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PROBLEMS OF THE PLAINS: A COLORADO COUNTY DISCUSSES POLICIES

*Carl Hoffman, County Agricultural Agent
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Some of the problems found in eastern Colorado can best be dealt with at the community level—or even by individuals and the organizations of which they are members. By their very nature, some other problems require the concerted effort of many people in a large area. Yet problems of this type in the Plains region have received very little attention.

Several leaders in the area have pointed out that perhaps this is our own fault. "How," they say, "can we expect people *outside* the Plains region to understand our problems if we do not understand them ourselves? It is about time we size up our problems and decide what needs to be done."

HOW THE PROGRAM STARTED

In October 1956 Lloyd Kontny of Julesburg introduced into the area a book entitled "The Great Plains in Transition." Written by Carl Frederick Kraenzel, professor of rural sociology at Montana State College, the book describes conditions and problems peculiar to the Plains region. Kontny was so impressed with it that he asked others to read it. They, too, found the book fascinating, and Kontny asked my assistance in getting a group together to discuss it in detail.

Twenty-two persons were invited to attend a special meeting at the County Extension office on the evening of January 4. As each person arrived he was given a copy of the book to scan. When everyone was present, the group read together the introduction and the first two chapters. Four persons had already read the book and their enthusiasm spread to the others.

The men were then asked if they would like to read the entire book and organize a discussion group that would meet once a week. It was suggested that perhaps at the conclusion of the discussion meetings, the group could select five or six persons to appear on a panel before the quarterly dinner meeting of the Sedgwick County Crops and Livestock Improvement Association. Each person immediately purchased a book and the first formal discussion meeting was held in the Extension office on January 18.

ORGANIZING THE DISCUSSION GROUP

At the beginning of each meeting those attending were divided into "huddle" groups. Each huddle (containing 4 to 6 members) selected

its own chairman and recording secretary. Each chairman was given a copy of questions that were to be discussed at that particular meeting. After approximately one hour, the huddles were brought together and their comments and answers reviewed. As expected, their answers differed on some questions. This stimulated discussion and brought out ideas that were recorded by an appointed secretary for the large group.

Each week the men were placed in different groups in order that they might become thoroughly acquainted with each other. The meetings began at 7 p.m. sharp and closed at 10 p.m. Coffee was always served at the end. While drinking their coffee, the men would sit around in groups and continue to talk—sometimes until 11 p.m.

CROSS-SECTION OF INTERESTS

These men did not all have the same philosophy, nor were they in the same business. Yet, to them the meetings became so important that they made a special effort to attend each session. Following are the names and interests of members of the group:

- Fred Ask, farmer and chairman of County ASC Committee
- R. D. Dittmore, attorney and member of Julesburg Chamber of Commerce
- Bill Davies, vice president of Julesburg First National Bank
- Max Fulscher, dryland farmer and purebred cattle breeder
- Wes Gerck, irrigated farmer and board member of SCS District
- Ray Knodel, superintendent of Julesburg Grade School
- Dean Hiatt, county ASC office manager and commander of Gateway American Legion Post No. 105
- Kenneth Hodges, certified seed producer and farmer
- Wes Johnson, irrigated farmer and board member of SCS District
- Lynn Kinnie, dryland farmer and member of Julesburg Jaycees
- Lloyd Kontny, dryland farmer and president of Colorado Wheat Growers Association
- Carl Meline, county commissioner and cattleman
- Carl Metzger, potato producer and cattle feeder
- Kish Otsuka, irrigated farmer and chairman of County Soil Conservation District
- Fred Gibson, county judge and experienced real estate agent
- Delos Parker, doctor of veterinary medicine
- Runyan Race, dryland farmer and executive member of Farm Bureau
- R. R. Ricker, county commissioner and dryland farmer
- Bob Rewinkel, grain elevator operator
- Joe Schmidt, irrigated farmer and board member of SCS District
- Gib Smyth, cattle feeder and president of County Crops and Livestock Association
- Albert Smith, irrigated farmer and active member of Rotary

At the last discussion meeting on February 15, each person was given an evaluation sheet with four questions on it. He was asked to answer the questions frankly, and then, on the reverse side, to write the names of the 6 individuals he would like to see appear on a panel before the Crops and Livestock group. Those chosen were Davies, Fulscher, Kontny, Dittimore, Knodel, and Smith.

Here are some of the evaluation questions, comments, and suggestions:

- Q. If another group were to set up discussion meetings similar to ours, what changes would you suggest they make to improve the meetings? Please comment and do be frank.

“Schedule another night for meeting, especially during basketball season.”

“More business men represented—greater cross-section of all trades, occupations, etc.”

“More time should be given for general discussion, which would mean more meetings and less material per meeting.”

- Q. What have these meetings meant to you and what has been the most important thing you have gotten out of them?

