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How Public Policy Work Is Done in My County

By A. M. Bishea

Probably a little about my county, our county seat of Evansville, and our people will give you a better background for what I may say.

Vanderburgh County is in the southwest corner of Indiana, separated from Kentucky only by the Ohio River, and from Illinois by the Wabash. Vanderburgh County has never been wrong in a national election. It is a small county—seven townships—12 by 24 miles in area. The population of Evansville is about 140,000, with 153,641 in the whole county. There are only about 1,100 real farm families—the rest are suburban. We have no rural high schools. All our rural students have always attended the high schools in Evansville. We also have a college with an enrollment of about 2,000.

Agriculturally our basic crops are corn, soybeans, and wheat. From a livestock standpoint we are strongly dairy, but beef cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry return sizable incomes.

Evansville is the refrigerator capital of the world with Servel, International Harvester, and Coldspot-Seeger plants. The industries are built mostly around steel, although some of the original furniture plants still operate. We are competitors of Milwaukee with two breweries.

Now, what about our people? We were predominantly of German extraction until World War II brought in an influx of northern Yankees. Our farmers are still rather generally of the original strain. They are thrifty but conservative. When I say we had the first home demonstration agent in Indiana and the first SCS district, you can judge that the county is progressive.

HOW WE GOT STARTED

How did we get interested in this matter of "public policy"? It was not a sudden, electrifying discovery. Some five years ago, we could see that farmers were asking questions that seemed to have little to do with agricultural production. When farmers met in our office or in township groups, they might talk about

fertilizing corn and feeding Supplement A to cattle, but soon we would find them discussing taxes, schools, roads, health, and national problems of both a social and economic nature.

Sensing this interest we arranged a series of city-farmer meetings. In fact, four of these meetings were attended by 150 farmers and a like number of businessmen. They were sponsored cooperatively by the Chamber of Commerce, the Farm Bureau, and the Extension Service. We used two or three speakers each night discussing the same subject. These were good rural-urban relations meetings, but they were too formal to get actual discussion from the individual.

So when our staff at Purdue suggested the possibility of a "farm policy school" with a hand-picked group of leaders, we were ready to try it.

Our first school was held in 1950. We have nine counties in our county agent district. Each agent was asked to invite from 10 to 15 men—no ladies. Our first meeting was held in the YMCA auditorium — a room that normally would hold 300. There were two subjects for this meeting: (1) the school problem and (2) national monetary and credit policies, national debt, taxation, and public expenditures.

Truthfully, the leaders invited were a little skeptical—wondering what the Purdue fellows were trying to force upon them. One good farmer came to me about a week later and said, "Bish, just what was behind that meeting? Was it politics or what?"

One reason for their cautiousness was the fact that we had just had a knockdown-dragout fight over the question of consolidation of schools, an ill-timed attempt on the part of some of our suburban population to make all county schools a part of the Evansville city system, without the logical presentation of facts.

What did the county agent have to do with this fight? A group of farmers—leading farmers—came to my office with their township school trustees and said, "Bish, we don't want you in this fight. All we ask of you is to tell us how to lick them, and we'll do the job." Now, I had taught school for ten years, and I knew the ills of the trustee system, but I also knew my farm people. I realized that consolidation was not the cure. So I first gave the trustees a real going over for their shortcomings, and

then I told the farmers where to go for ammunition to win their fight. Evidently they found both atomic and H-bombs, for they blew the referendum into bits.

I mention this because it bears upon the real value and need of these farm policy schools. Had we had a school of this kind before the fight, we would have attacked the problem more intelligently. It made me realize that extension leadership has an obligation far beyond the usual realm of crop and livestock production or the usual extension lines we generally think of.

HOW WE RUN A SCHOOL

Now, how do we conduct the school? In the morning Professor Kohlmeyer in his lovable "Will Rogers" style, presented facts on the "school problem," such as: enrollment figures, cost of education per pupil, sources of funds for buildings, sources of revenue for teachers, and variation in costs by townships.

Then we divided the group into four sections. Each section elected a discussion leader and secretary, and went into session to decide the "Goals to Strive For."

