

THE VISITOR

Devoted to the Interests of Agricultural Education in Minnesota Schools

Volume XLVII

April 1960

No. 2

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN A CHANGING AGRICULTURE

EARL KNUTSON, *District Administrator*

Westby Public Schools, Westby, Wisconsin

Two years ago "Johnny" apparently could not read. It appears now that he probably could read but failed to read the technological dissertations and decipher the mathematical interpolations that may have put all our critics in orbit by the year 1959. He apparently was quite satisfied in reading the cultural and moral treatises that have kept us firmly planted upon this good "old" earth since the dawn of civilization. He was satisfied with those great precepts and principles that have stood the test of time and have made America and the world great in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Those fundamental principles must not be forgotten in the Twentieth Century or future centuries of civilization.

Progress most assuredly is based upon change, and no educator will dispute that assertion. However, progress without direction can lead to destruction. You have heard many times the statement that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." The whole of that statement, made by an Irish statesman, John Phillip Curran, about 170 years ago, was: "It is the common fate of the indolent to see their rights become prey to the active. The condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt." This is as true today as it was at the time it was uttered, and it is as true of our educational system as any other avenue of activity. Specifically, it is as true of Vocational Agriculture as any other phase of educational endeavor.

The advent of the Conant report, probes into space, automation, the shifting of farm

families to suburban areas, and the anxiety of much of our population, which frequently has caused difficulty in the development of sane adjustments, are all having a considerable impact upon the schools of the nation. Vocational Agriculture is by no means exempt from this storm of technological advance, shifting populations, and acute pressures.

Public schools must take cognizance of these rapidly changing factors in our society, but at the same time must distinguish fact from fiction, and must winnow the chaff from the wheat. Schools must recognize those principles of learning that have made our educational system and America great. Before relegating to the past those basic fundamentals of our present Vocational Agriculture program, schools better take a most careful inventory of what that program has contributed to the way of life in America—a way of life that despite technological advance will continue to dominate the American farm scene.

In other words, our schools in a changing agriculture must do a soul-searching job of their own philosophy as it pertains to agriculture and then truthfully determine how well they have accepted, on the basis of local community need, the present program in Vocational Agriculture. By acceptance, I do not necessarily mean the methods used in arriving at established objectives that have proven to be sound. We have heard that some of the means used in the past to arrive at accepted farm practices, because of a changing agriculture, are no longer effective or desirable. I have no argument with that contention for it in no way conflicts with my belief that the

Editor's Note: The articles by Mr. Earl Johnson, farmer, and Mr. Earl Knutson, school administrator, were originally presented as part of a panel discussion dealing with needed adjustments in vocational agriculture. This discussion took place during the American Vocational Association meetings held in Chicago, Illinois, in December, 1959.

THE NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF ADULT EDUCATION

EARL JOHNSON, *Farmer, Huntley, Illinois*

The topic of gearing vocational agriculture to changing times is a most challenging one. Agriculture today is radically different from what it was 40 years ago when adult education for farmers had its beginning. Those were the days of the horse cultivator, horse liniment, lots of human trouble, working from sunrise to sunset with no time off except when it rained—and there was always manure to haul then. My mother pumped all the water, turned the washing machine by hand, cooked on a wood stove, and baked her own bread. What a difference today! Forty years ago the general thought was to teach the farmer how to grow two blades of grass where one had previously grown. That job has been done, and how! On one of the farms that I operate, we grow today 100 bushels of corn per acre on land that 20 years ago produced only 10 bushels per acre. Yes, indeed we have made two blades of grass grow where one grew before.

We have had a tremendous technological evolution in agriculture in the past two decades. There is a great need today for the farmer to continually study his business in order to keep up with this progress. Therein lies the challenge to education in the adult and young farmer classes. For example, I have a son who had four years of vocational agriculture in high school and four years of general agriculture in college. Since then he has spent three years as a fighter pilot in the Air Force. He is at least of average intelligence, yet I am thoroughly convinced that as a young farmer of today, if he hopes to be a success, he will need to continue to study his business. No one is closer to the young farmer in the local community than the vocational agriculture instructor. I say to you teachers today: your responsibility is tremendous. Are you qualified and capable to meet this challenge?

It is important that our teaching of high school youth and young adults be geared so that it is practical for the community in which he lives. For instance, I read many magazines and trade articles that sound or look good, but when I analyze how they will fit into our farm program, our climate and soil conditions, our market facilities, etc., they may or may not be a practical thing at all for this particular area. I think it is a challenge to our vo-ag instructors that they be able to develop courses of study and areas of interest that will have a definite relationship in their community to all the economic factors of the area.

Now I would like to discuss with you two

general areas of education in young farmer and adult classes as well as in high school. The first is the importance of *efficient farm management*.

