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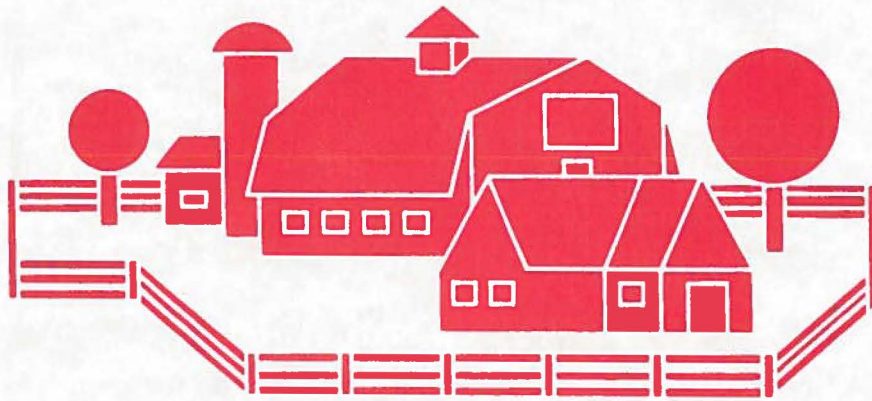
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# FARM MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR A NEW AGE



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FARM MANAGEMENT EXTENSION EDUCATION:  
IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE

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"Theories do not change reality; if you believed that electricity was a flock of molecular goats, you'd still have to insulate the wire." John Heron

John Heron worked his editorial wonders on the Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter, enriched all who read his work, and was wont to quote these lines in accepting the many awards he won: "I gather flowers by the wayside, by the brooks and in the meadows, and only the string with which I bind them together is my own." Amen. The best of what I shall say is borrowed, and many from from whom I learned much are in this room. I am honored to be here.

Those who are most interested in the "pursuit of excellence" part of the title can relax; I shall not tread overmuch on turf that rightly belongs to heavyweights. For indoctrination in the pursuit of excellence, I turn to the book of Proverbs; to essays by John Heron; to Gardner's "Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society"; and more recently to "In Search of Excellence-Lessons from America's Best-run Companies", by Peters and Waterman.

Farm management observations in this paper are based on 19 years' experience, with recent stimulus from an excellent series of papers in the Proceedings of an AAEA-sponsored workshop. Others, of course, have more experience, and many are better equipped for learning from that experience: but not many will have been exposed to the diversity of farm sizes, types, enterprise mixes, problems and opportunities afforded the only state-level farm management specialist in a state with 42 enterprises each grossing more than \$5 million in farm gate sales.

No theories are offered about how agriculture got in the mess it's in, nor are cures offered. But some of the changes in agriculture and the economy are altering the nature of extension farm management work. Some implications of changes in farm structure are discussed, as are the impacts of tighter funds, and cursory mention is made of the changes taking place in communication tools.



### Some Constants

Despite the dizzying rate of change in agriculture, some things stay the same. Extension farm management specialists were, are, and will be in the education business. True enough, most of us have occasionally sugar-coated an educational bolus we wished to thrust down the throat of some unsuspecting audience, but our objective is, and should be, to educate.

To educate is to cause to know. Therefore, none of the teaching skills we have so assiduously acquired need be cast off. Most of us will need some new skills, and all of us need to improve. (Is there anyone here who hasn't said, or written, that the farmers who survive are going to have to be better managers? Somehow, the barrel of that gun looks a little bigger when it's pointed our way, doesn't it?) In the future, we may apply our skills in different ways and we may convey the message in different vehicles; but analyzing, writing, and speaking are what we will be doing.

What we do is simple enough: The product of extension is decisions (Holder). Improving decision making frequently means providing information to decision makers in addition to teaching them. Present programs for generating and providing information are likely to be questioned more frequently in these tight-budget times.

Nelson quoted a wonderful line by Wadsworth, "The trust placed by people in their Extension Service, in particular their county agents and specialists, largely results from the fact that what we say, we know(my emphasis).p.20" Schuh made the same point: "...it doesn't matter how imaginative your teaching aids are, if you don't have the substance, you don't have much.p.153" Our value to decision makers--past, present, and future--lies in providing unbiased information, analyses, and educational programs. And, one supposes, our value to society also stems from that same love of truth.

For several years after graduate school, I doubted there was a role for Extension Farm Management Specialists; things in the 70's just rocked along and didn't really take any managing. But nowadays, with uncertainty the only sure thing in agriculture, our role is helping decision makers cope with that change--remembering that much of that change is being peddled for a profit. Farm size matters not: Change creates a need for help among the managers of both small and large farms. Florida has some of the biggest farms in the world, and mostly, their managers are as smart as you would expect, but not always. Neither they, nor we, ever know all we need to know. Those of us who are trained in finding out, and in training others how to find out, have a vital role in helping maintain the health of our agriculture.

## Changing Farm Structure

Practically every pundit in the land has written something about there being fewer commercial farmers, more part-timers, and a vaporizing class of intermediate-size farms. There are problems aplenty with the other categories, but my concern in this paper is primarily with commercial farms, and how to do effective farm management work with them in the future.

