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THE SAEA: AFTER TWENTY YEARS: DISCUSSION

Harold M. Harris

My perspective on the history of our association is unique—my name has gone up in nomination for office more times and I have been defeated more times than anyone else. Your current editors call me the Harold Stassen of Southern Ag Economics. So the first inference you may wish to draw from this paper is that this proves that over the years the Association has had sound leadership and a knowledgeable membership.

I have chosen to look at our Association's brief history from a personal view. The reader who is interested in a more detailed chronology of the development of the organization is referred to Havlicek.

Note that I am not a charter member—a fact that was pointed out to your Past President, who organized this session. The lie I have been telling is that this is because of my youth, but the sad truth is that the initial meeting in Mobile coincided with preliminary exams at Purdue. I do have a vivid recollection of J.B., upon his return from the initial meetings, telling a group of us that they were excellent. I concur with his assessment that the Association's performance has continued at high levels.

I had participated in earlier meetings of our Association's predecessor groups, the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology and the Marketing Sections of the Association of Southern Agricultural Workers. At one of these, I experienced the terrifying situation of delivering my first professional paper. The stupid answer I gave to a very good question still haunts me.

At another, I watched in awe as the late Joe Chappell of North Carolina State literally tore into a respected elder statesman of the profession in a discussion such as this. He attacked his assumptions, his methodology, his conclusions, and perhaps even his mother. I thought, "My God, what am I getting into?" But at subsequent meetings, I have barely suppressed giggles at seeing some of the "leading edge" Penn referred to being brought, at least temporarily, back down to the solid earth where the rest of us toil. Such incidents are well worth the price of membership, even though they may occur only once every several years. The sad part about it is that some excellent discussions have been omitted from the *Journal* over the years because of the major flaws in the invited address.

LOOKING BACK

In 1969 we were well into the programs of The Great Society. The Vietnam war was in full swing. There were 3 million farms in the United States representing 5 percent of the population compared with 2 percent today. Farm exports were a paltry $5.7 billion, much of this subsidized. Gross farm income was $55 billion, about the same as net farm income today. The per capita income of the farm population was $2,431, three-fourths that of nonfarm.

Corn sold for $1.15/bushel, and average yield was 80 bu/acre. Farmland in the South was valued at $200/acre. The USDA reported that a family of four could eat for about $35 a week under the moderate cost food plan, and many of us on graduate assistantships were trying to do it for less. There were 50 million fewer Americans than today. Under the massive welfare programs of the Great Society, 4 million people received Food Stamps, compared to 20 million today.

Closer to home, starting salaries for new Ph.D.s were about $12,000, and some southern Ag Econ Departments were having a hard time competing with USDA and universities in other regions. The charter members paid $3.00 in dues.

What about the makeup of our Association, whose members were grappling with the problems of that day? Keep in mind, however, that

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as J.B. pointed out, while we were wrestling with some big problems, the Association was formed with a much baser motive—to increase the number of publications outlets.

The Association was a men's club. Of the 519 original members only a handful were women. Some of these were Home Economists by training. When the female membership started growing rapidly, many of us "southern gentlemen" were perplexed. We didn't know whether to open the door for them or treat them as one of the fellows. When a woman entered the room at the annual meetings, heads would turn. There were whispers. Is that the one from VPI? From Georgia? From Florida? Now, a number of the brightest and best agricultural economists in the region are women. To steal a line from John Holt, "Roses Among the Thorns."

At its inception, the SAEA was lily white. Integration of the student bodies of the southern 1862 LGU's had just occurred. As with women, there were a handful of blacks like Dr. Victor Hurst of S.C. State College. The welcome address at this meeting by Dr. Handy Williamson, Department Chairman at Tennessee, shows how far we have come in this regard.

Most all of the early members, like me, were farm boys. We didn't want to go back to the farm or we couldn't, but we wanted a career involved with agriculture. The charter members brought with that background a firsthand knowledge and empathy for farm and rural problems, something that I will return to later.

