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## THE SAEA: AFTER TWENTY YEARS

J. B. Penn

I very much appreciate the invitation to participate in the meetings on this special occasion, the twentieth anniversary of the Association's founding. It is always a pleasure to return to the South and especially to participate in the work of the SAEA, for which I have strong interest and affinity.

My charge from President Batie was somewhat general. She suggested that a twentieth anniversary presents a good opportunity to review our history, check our course, and perhaps to speculate about what lies ahead. That is the general nature of my remarks today.

I hope to do four things here today. The first is to present a brief overview of the relatively short history of the Association. Then, I want to go back and recall the motivation and factors that led to the creation of the SAEA in the late 1960s, together with the objectives and expectations the founders had in mind. After that, I will comment on the Association's performance over the 20 years, and its status at the present time. I will conclude by suggesting some issues that may be of importance to the SAEA as it looks to the future.

### OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE SAEA

The SAEA's two-decade history is relatively short, especially compared to the Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA) which is more than 60 years old and the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) which was formed more than 80 years ago.

The SAEA can trace its origins somewhat indistinctly to an organization formed in 1899

in Atlanta, Georgia, the Cotton States Association of Commissioners of Agriculture.<sup>1</sup> That group was formed to address problems common to the southern states and which presumably could be more effectively resolved through united actions. Very shortly thereafter (1905), that group became the Southern States Association of Commissioners of Agriculture. It then expanded to include the work and participants from the state universities and the state agricultural experiment stations, and again modified its name in 1907 to reflect its broader membership, becoming the Southern States Association of Commissioners of Agriculture and other Agricultural Workers. That name did not last very long either. Four years later (1911), it became the Association of Southern Agricultural Workers (ASAW). That name, the ASAW, did take hold and lasted until 1972 when the present name was assumed, the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists (SAAS).

The records indicate that the original organization, the Cotton States Association of Commissioners of Agriculture, very early began discussing economic issues and events and devoted considerable attention to these at various sessions over the years. By the mid-1920s, an Agricultural Economics Section was a part of the program for the annual meetings of the ASAW. Rural sociology was incorporated into the Agricultural Economics Section in 1933 and was reflected in the name, the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Section. A separate Marketing Section was formed in 1937 to focus on the regulatory aspects of marketing. Those two sections, Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology and Marketing, were increasingly

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<sup>1</sup>The historical information presented here is taken from Joseph Havlicek, Jr.'s 1984 Presidential Address, "The Southern Agricultural Economics Association: Past, Present, and Future."

active in the ASAW until they broke away to become a separate and distinct organization.

The SAEA was officially formed in 1968 at that year's ASAW annual meeting. A joint meeting of the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology and Market Sections formally adopted the constitution. The first annual meeting was held the next year in Mobile, Alabama. That and all subsequent meetings have been held in conjunction with the ASAW and now the SAAS.

The SAEA began with 519 charter members from 33 states, the District of Columbia, and three foreign countries. The annual dues were \$3.00 for regular membership and \$1.50 for students, and a single issue of the *Journal* was priced at \$7.50. The first slate of officers was composed of Robert W. Rudd, University of Kentucky, as President; Marshall A. Godwin, Texas A&M, as President-Elect; A.D. Seale, Jr., Mississippi State University, as Vice President; and John C. Redman, University of Kentucky, as Secretary-Treasurer. A 13-person editorial council was named for the *Journal* with J. Rod Martin, USDA and Texas A&M, as Editor.

#### MOTIVATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND OBJECTIVES

There is much to be gained from understanding the history of an organization, since it provides a useful context in which to gauge the ongoing activities. While the historical overview above is interesting, it does not reveal what motivated the formation of the SAEA. To gain some insight into the factors that led to the organization of the SAEA, I interviewed several charter members and others active in the profession at the time.