“I have gotten out of them the fact that men of various political, farm organizations, and occupations can sit around a roundtable and, by discussion of general problems, compromise to the point where you could start an action program.”

“It’s human nature to ‘get in a rut,’ so to speak, and stay there. These meetings make you realize this. They stimulate thought, which, to put it simply, is the most important thing I’ve gotten out of the meetings. The exchange of ideas with other members of this group has been enlightening and enjoyable.”

“A more realistic understanding of the conditions and problems that exist in the area. The making of acquaintances who have gotten to know each other better through discussion of problems common to all.”

“A clearer awareness of problems which is first necessary before a solution can be found.”

- Q. What topics did we miss that you would have liked to discuss?

“Breakdown of county expenditures.”

“The actual feeling toward the present agricultural program.”

“We need something more specific on ways and means of developing industry locally.”

“More management ideas from the different members in the group.”

Q. Would you like to see this group continue to meet occasionally and discuss timely topics?

All said either “yes,” “certainly,” or “definitely.”

CROPS AND LIVESTOCK IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION FOLLOW-UP

In the early planning stages it was realized that those attending the Crops and Livestock meeting would not be able to appreciate fully the comments made by the panel members unless the audience had the same background information as the panel. This appeared to be next to impossible unless someone could condense the 389-page book into a 40-minute talk. Avery Bice, our extension economist, was contacted and accepted the job.

Another problem was to locate a top-notch moderator to head the panel. For this job we obtained T. Guy Stewart, Extension Supervisor of Agricultural Planning and Program Development.

On February 18 a program which had taken months to plan, develop, and publicize was presented to over 200 persons attending the quarterly dinner meeting of the Sedgwick County Crops and Livestock Improvement Association. Beyond a doubt it was the outstanding program of the Association to date. Interest was so great a “black market” for tickets developed.

Bice did an excellent job of cutting away details and giving the main ideas of the book in terms everyone could understand. He summarized the author's analysis by showing a chart which said, “Adapt or Get Out,” pointing out that the residents of the Plains must adapt their way of life to semi-arid conditions and not to the conditions and philosophy of humid areas. The panel members proposed an eleven point program:

1. **WELL INFORMED, WELL EDUCATED PUBLIC.** Knodel recommended seeking ways to get better informed teachers with training and awareness of Plains problems. The question of feasibility of a regional university was raised. An adult education program built around discussion groups was endorsed.

2. **WAYS AND MEANS FOR CREATING RESERVES.** Davies suggested that income averaging over a five-year period be investigated as a basis for calculating income tax; also that the law be changed to permit local governmental units to accumulate reserve funds in good times which could be drawn upon during lean years.

3. END OUTSIDE FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION OF THE PLAINS PEOPLES. Fulscher made particular reference to freight rate inequities in the "basing point-plus" provisions.

4. WEATHER RESEARCH. Kontny and Fulscher presented a plea for more research on long-range weather forecasting and weather modification.

5. SEEK STRENGTH THROUGH UNITY. Dittimore and Knodel suggested a regional advisory council to work continuously toward regional unity, adequate inventory of resources, and improvement of interregional communication.

6. LAND-CLASSIFICATION AND REGULATION OF LAND USE. Smith proposed regulation of use for lands unsuited for cropping; land use ordinances or zoning were advocated. The question of advisability of government purchase of marginal lands for regulatory control was raised.

7. CORRELATION OF FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES' EFFORTS. Smith also asked consideration of the feasibility of establishing regional units within the Plains area, and urged informal liaison consultation between administrative heads of various agencies to achieve a regional approach to regional problems.

8. RESEARCH ON ALTERNATIVE WHEAT. Dittimore stressed the hazards of dependence on one crop.

9. UNDERGROUND WATER STUDY. Davies proposed surveying underground water potential and limitations, as well as examining ways of conserving those portions of the supply where recharge rates are low.

10. STUDY OF INDUSTRIALIZATION POSSIBILITIES. Smith pointed out that industrial development offers a broader and more stable base for general economic stability of an area.

11. DEVELOP POLITICAL POTENCY. Smith also suggested that Plains states congressmen organize informally to assist in constructive programs aimed at economic stability for the area.

Additional points were made by people in the audience. Among the comments made were these:

"Kraenzel's geographic limits are too narrow. States outside of the Plains proper have been experiencing drought problems, too."

"Remedial suggestions and efforts will be too slow. By the time anything can be done, it will have rained again and people will forget the urgency."

“Emphasis should be put on finding solutions for *full-time* farmers rather than trying to seek part-time opportunities for farmers and ranchers.”

PROGRAM WILL CONTINUE

Arrangements are already under way for a 1958 series of discussion meetings. The book chosen as the basis for discussion this year is *Farm Trouble* by Loren Soth.