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Forty Years in Retrospect

Don Paarlberg

Congratulations to *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* on 40 years of productive life. May there be many more.

Forty years ago, when the Journal was launched, O V Wells laid down its format. It would, he said, carry signed articles in three fields:

- Results or findings of research carried forward in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics,
- Articles on new research methods or techniques, and
- Articles on statistical fact-gathering.

A review of works published in the Journal reveals that the format Wells laid down has been followed with remarkable faithfulness. The subjects cover almost the entire area relating to agriculture. Often these articles come early in the cycle of public concern focused on them.

Recognizing that a listing is arbitrary and that it must overlook many worthy authors and subjects, I report some of the topics and writers featured during the life of the Journal. The timing of the articles reflects growth and change in the agricultural economics discipline.

Sampling The work of Earl Houseman and Charles Sarle pioneered improved accuracy and credibility of estimates by what has become the National Agricultural Statistics Service. These men were instrumental in transforming the statistical work of the Department of Agriculture from undisciplined fact-gathering to a probability sampling. In a recent issue, Barry Ford, Jack Nealon, and Robert Tortora addressed a long-neglected subject: nonsampling errors.

Statistical Method Among the prestigious names were Fred Waugh, Marc Nerlove, and Karl Fox.

Soil Conservation George Walter reported early original work on soil conservation. Henry Wallace reviewed a book on the care of the earth in 1963.

Water Use Raymond Anderson foresaw increasing non-irrigational demands for water in 1963.

History O V Wells reviewed the history of agricultural economics in 1953.

Macroeconomics Karl Fox and Harry Norcross addressed the subject in 1952. Clark Edwards has written repeatedly on various aspects of the macro field.

Structure Allen Paul wrote on the agribusiness side of farm structure. Radoje Nikolitch reported the onfarm side, as did Warren Bailey.

Food Fred Waugh, Marguerite Burk, Howard Davis, William Boehm, Sylvia Lane, Stephen Hiemstra, and others were in print on this subject. Some of them wrote before food policy issues were high on the public policy agenda.

Economics of Individual Farm Products Harold Breimyer published prominently on livestock subjects. Gerald Dean, S S Johnson, and Harold Carter reported on the supply function for cotton.

Demographics Calvin Beale pioneered in this field.

Econometrics Martin Abel published on econometrics in 1963. Virtually an entire issue in 1978 was devoted to computerized data systems in the US Department of Agriculture.

Productivity Raymond Christensen and Harold Yee wrote on agricultural productivity before it gained widespread interest.

Agricultural Development Abroad Sherman Johnson wrote early and repeatedly on foreign development. D Gale Johnson published on it in 1977.

Trade The Journal has published numerous articles on trade. Alex McCalla wrote on it 10 years ago.

Technology Robert Nevel wrote on technology in 1969, and the subject permeates many other articles.

The author is professor emeritus, Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University.

Biotechnology Susan Offutt and Fred Kuchler have a thoughtful article on biotechnology in the winter 1987 issue

Other prominent economists have written for the Journal, some of them on general subjects, some in book reviews. George Brandow, who did work of lasting value on supply and demand curves, Ray Bressler, noted for his contribution in the marketing area, Earl Butz, President Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture, Willard Cochrane, former Director of Agricultural Economics, Bruce Gardner, currently productive in the field of farm policy, Dale Hathaway, now prominent in international agricultural matters, Earl Heady, recipient of more prestigious awards than any other agricultural economist, Glenn Johnson, Fellow of the American Association of Agricultural Economics, Charles Kellogg, a leading soil scientist with special interest in economics, J.B. Penn, prominent agricultural consultant in the Washington area, John Schnittker, former Undersecretary of Agriculture, Ed Schuh, top agricultural economist with the World Bank, Ted Schultz, holder of the Nobel Prize for his work in agricultural development, Lauren Soth, dean of agricultural writers, and Luther Tweeten, former president of the American Association of Agricultural Economics. The listing reads like an honor roll of the profession.

The Journal has been able to attract good authors throughout its history. Its articles have been professionally worthy. They supplement and anticipate more complete studies appearing in special reports and bulletins. Accountability and relevance are two special attributes of the Journal.

The writing style is professional without being esoteric. It is intended more to enlighten the reader than to advance the prestige of the writer, a commendable policy that unfortunately is not widespread among agricultural economists. Esther Colvin and Ronald Mighell offered some good counsel on the subject in 1957.

Not prominent among articles featured in the Journal are these subjects: farm labor, land tenure, rural development, and commodity programs, the latter probably because O.V. Wells said flatly that "articles dealing directly with agricultural policy will not be included."

Nevertheless the Journal has treated various controversial subjects on the public policy agenda during the past 20 years: food issues, environmental questions, demographic changes, structural matters, and issues emerging from the new biology. At the same time, the editors have been sufficiently circumspect to hold in check style

and subjects that would jeopardize the continued existence of the Journal and the agency. Doing and reporting economic research in a political environment is a precarious undertaking. The Journal keeps probing to find out where the limits are. As these limits change, the Journal changes. When the limits are found, they are respected.

What has come from all this effort? Measurement is impossible, but perceptions are admissible. New knowledge has been more widely disseminated. Public understanding has been advanced.

Professionals in the Department, having the Journal as an outlet for their research, have been buoyed in spirit and stimulated to be more productive.

The reputation of both the Department and the Economic Research Service has been enhanced. The proud tradition of the old Bureau of Agricultural Economics has been sustained.

During the 40 years of the Journal's existence, the standard of living on America's farms has risen, the nutritive quality and wholesomeness of the food supply have improved, and the country has been alerted to the importance of environmental issues. A part of the improvement must come from an advance in economic literacy, and a part of that advance must be attributed to the work of the Journal.

In my opinion, commodity policy is the one area in which we have not advanced. The Journal has given increasing space to this subject in recent years, but few people seem to be listening.

Research is not only a matter of professional endeavor, but it is also an act of faith. One must have faith that his or her work, at least in the long run, will add to the sum of human knowledge, will be perceived by the public, and will lift the general level of well-being.

Over the entry to Warren Hall at Cornell University are these lines:

Never yet share of truth was vainly set
In the world's wide fallow
After hands shall sow the seed
After hands from hill and mead
Reap the harvest yellow

Belief in the ultimate social and economic value of their work is what sustains researchers. And publication is what exposes their discoveries to a needful hazard: the refining fires kindled by others.