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AGRICULTURE IN TRANSITION
FROM WAR TO PEACE

Papers and Proceedings

of the

Seventeenth Annual Conference

of the

WESTERN FARM ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

Held at Los Gatos, California, June 27-29, 1944

Edited by the President of the Association

SYNOPSIS AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE

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(On leave from Stanford University)

Your President, knowing my habit of talking too much, has exacted a promise of me to "make it short." This will be the easier because I missed the first two sessions, including the Presidential Address, because of reservation trouble in Chicago. (To the Pullman Company, this was passenger trouble.) Then, during the second day you ran a three-ring circus. To reassure you of brevity I admit that I was never in more than one meeting at a time and did not gossip with those who got what I missed. Hence, if the hash I dish up to you now is not good you'll know that some of the intended spices and nutrients got lost outside the mixing bowl.

Your general title for the Conference, "Agriculture in Transition from War to Peace," fits the program and is a subject becoming a group of real and realistic economists. There are no longer any times that are not times of transition. You have gone to work at the next big one and have gone at it in time. In the course of the whole Conference, no one turned over old straw with a new pitchfork for the sake of the research dust he could raise. No one gnawed on one bone only. There were no Utopians proposing a transition, by miracle, to a state of perpetual economic bliss. There were many realistic proposals for local transitions that are already taking on operational form. In a word, the contributing members of the Conference are moving in the right direction.

I want to record my delight in the continuity and sweep of your study. The day is long since past—if, indeed, it ever dawned—on which it was proper to agricultural economists to concern themselves exclusively (or even nearly so) with the immediate dollar getting and dollar keeping of farm operators. You have brought in the whole apparatus except the cooks. Next time I hope you will bring in the cooks also; for no food innovation or improvement works until cooks learn and tell what to do with the new materials. The conservation of land and water resources; the bringing of people to the land; the use of the land; the enlistment and compensation of tenants and employees; the management and financing of operations; food manufacture, shipping and retailing; the changing dietary preferences of food customers; the nutritional consequences of what people eat; the community lives and living conditions of all concerned—this whole sweep of a food supply service has been brought in and every part of it has been brought into focus upon that day of transition for which we are all working and fighting. The spokesmen for each portion have taken the view that the others are teammates—not adversaries. In a word, the implied general view is that this

great transition, to be successful, must be managed as an entirety rather than as every-group-for-itself, battle-royal.

Having said this much in favor of the general attitude of fairness I can still note a good many hangover habits of speech. In this Conference, I've heard a good deal about farm labor problems, tenant problems, negro and other non-white race problems, factory-type farm problems, and so on. For every farmer who has a labor problem there are people in his community who have a farm *employer* problem. Every community that has a negro problem or a Japanese problem or a Filipino problem also has the same number of *white man* problems. For every big farm problem there is a *small farm* problem. Human conflicts solved unilaterally do not stay solved—especially if the discussion and the solution are adrenal rather than cerebral.

Detail Notes

There are a few matters special to a few of the addresses and sessions on which I feel urged to make some detail notes.

Food and Nutrition Section: I have become accustomed, wherever nutritionists are gathered together, to hearing a great deal about the importance of nutritional education. I heard it again. I am still convinced that education that talks about food as though it were medicine will fail. Only sick people—who are scared people—pay much attention to such teaching. Eating, for normal people, is fun. Good recipes and good cooking are the best educators. I note with pleasure that two speakers, Colonel Stanley and Commander Wilbur, whose organizations have done the greatest feat in nutritional education, said nothing about educating, but only about good feeding. Commander Wilbur, especially, pleased me. As a medical man he knows the values of therapeutic feeding, but he went straight at the job of feeding where it most needs improvement. I suspect the Commander of liking his food and of believing that once people are well fed they won't need much verbal education about food.

Farm Labor Section: Mr. Hill's address found a warm spot in me and stayed there. I do want, however, to put a few parts of his address together for emphasis. In one place, he urged economists and sociologists to come off the rostrum, to take off their coats, and get some of their research results converted into actual working institutions. In another place, he noted that California has the most serious problem of farm employment seasonality and mobility. In a third part he noted that, fortunately, California has, by far, the best systematic current information about labor needs and availability. This latter circumstance is "fortunate" only because a few economists—all members of this Association—did take their coats off. They didn't stop with research but did the legislative drafting and lobbying and wire pulling. They rode herd on administrative officers and advised them. They did the conciliating among groups who were hostile to one another. In a word, a large part of *their* work for transition from depression to full em-

ployment, from peace to war and from war to peace was already a working institution before the post-Munich speech about "peace in our time."

Agricultural Prices Session: Both Dr. Wells and his associates on the program had a good deal to say about the role of "full employment" in relation to agricultural prices. They are right, of course; for in employment it is the distribution of employment person by person, month by month (rather than mere national income aggregates) that stabilizes the flow of real income and so stabilizes and supports agricultural prices at levels that permit farmers to remain solvent.

None of them, however, spoke of the measures necessary to get such employment. Certainly that fullness cannot take the form of the present volume of commodity outturn of industry; for in peacetime there is no end outlet for commodities except households and establishments serving us in our households and in our movements. The sheer tonnage of commodity outturn now prevailing would quickly fill our houses and clog all our roads. There will have to be huge aggregate shifts out of commodity manufacture.

It is not out of place to indicate, too, that shifts *big enough and quick enough* to do the job cannot be managed unless one great part of the change consists of whittling down the working day, the working week and the working year to figures that will permit all who want it to get full employment. There was no such problem at the end of the Napoleonic Wars or the American Civil War. For, in the technology of those days, the productivity of labor—even with human work daily at the limit of biological endurance—the total productive result was a per capita real income below the critical threshold of sound health. But nowadays no such working regimen can be used. Hence, any and all shifting from one employment to another must fall short of getting full employment unless we scale down our pre-war notions of how much hour employment it takes to make "full" employment.

This is a matter of vital gainful interest to agriculture; for the more nearly uniformly *any* aggregate of income is distributed in time and as among persons, the bigger the proportion of it will go for agricultural commodities. I have left this to the last not because Wells spoke last but because this employment transition is *the* problem of post-war transition.