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The Story of Agricultural Economics: A Review

By Oris V. Wells

Ordinarily this article would appear in our Book Review section with the usual citation: The Story of Agricultural Economics in the United States, 1840-1932. By Henry C. and Anne Dewees Taylor (with foreword by Everett E. Edwards). The Iowa State College Press, Ames, Iowa. XXVI + 1121 pages. 1952. \$10. But this is no ordinary book. Rather, if the editors may anticipate their reviewer, this is "a surprisingly good book," one which we think should be called to the attention of all agricultural economists who are interested in the development of their science or discipline. For this is essentially a research product in which the Taylors have traced the development of agricultural economics from its somewhat uncertain beginnings into the year 1932. The plan of the project was based on the idea of quoting the actual words of the agricultural economists themselves rather than simply submitting the ideas of the authors. This task of finding the original sources and making the appropriate selections was a difficult one. In fact, some 200 persons contributed in varying degrees, with the work of collecting materials starting so long ago as 1939 in the form of a joint effort of the senior author, then Managing Director of the Farm Foundation, and the History Section of our Division of Statistical and Historical Research.

AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS as a scientific discipline is scarcely 50 years old, yet today agricultural economists are found in considerable profusion everywhere — in the Land-Grant Colleges and most of our leading independent universities, in the numerous agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture, on Congressional staffs, and as advisers or statisticians in many business corporations of one kind or another.

As Everett E. Edwards indicates in the foreword: "Surely the question as to how agricultural economics reached this height in the United States is worth serious study." This book is an effort to answer this question — an effort which started more than a dozen years ago on January 30, 1939, when H. C. Taylor, then Managing Director of the Farm Foundation, wrote to O. C. Stine of the Bureau of Agri-

cultural Economics that he felt it was desirable to begin to get together material relating to the development of agricultural economics in the United States. Stine replied under date of May 24 offering the cooperation of the Agricultural History Section of the Division of Statistical and Historical Research.

The final result of this project is a surprisingly good book — *surprising* in terms of materials used and the way in which they have been brought together, and *good* in that the product is one which it seems to this reviewer at least is sufficiently excellent to well repay Henry C. and Anne Dewees Taylor, and all of their various assistants and collaborators, for the time and effort that went into the work.

Strictly speaking, this is not a story or history of agricultural economics; certainly it is not a story of agricultural economists as such.

Rather, the Taylors set themselves to a major research task. What they have tried to do, and what it seems to me they have done very well indeed, is to analyze the development of ideas over the whole field now covered within the term "agricultural economics," starting with the basic ideas and controversies, some of which trace as far back as 1840. But attention is chiefly centered on the development of agricultural economics into an orderly, scientific discipline within the first third of the current century, during which time the stage was also set for the great proliferation of these same ideas in the applied field after 1932.

As a matter of fact, the Taylors have deliberately chosen to end their analysis with the year 1932 because, as they indicate, "that date marks the dividing line between two eras." To use their own words, what they have sought to do is "to preserve a record of some of the major roots from which agricultural economics has grown, to trace the direction of the growth, and to honor those whose insight, integrity and purposefulness determined both the direction and the soundness of the growth during the years between 1840 and 1932."

Of all the ideas set forth in the book, it is with this one statement as to the dividing line between two eras that this reviewer would be most inclined to argue. But this is beside the point, for again the Taylors recognize that agricultural economics has had and will continue to have continuous growth. And, as the reader works through the several sections of the book itself, he will find that Taylor was keenly aware of the fact that some of the solutions which were being tried during the difficulties of the 1920's were not always satisfactory to farmers and those interested in agriculture; that other solutions were in the process of developing.

Perhaps we should note the opening sentence around which the first sections of the book are built: "The agricultural situation in the 1880's and the 1890's aroused much thought on the part of farmers, congressmen, and economists." In short, it was out of the effort to understand the conditions of agriculture and farm people that agricultural economics developed, and this is the driving force that has maintained the life of the science since Taylor organized the first formal

course in agricultural economics at the University of Wisconsin in 1902.

Credits and Method

Something more should be said about the development of the project and the many credits for assistance which the authors acknowledge. As indicated earlier, this study was really started as a joint project between the Farm Foundation and the Bureau. As a part of the first fact-gathering and gaining of perspective, Anne Dewees, at that time employed in the Bureau, was sent in 1939-41 to 16 institutions where research and teaching in the field of agricultural economics was being carried on, interviewing certain key persons, including some outside the colleges, and acquainting herself with the several libraries in which material might be available. Following this, the authors continued to collect materials for another 4 years, at which time the senior author resigned as Managing Director of the Farm Foundation under an arrangement which allowed him to devote full time for the next 4 years to the preparation of the manuscript.

There is no need to list here all the persons who assisted or are given credit, but it does seem worth while to say that the foreword was prepared by Everett E. Edwards, probably representing the last of the many contributions he made to the field of agricultural history before his death in the spring of 1952; that the farm-finance sections were prepared by Norman J. Wall, Head of the Division of Agricultural Finance in the Bureau; and, finally, that those who use this book over the years will on many occasions find themselves indebted to Adelaide R. Hasse for her comprehensive index, which accounts for the last 99 pages of the book. Arrangements had also been made for Leonard A. Salter, Jr., to write the land-economics section, but this was prevented by his untimely death. However, this section does lean very heavily on Salter's thesis, *A Critical Review of Research in Land Economics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1948).