Bill Veeck of White Sox fame was recently in our area to address a Farm-and-City Week Banquet. He brought with him a guest whom he introduced as his "D and D" boy. That stands for "Desire" and "Determination." The boy was Michigan State's All-American quarterback. In my opinion the real challenge of the future is to educate our farm "D and D" boys to become more efficient in the management of their farm businesses.

The one- or two-family farm of today is big business. Our agricultural progress has been tremendous. This is a mechanical age. In these days of high costs and complicated machines never has the man been more important. Agriculture today is no place for the weak, the ignorant, or the indifferent. It is no place for the average. The farmer of today is not a jack-of-all-trades, he must be a *master* of them. He must study his business and fit practical ideas to his own operation to keep up with the progress of our times. This educational process must begin in the high school and continue on through the years as long as he continues to farm. He dare not stop learning in agriculture today.

For example, the farmer of today and tomorrow must be engineer enough to run efficiently a \$10,000 machine and mechanic enough to fix a break-down on the spot. He must be enough of an economist to know when to buy feeder cattle and when to sell them; and, at the same time, bookkeeper enough to spot weaknesses in his operation. While he gambles on the weather and market prices, he must be veterinarian enough to spot disease, castrate pigs, or stick a bloated steer. He must know which variety of seed is best for his area and when to plant it. He does not have to be a diplomat, but it would help him to convince his wife that a one-man hay baler will increase his profits so that he can buy her that new electric dishwasher.

The farmer of today and tomorrow is a good-sized capitalist and also a day laborer. He must have the brains to make 40 decisions a day and at the same time the brawn to toss around bales of hay and bags of fertilizer. In financing his operation he must be able to

work out an operational budget for the year that will include any new equipment he will need plus a plan that shows seasonal needs and allows for both highs and lows in production and income. He can then take this plan to his banker and ask for a loan of \$20,000 to \$30,000 without batting an eye.

What does this sum up to in the field of education? The emphasis today, as stated earlier, is not to make two blades of grass grow where only one grew before, but to increase the output per man through more efficient management.

The second area of education that I would like to have you consider is that of the *role of government* in the business of farming in the future. Should we have government control of agriculture? Or should we continue the free enterprise system that has made this country what it is today? There is much information available both pro and con on this controversial subject. I am sure teachers could have many lively debates and discussions, not only with high school groups but also with adults, that would stimulate the thinking of farmers on this very important subject. In a good adult program of this nature the student should be taught the pitfalls and dangers of big government and of government control, the dangers of a socialistic controlled economy, the possibilities of a police state with equality for all but with little opportunity for anyone. This versus our great American heritage of free enterprise, with freedom of decision and with unlimited opportunity for all. One of the problems of the farm program administered from Washington has been that it encouraged the wheat farmer to grow corn, the cotton farmer to grow soybeans and the corn farmer to grow wheat, all of which is quite ridiculous.

In our educational program we need to teach high school students and young farmers to think clearly for themselves. Recently, a group of Illinois farmers at a state meeting voted to approve a soil bank program that could not be of value to anyone without some means of compulsory enforcement. Yet, this same group defeated an amendment which offered an enforcement plan for this program. To me this is a clear indication of failure to think for one's self.

I personally feel that there is a great future for the well-trained and well-educated young farmer in agriculture under the free enterprise system with a minimum of government control to encourage individual initiative. Under this system he may be taking the risk of going broke, but he will also have the

opportunity to make his own decisions, to obtain as high a level of living as any farmer in the world, and to have financial independence.

The challenge in agriculture is great. Technological progress has been so tremendous that no one can learn it all in high school or college. Learning must be a continuing process into the young farmer and adult classes. The ability of a high school student to grasp all the important factors is limited. As he begins to experience what he has learned in high school, his capacity and ability to assimilate the technological and economic importance of change increases. He should recognize that he will need to continue to study in order to keep up with rapidly changing conditions in farming.

Again, I repeat that no one is closer to the young farmer in the local community than the vo-ag instructor. No one is better qualified to stress the importance of better farm management, of being a better businessman, and of getting more output per man, not necessarily more bushels per acre. At the same time, he must teach the young farmer the dangers and pitfalls of big government in the farming business as opposed to the real challenge of more opportunity under the free enterprise system. Perhaps it might be well in the high school classes to study the history of government controls in agriculture in other countries of the world. Russia has boasted that they will meet our agricultural output. There are only two ways that might happen—either they will change to our free enterprise incentive system or we will change to their government-controlled system that does away with incentive. In this field the student must be stimulated to think for himself.

In conclusion, I will make three specific recommendations to meet the changing needs in vocational agricultural education.

First, that we not only continue, but that we enlarge the adult education program.

Second, that we teach more efficient farm management practices, the goal being more output per man.

Third, that we teach young farmers to think for themselves that they may more clearly evaluate the dangers of the role of government in their businesses as compared to the opportunities under the free enterprise system.

The successful farmer of tomorrow will be the man who continues to learn, who has more output per man, and who thinks for himself.