Perhaps the strongest motive for the formation of a Southern professional association grew out of the perception that the national association (the American Agricultural Economics Association—AAEA) did not meet the needs of professionals in the southern region. This perception included several elements: that outstanding professionals in the South were unable to attain national recognition for their contributions; that few were ever officers of the Association; that Southern researchers did not have the opportunity for the same professional exposure (invitations to professional meetings, membership on committees, special boards, and the like) as those from other regions did; that Southern members faced extreme difficulty in

getting their work published in the national journal (the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics—AJAE*); and that the AAEA was so dominated by members from the midwest region that it was virtually impossible (with few exceptions) for Southerners to break into that power structure. Thus, the argument went, to have greater opportunity for professional development and interaction and for publication, a new association was necessary.

I have not attempted to determine how widespread these perceptions were, nor the extent to which they may have been true. Nevertheless, they are remembered by many as important factors at the time.

Disgruntlement with the AAEA was by no means the only motivation for a new association. Some motivation came from the desire among the economists to have a distinct professional identity in the South, to be associated with a profession rather than just a section of the southern agricultural workers. Some economists and rural sociologists, as social scientists, felt that continuing as a section of the ASAW was not adequate and that they needed their own professional association.

Another major impetus for a new association, closely related to the above, was the perceived need for an additional publication outlet, another specific means by which professionals in the region could improve their communication, specifically on applied problems of the South. People holding this view thought a new association could be complementary to the national association and that a new applications-oriented, regionally-focused journal would complement the *AJAE* as well. Thus, a major motivating factor in the formation of the SAEA was the desire for a distinctive, applications-oriented journal that would deal with issues relevant to the South and not be merely a regional version of the journal of the national association.

There also were strong views that the South still lagged seriously in economic development and that more concerted attention should be given to problems of the rural areas and agriculture. It was argued that professionals in the region with common interests would benefit from a new forum to identify, debate, and focus research on problems unique to the region. A new association with a distinct regional focus thus was viewed as a means for promoting the region.

Support for formation of a new association

and launching a new journal was by no means unanimous. Several people argued rather persuasively that such a move might not prove to be in the best interests of economists in the southern region and actually could prove to be counterproductive overall.

One such argument was that the formation of a new regional association was simply a way of avoiding facing the real issues, namely that some of the departments' programs were not strong and their professional output less rigorous than at other schools. They further argued that a new association and journal risked institutionalizing mediocrity, and, perhaps even worse, would make the South even more insular and alienated from the mainstream of the profession than it was.

Another concern was the adverse consequences for the national association of formation of another, possibly competing, regional association. Those with this view feared that the new association could siphon off resources, talent, and energies from the AAEA and undermine its effectiveness at the national level.

The objectives and expectations of the founders appear to be fairly clear. They had some overall purposes in mind and more specific expectations relating to the annual meetings and the journal. Article II of the Association states:

The purpose and objective of the SAEA shall be to: foster the study and understanding of agricultural economics and its implications to problems in the southern United States; promote unity and effectiveness of effort among all concerned with those problems; promote improvement in the professional competence and standards of members; cooperate with other organizations and institutions engaged in similar or related activities; and increase the contribution of agricultural economics to human welfare.

These purposes and objectives were to be met primarily through the annual meetings provided for in Article V and the publication of a journal (Article VI).

The journal appears to have been the centerpiece of the expectations for the new association. Yet, after two decades, the recollections are somewhat different about

precisely what the journal was to be. However, it is clear that it was not to be duplicative of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, but was to appeal to a much broader proportion of the total membership. The first editor recalls that it was to avoid becoming a "mini-AJAE" and was to communicate with the profession on a broad range of issues needing attention, while the "leading edge" articles were to be left to the national journal.<sup>2</sup> It also is clear that it was to be regionally oriented and to focus on reporting applied research results. Apparently, there was widespread appreciation of the AJAE "proceedings" which offered both ideas and discussion, suggestions for fruitful research, and interesting applications. The new journal was intended to be more in that vein, but with refereed articles to ensure high quality.