The index is one of the chief keys to the approach the Taylors have used. Perhaps as much as two-thirds of the 1,000-odd pages of the main text is actually devoted to quotations from speeches, correspondence, books, and bulletins

that have to do with agricultural economics. However, this is far more than a book of excerpts or quotations. Still, the Taylors would have rendered a valuable service had they done nothing more than bring this source material together and get it published.

The skill of the authors and the excellence of their attack lie first of all in selection of key materials and, second, in the way in which these are arranged or put together so as to illustrate and analyze the development of ideas. In addition, in their comments and connecting text they have gone some distance in telling the story of the contributors, as well as in giving attention to the manner in which economic materials gradually found their way into use among farmers and increasingly in the policy field.

Organization

The problem as to how to organize the materials was solved by dividing the book into eight main parts, almost any one of which would have represented a substantial contribution. Parts one and two deal with the economic thinking aroused by the agricultural depression of the 1890's and with the early development of rural economics and farm management in the Colleges of Agriculture, carrying the main outline into 1919, when the American Farm Management Association and the Association of Agricultural Economists were consolidated into the single organization, the American Farm Economic Association.

The following six parts in effect divide agricultural economics into six sub-fields and trace and analyze the development and thinking in each of these. The six are: Economic Analysis of Farm Management Problems; Fact Gathering and Agricultural Statistics, including a discussion of the historical and geographical approach, agricultural surveys, cost accounting studies, and the beginning of agricultural outlook work; Marketing Farm Products; Land Economics; Farm Labor and Farm Wages; and Farm Finance.

I am sure that neither the Taylors nor anyone else would argue that the importance of the several sub-fields or the contributions thereto are measured by the proportionate amount of space devoted to them in this book. Yet it is interesting, in view of the current feeling that

marketing research has been less emphasized than other fields, that more space is given to the *Marketing of Farm Products* than to any of the other five fields—287 pages, that is, as compared with 214 pages devoted to the discussion of statistics, fact finding, surveys, and related activities for which it sometimes seems agricultural economists and statisticians are most noted.

What Will Critics Say?

It is interesting to speculate on the criticisms that other reviewers may advance, as well as the answers to these which it seems to this reviewer lie within the text itself. Such possible criticisms include:

(1) *The book is too long, too complex, and in some ways rather difficult to read.*

But had it been the aim of the Taylors to simplify and popularize, it is obvious that they themselves would have chosen quite a different technique. Rather, the aim has been to select and make available the actual texts, drawn from thousands of sources, through which agricultural economics has been developed, and to relate these to one another in such a way as to show not only what ideas have been brought forth from time to time but also which ones have stood the test of time and, even more important, the tests of economic reasoning and scientific research.

As a result, the Taylors have done a definitive job, and it is safe to agree with Everett E. Edwards that anyone interested in writing in this field henceforth will find it literally necessary to start with this book. Here is a guide to the literature of agricultural economics, with a remarkable quantity of information as to the individuals and institutions relating thereto, and with one of the best organized indexes for which one could ask.

As for the argument that the book is complex and in some ways difficult to read, both agricultural economics and life happen to be like that.

(2) *The book is too much devoted to H. C. Taylor and his work.*

Perhaps so; but it seems to this reviewer that after a sober reading of the book one will come to the conclusion that the Taylors have as a matter of fact done an objective job in trying to see

that all worth-while viewpoints are adequately covered. And I am sure the Taylors themselves would be the first to agree that others may supplement their work to advantage.

Considerable space is given to the ideas set forth in Taylor's *An Introduction to the Study of Agricultural Economics*, but this happens not only to have been the first but also for many years the standard American textbook in the field. Also, considerable attention is given to the events that led to the formal organization of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics on July 1, 1922, again a field where Taylor has an intimate and first-hand knowledge inasmuch as he was at the time Head of the Office of Farm Management and did become the first Chief of the new Bureau. Further, Taylor was notably one of the early individuals who insisted that agricultural economics should cover the entire field as we now know it, rather than to be subdivided into several different sciences or disciplines. In short, to use the term fashioned some years ago, Taylor could well lay claim to having been the first "Generalist."

(3) *There are places where the reader may feel that less attention to ideas, with more attention to personalities and controversies, would have made the book more dramatic.*

True. But again this is not what the Taylors set out to do. And as one works through section after section, the advantage of this refusal to be drawn too far into personal controversies

becomes apparent. The whole study, after all, is devoted to agricultural economics and, so far as individuals are discussed, the aim, as the Taylors themselves indicate, is to give some recognition and honor to those who contributed to the field.

Concluding Observations

Each reader must of course always evaluate a book for himself. This reviewer has found *The Story of Agricultural Economics* intensely absorbing. It is an outstanding book.

There are many things that one would like to comment upon as, for example, the masterly way in which the Taylors trace the gradual transformation of the early demand for cost accounting studies into what we now know as the budget method of farm-management analysis; the insistence which recurs several times over, and which was one of Taylor's original contributions, as to the differential abilities of individual farmers as farm managers; and, finally, Taylor's clear recognition of the developments which, as he indicates, heralded "the beginning of a change in official thought in Washington on the subject of prices" as early as 1923.

But all this is beside the point. The fact is that this is a book that well covers a vast field of information; a book that will add to the actual current everyday working knowledge of all but a scant handful of agricultural economists, who will, I suspect, actually be the first to read it.

A mimeographed index for volume 4 is now available upon request from

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