthought he tells the editor, “. . . so we're having a field day the day after tomorrow, and I thought maybe you ought to get out a story to all the papers and maybe get out some radio tapes to let people know, so you'll help us get a good crowd.” You say something sharp and terse about the state's farm paper, your biggest aide, having to have a three weeks advance to make the next issue, and you realize it doesn't dent Larry's lagging noggin.

So the field day is held, and everybody congratulates everybody else on what a fine day it was, how good the crops looked, and what a pity there wasn't more of a crowd. Your own biggest effort, as the ag editor, was to try to get pictures which would not betray the fact that there were more cars parked there with state plates than those driven by taxpaying citizens. The director mentions something later about the lack of advance publicity and how come you fell down on the job.

3. Dedicated Donald. All around Ag Hall he is referred to us as a dedicated scientist, a man doing most important work. When the ag editor dares venture into his laboratory, Dedicated Donald, in long flowing white lab coat, grabs the conversational

bit in his clenched jaws and excoriates the dean, the university, the regents, and the legislature for their niggardly support of his work. His work is important to humanity, you are told, and humanity has shown no appreciation of its importance.

The ag editor, timidly trying to wedge his way into that one-way conversation, tries to point out that, if the public were informed of this great and important work, it might help pry open the purse strings the next time budgets were being examined. Permit, at this point, an actual quote: "How in hell can I do important work if I have to take my time sitting here and telling you all about it!" So help me, that is an actual quote. It is all so absurd and so hopeless that forever afterward Dedicated Donald is Defecated Donald in the editor's book of choice cognomens.

4. Traveling Tommy. Tommy, in our own experience, has been an agronomist, an entomologist, an animal scientist, a soils scientist, and a range management man. Traveling Tommy has interesting work going on out in the state, at the branch stations, at the university farms.

He is always in a rush when the ag editor comes upon him, always just going somewhere. The ag editor surmises that Traveling Tommy is doing work which is interesting, probably has picture possibilities, certainly is newsworthy. But Traveling Tommy never has time to sit down and discuss this work.

Worst of all, for the ag editor, it never occurs to Traveling Tommy to take the ag editor along. There is a good feature story and some good photos out at the end of that jaunt to farm, corral, range, or forest, but it never occurs, we repeat, to Traveling Tommy to ask the ag editor to join him.

There would be plenty of time, riding in a pickup, to tell about the work. Why it was started, how it is being conducted, what is the hoped-for finding, and how that finding or findings some day will help agriculture and, in turn, all consumers of food and fiber. But Traveling Tommy never stops to explain. He is too busy traveling.

5. Slippery Susie. Susie is a dedicated home economist, a specialist who makes great preparation and then great trips to visit the homemakers' clubs in Strawberry Gulch and Colic Slough. Slippery Susie couldn't explain to a grand jury just what her "program" is, because she is clenching her notes so tensely in her clammy little hands. But she will spend six weeks in preparation, take one day to drive to the program location, then

after an introduction by the county home agent she will discourse for 40 minutes to an audience of 23 persons, 18 of whom came to the meeting because they simply didn't have anything better to do that day. Then Slippery Susie will spend the balance of the day in her motel room, correcting her notes for the next presentation next week at the other end of the state. She will have spent three days and \$137.85 worth of mileage, motel, and meals to reach an audience of 23 people, most of them coming for entertainment and not an eager desire for new information. In fact, the information itself is probably far behind that presented in the current issue of one of the women's magazines to which most women subscribe. But Slippery Susie, in her own mind, is doing a great job for extension and for the state. She will get a plaque and laudatory letters when she retires.

The ag editor, timid in the presence of dedicated home economists, has tried to suggest to Slippery Susie that, if given a little information about her program, he could have the artist make charts and drawings, the editor would write the script, and Susie could spend one hour in walking across campus to the university's television station, there to address an audience of not 23 but 23,000 or more. Also, it would save mileage, motel, and three days of Susie's time.

But the gal will have none of it. She is doing as she was taught to do in 1929, and she will continue until retirement, expensively reaching pitifully small audiences—and keeping a careful expense account, to be sure of payment for mileage, motel, etc.

None of these five examples is drawn as a caricature. All exist in fact, most on most agricultural college campuses. None of these people wear masks, nor do they carry snub-nosed .38's. But each of them, spending a professional lifetime on the public payroll, in his or her own way avoids the ag editor's efforts to help him tell the public—the public which pays the bills—about the work they are doing.

You can't title this "The enemy from within," because they are not enemies, only people who, in a variety of ways, conspire to avoid the ag editor's efforts to help inform the public.

If he is a good ag editor he is convinced that no new knowledge, or improvement of existing knowledge, is of any value until it is in a form and place where it can be widely useful. That sums up our job.

But how difficult, at times, it is to do that job!