The first journal was dated December 1969 but actually was issued well into 1970. It was financed from membership dues which were purposefully kept quite low in an attempt to attract broad participation. Increasing printing costs posed problems right from the start, but the generosity of the Farm Foundation enabled the first journal to appear (this support was acknowledged in a unanimous resolution of the Association and appears in the first issue—page 173). One of the early officers recalled that the journal could not have appeared without this support and that without the journal the fledgling SAEA would have folded. The financial problems did not end there. It also was reported to me that another of the subsequent early issues appeared only after the editor defrayed some of the costs with his own money.

## THE PERFORMANCE: STATUS AFTER 20 YEARS

Let me say at the outset that this discussion of SAEA performance and how well it may or may not have fulfilled expectations at the time of its inauguration is based on perceptions, my own and those of others gathered in the course of preparing this paper. I have not surveyed the membership nor attempted any systematic analysis of journal content over the years.

One of the obvious indications of organizational health is its membership trend. On this basis, the SAEA appears to be a resounding

<sup>2</sup>Personal conversation with J. Rod Martin, Texas A&M University.

success. From the charter membership of 519, the total has grown to more than 1,100, a nearly 115 percent increase. Moreover, the recent trend is upward, with individual membership growing since 1980. And, the annual dues have been held to modest levels; the amount (\$15) for 1988 reflects a real increase of just over 50 percent from the inaugural level.

I believe any objective assessment of the SAEA after 20 years would conclude that the fears expressed at the beginning were not realized. The southern region has become much less, not more, insular. The programs have become much stronger in most schools. Southern professionals are more active in the mainstream of the profession and in the AAEA. Rather than a drain on the AAEA, the SAEA appears to have had a synergistic effect. Many of the same people instrumental in SAEA achieving some measure of success also have been leaders in the AAEA.

It is difficult to sort out exactly why this may have happened as it did. While the SAEA played a role in these changes, the greater integration of the South into the mainstream of the agricultural economics profession likely resulted from many factors. It can be attributed partly to the fact that the world has become smaller in the last 20 years. Travel and communications advances have removed many impediments to closer professional interaction. Also, there appears to have been an increase in professional mobility. Several southern schools (e.g., Texas A&M, Florida, and Georgia) greatly increased their funding for agricultural economics at times during the period, were able to become much more competitive, and attracted some of the best professionals from all parts of the country.

The SAEA also gets high marks for meeting most of the purposes and objectives originally set out for it. It has provided opportunities for its members through the annual meetings, the newsletter, and the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics (SJAE)* for greater professional interaction. The programs for the annual meetings would suggest that the Association has focused on concerns, problems, and issues important to the South, thus meeting its mandate to maintain a regional focus.

There also is a perception that the Association has worked hard to draw out diverse opinions and to open opportunities for airing controversial views at the annual meetings. Also, the papers included in the sessions generally are perceived as treating broad and

sometimes controversial topics.

The *SJAE* also gets generally high, but somewhat mixed, marks for meeting expectations originally held for it. It has become a credible, broadly respected journal across the profession. Johnson suggests the *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics* now to be a national journal, first among the regional journals, and the second most prestigious journal of our profession. I expect that one could find many who would challenge that and argue that the *SJAE* could appropriately make those claims as well.

Most observers agree that the journal has held to its regional orientation, still containing many articles with a subject focus of strong interest to the South (perhaps sometimes to the point of being trivial). Also, the *SJAE* generally is perceived as having an applications focus, rather than a theoretical or strictly methodological orientation. Also, the *SJAE* has been innovative, beginning about five years ago to include articles on microcomputer software in response to the widespread use of computers by the membership. Both the applied nature of the articles and the software articles are viewed favorably by teachers and prove useful for course instruction.