Schuh has recently written that we should be doing more work with the large commercial farmers because they have political power. The larger social reason is that they are the ones who produce our food and fiber, and benefitting commercial operators benefits consumers, given our competitive markets. Then, too, there is a need to work with commercial agriculturists in order to stay attuned to the agriculture of tomorrow (Holt, Pugh, and Brant).

Aiming educational efforts at the larger farm operators means gearing up for smaller, smarter audiences. We have had good luck drawing them to meetings on pressing questions such as participation in the dairy adjustment plan. But they are not apt to be at "normal" county educational meetings. Writing for popular trade journals, software packages and analysis of pressing questions appears to be the current best bets at reaching them.

The bigger operators can afford consultants, and most of them use them. We do our best to get along with consultants. I'd rather have a friend out there talking to the big growers (and the politicians) about our work than an enemy. We find working with consultants to be a two way street; we help them when we can, and they help us. To date, our relations have been good. Nelson made the point that we can expect to do more of our own research in the future. Many states have been doing that for years. The really interesting thing is that some of the studies which the very biggest integrated operations are interested in are the mundane things that many states have stopped doing. Comparative cost studies, efficiencies of size or scale, business analyses; the larger firms still need to know how they stack up. And a firm considering producing some vegetable crop in California, for example, would need to know what the present production picture is there, in order to know whether to produce the crop, to contract it grown for them and so on.

An efficiency study being done under an extension flag is understandable, but other studies could easily be seen to benefit a single firm more than others, and thus pose a question of whether that firm should pay for the study. All of us will have to weigh the need for bucks (either for the pocket or for the program) more carefully as our clientele get fewer and larger.



Educational efforts for the large farms must be tailored to a specific decision-making level (Holt), and they need to be problem oriented, not specialty oriented (Ikerd). Virtually all programs should include production, marketing, finance, and when appropriate, policy. Labor management courses have been popular in our state with our biggest operations.

Specialists have to do most of the teaching to managers of the larger operations. Many county agents are capable of handling economics material, but even if they have the ability, they lack the credentials. As one manager of a large farm put it: "I want to look up to a teacher, not at him. I have been to the same school and have just as many degrees as the County Agent." Don't misunderstand, the good County Agents are respected by commercial farmers, and if the County Agent doesn't like your program, his producers won't be there.

Schuh contended that for the managers of large commercial farms, we should offer "...courses comparable to those offered on campus which give them principles and new areas of subject matter. p.156" Perhaps, but I doubt such a course would draw. Examining the curricula at the shortcourses offered by the Harvard Business School, the Agribusiness Shortcourse taught by Cornell, and various seminars offered by consulting companies makes me think the curriculum will have to be case-oriented and taught by some method other than the lecture approach. We plan on offering an off-campus management course similar to our campus course, but do not anticipate drawing the big boys, but rather some of the younger, aspiring managers.

#### Tighter Funds

Everyone seems to agree that funding increases have gone the way of the dodo bird, so what's an aspiring professional to do? Grants are scarce, and almost never fit the program one thinks is most important. Besides that, most potential studies of a farm management nature are pretty specific to a given firm, and seldom have much redeeming educational value. It appears most of us will have to grab for all the grants we can, and bootleg the work we think is most important.

Workshops and shortcourses will be paid for by the users. There can be considerable resistance to this, but there doesn't appear to be any recourse. Paying for the workshops improves the quality of the students; if they are paying, they pay attention, and they attend.

We hope, sometime, to establish a work-study program in which we could farm out a graduate student to work for one of the big outfits and get credit. The student could try a few of our models on their operation; we would get access to some data, and so on. Students would have to be very carefully screened, of course, but such programs are being tried successfully by some of the other disciplines.

### New Tools

Micros have been the subject of a million words, and need few from me. One question is whether they will increase the demand for our educational programs, or whether they will just increase the demand for our services. I lean to the latter.

Micros take away most of the excuses we once used for not delivering a top quality educational program. They bring analytical and word processing ability to our fingertips in real time.

Others more capable than I will have to address the potential impact of such things as VCRs and the proliferation of educational channels made possible by satellites. I plan to be an early adopter (funds permitting, of course).

### Conclusion

If there is a crisis in agriculture, and if that crisis in agriculture precipitates a crisis in Extension, there are about three approaches most of us might take:

- Shift over to teaching. The demand for teaching is more inelastic than either research or extension. This is roughly
- the equivalent of advising farmers to stay with their safest enterprises.
- Become an administrator. Administrators, like ship's captains, preside over sinkings and so will have a job longer than anybody. This is somewhat similar to counseling farmers to seek off-farm employment.
- Get good enough at our jobs to be able to make a living on the outside, if Extension folds. This is the "Be more effective, be more efficient, work smarter not harder, be a manager not a laborer, develop a marketing plan, cut back to what you do best and expand that" advice that we routinely pass out to farmers.

That last option ought to be tried. If we can pull it off, there won't be a crisis in Extension.



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