At the end of an hour the sections came together. Each secretary gave his report, and as you might imagine, they varied. It is important to note here that no attempt was made by Kohlmeyer or anyone else to draw a conclusion. The ball was still rolling when we stopped for lunch.

In the afternoon, we took up the second subject. Carroll Bottum presented the background material or facts. Then the same procedure was followed with four discussion groups.

The first meeting was good, but it took nearly the whole year for some of those leaders to see its value. We sensed, too, that the physical setup was not too good. The hall was too big and did not instill the atmosphere that was needed.

However, when we sent out the invitations for the next meeting in January 1952, practically every leader wanted to come back. This time we corrected a few mechanical mistakes. We arranged to hold our next meeting in the faculty lounge of Evansville College. This room held about 120 chairs comfortably, and that is the number we invited and had at the meeting. The psychology of holding it at the college and in a room that "just held the group" improved the atmosphere to my way of thinking.

At that meeting we discussed the welfare problem and the United States in world affairs. Again some of us made a mistake in the selection of our leaders. Checking the group, we found we had too many fellows representing federal agencies—PMA, SCS, FHA, FCA, etc. Most of them were farmers, but they tended to monopolize the discussion and squelch the comments of the other farmers.

Our last school was held in January 1953. Again we went to the college and used the same physical setup. This time we did a better job of getting a more representative group. Our subject this time was "What Should Be Done About Our Roads?" and "How to Keep the Nation and Agriculture Prosperous." To make the discussion more practical, we saw to it that we had representatives of our County Council, who appropriate our money, and the County Commissioners and the Road Superintendent, who handle our roads. Our factual information was obtained directly from our county records. The discussion this time was lively and supported by good use of factual information. It was by far the best meeting we have had.

WHAT THE AGENT DOES

Now let us analyze the policy schools and their organization.

(1) How do we pick the folks we invite? It is left up to every agent. Personally, I try to have each township represented. It may sound autocratic, but I select the fellows who I know are leaders, thinkers—not "yes men" but people who will be asked for guidance by their neighbors. I try to have some representation from federal agencies, and I always include one of those "pig-headed" individuals every community has and needs. Abe Martin said the reason a dog has fleas is to remind him that he is a dog. Any meeting needs a flea or two.

(2) How many do we invite? You may ask if 15 men are enough to do a county any good. Why don't we have 30 or 50 from each county? Possibly we do need more, but we feel that people from nine different counties getting together helps the discussion. Possibly we will cut down on the counties and enlarge the number, but I would rather have my leaders fight for an invitation than have to beg or entice them.

(3) Why don't we invite the women—aren't they also interested in public problems? A few districts do invite women, but

we have always felt we get more freedom of expression from a "men only" group. In Indiana we have a well organized home economics program, and our program was finally carried to our women—900 of them.

(4) Is one meeting a year enough? Definitely not. We should have at least one or possibly two more each year. The boys at Purdue say they are willing but short on personnel, and I assume that includes money, too.

(5) What type of program is needed to insure that the leaders will carry the "discussion" further? Do you think they do carry it to others? Actually, we make no attempt to check this. We do not obligate any leader to discuss it at township meetings or the like, but we know that it is done by the comments we get. If at least one of the subjects is alive—a local, hot issue—we do not need to worry. The very fact that we do not try to make them agree even in the concluding session, leaves the gate open for discussion. We give them the facts but let them do their own sorting. I know that the subjects are discussed at King Kamps' Club House, Tavern at Nisbet Station, and in our country church gatherings.

(6) What does the local county agent do in this type of discussion meeting conducted by extension specialists? He just keeps his mouth shut and listens if he is smart. It is his chance to get "some good public opinion," and certainly he does not want to guide the trend of thinking at these meetings. In fact, I even stay out of the discussion groups—only keeping my ear close enough to know what is going on.

WHAT I THINK OF PUBLIC POLICY WORK

Personally, I feel it is the start of filling a real need. It is not a spectacular program. You never will be able to boast of large attendance, but it is helping people help themselves. It is encouraging study and discussion of real problems. In my own particular county, I feel that it has developed a leadership group able to influence thinking with farmers and with industrial and labor leaders.

An example of its worth just came recently when our Congressman said he would like to meet with a group of our farm leaders. Most of the leaders who attended our farm policy school were there, and they made the discussion much better.