While my overall assessment of SAEA and *SJAE* is very positive, I do detect some dissatisfaction and can find members who think the Association has not come as close to meeting the original objectives and expectations as others believe. These observers suggest that the Association and *Journal* perhaps are becoming victims of their own success, that the SAEA has become somewhat elitist and clubby and largely inaccessible to many in the membership. They argue that it has come to resemble somewhat the type of organization which its formation was a response to 20 years before.

Even while most members are justifiably proud of the *SJAE*, some also suggest some strong dissatisfaction. One early editor suggested that it has now come to emulate the *AJAE*, contrary to the original expectations. Others have the perception that both the regional and applications focus have faded somewhat in recent years and given away to more "leading edge" methodological articles and that it has become progressively less accessible to the broad membership and become less useful as a result. These critics also suggest a continuing serious need for an outlet to communicate ideas, to help form and develop ideas, and to develop a synergy among profes-

sionals. These observers see the failure of the *Journal* to follow this "proceedings-type" format and to fill this role as a disappointment.

### WHAT FUTURE FOR SAEA?

Institutions that thrive over time are those that adapt successfully, that effectively continue to meet the needs of the membership. Quite simply, how well SAEA does in the years ahead will depend upon how well it can meet that challenge. And, it is quite a challenge because of the wide diversity of the membership.

Gessaman, in writing about the Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA), had defined four constituencies in a professional association: the "leading edge" of the profession, concerned more with disciplinary interests than the immediate relevancy of their work; persons with problem/locality-oriented professional interests who desire to participate in professional interchange with others of similar interests through the Association (the "proceedings" types); persons with professional interests focused on problems of particular importance in the region; and a more nebulous constituency, the "silent majority," who at times likely identify with one or more of the other three constituencies. Meeting the needs of such diverse groups and incorporating so many visions of the future of the Association into coherent, effective plans is quite a challenge indeed.

What likely will be some of the primary concerns of these groups in the future that the Association must address if it is to avoid stagnation and a dwindling membership?

I suggest there are two broad categories of concerns, those peculiar to the *SJAE* and those that face the profession at large as well as Southerners. Of the former, the future role of the *Journal* (or more broadly, communications among the membership) will require continuing examination, soul searching, and debate. Some will argue to continue it just as it is, while others will want fundamental changes, and all for very good reasons. The pitfalls are clear but hard to avoid. To make it into more of a national journal obviously would appeal to the "leading edge" constituency but not to those favoring a strong and growing regional and applications focus. And, others would prefer still other courses such as returning it to more of an ideas exchange

("proceedings type"), or adding other communications outlets, like the AAEA finally did with *Choices* magazine. Since the *Journal* and the annual meetings are the major benefits that many professionals see to membership in the Association, satisfaction with the *Journal* (or other communications outlets) will be closely tied to satisfaction with the Association.

There are other issues peculiar to the *SJAE* that you will know better than I, and I will not emphasize these. I also suggest there will be other issues of a broader nature, perhaps affecting the entire profession and on which an association will be expected to provide leadership. These might include such topics as the perceived inattention of the profession to technological change and its impacts on farming and the food system and to structure/concentration in certain aspects of the marketing system; problems emerging from lack of familiarity with agriculture among professionals; insufficient responsiveness of the university programs to meet the needs of agribusiness; communicating the benefits of social science research to the public generally and more directly to those who decide upon the funding support; and then some very controversial ones such as whether there is a bias in the profession against extension workers, and publication procedures for research reports in government agencies.

How well the Association provides leadership and responds to the membership in addressing such issues will in large part determine its health over the years.

### CONCLUSIONS

On the twentieth anniversary of its founding, the SAEA would appear to merit more than passing marks. Based on my conversations with people who should know, it is generally adjudged to have fulfilled most of the expectations that the original founders held for it.

The SAEA, as all professional organizations, faces continued change and adaptation and must continue to evolve if it is to remain an important element of the professional life in the southern region. The SAEA generally is perceived as having encouraged the discussion of divergent views, perhaps more than other associations, and continuing to do so will stand it in good stead in the future.

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