The Association in its early years was in some respect a fiefdom of the old-time southern department heads. These men were real heads—not chairmen. They made decisions without consulting faculty, they hired, they fired, they chewed ass. This is not said in a derogatory manner, just as a statement of fact.

Seven of the first eight Presidents were such men: Bob Rudd, Tom Whatley, Ken Tefertiller, Jim Plaxico, Verner Hurt, Joe Purcell, Henry Meenen. Perhaps in its infancy the SAEA needed such firm leadership, but I think it was a sign of maturation when we got off that kick and started simply electing the best representatives of the profession in our region to lead us.

The SAEA is financially sound today, but as Penn mentioned, this has not always been the case. I recall in the mid 1970's when Dick King, Gene Mathia, and some of the other officers had to pledge personal assets so that the organization could continue to function until a new higher dues structure took effect. We owe a debt of gratitude for such personal sacrifices that have been necessary for the survival of the Association.

Part of the history of SAEA is evidenced by the listing of past officers in the *SJAE*. But we do not list the names of those who have worked the hardest over the years—the editors. Rod Martin was the first editor, followed by Gerald Doekson, the late John Nixon, Leo Guidry, Al Schupp, Bob Shulstad, then by coeditors, Rob Martin and John Adrian, and current editors, Steve Miller and Gary Wells. The growing quality of the *SJAE* is tribute to the efforts of these individuals.

Concluding this personal history on a sad note, many of the 519 charter members are no longer with us. Among those who touched my life, both professionally and as friends, are John Nixon, Ben Lanham, Leo Strickland, Steve Lytle, Jerrold Pitman, Ralph Kline, Wayne Burkhart, and Gene McMurtrey. Others who were not charter members include William Alexander, Fred Prochaska, and Lowell Wilson. Most of you have similar lists. Let us not forget these and others like them who have made differences in our lives and contributed greatly to the profession in the South.

WHERE TO NOW?

As our association approaches adulthood in human years, what lies ahead? It has been postulated that organizations, like living creatures, have a life cycle. Stage I is characterized by rapid growth. In Stage II, the organization matures. Stage I goals have been achieved and stability, if not stagnation, sets in. Stage III can go either direction—forward, adopting new goals, new directions; or backward, fading away like the National Grange. We can be viewed as a Stage II organization. Will we go forward or backward?

As Penn pointed out, the Association has made great strides in the past 20 years in helping its membership through two primary avenues, the *Journal* and these meetings. In these two ways the Association allows us to communicate professionally and encourages scholarly analysis of real world problems. For the truly professional agricultural economist, this is fundamental. He or she must have the ability to apply sound economic logic and analytical techniques to applied problems, and must further have the ability, and the oppor-

tunity, to communicate these ideas.

But I would argue that there are some other ingredients as well. These ingredients include empathy, curiosity, honesty, and breadth. I would further argue that this Association should play a bigger and better role in developing these attributes among its membership.

Most all of the charter members and early joiners of this association knew the problems of farming and rural areas first hand. We witnessed, and more than a few had felt, rural poverty. We knew from our fathers which government programs were boondoggles, which were bandaids, and which ones offered real benefits. We knew what it was like to have inadequate services. Given the changing makeup of our membership, does our Association have a role to play in recreating this humanistic view? Our discipline is the brunt of jokes and is called "dismal" because we deal with statistics and a form of theoretical logic that escapes many. But we must remember that we are a social science—a *people* science.

Have these meetings piqued your curiosity about an emerging problem, made you want to know more about it, research it, teach about it in the classroom or out in your state? I think that ideally they should have. A number of hot topics were discussed, but how many were on true emerging issues where the research is not yet done. I agree with Penn, for example, that the impact of increasing concentration and leveraged buyouts on competition in the food industry is a critical concern. I saw one contributed paper in the program that touched on this issue. Why not announce a symposium or a paper competition on such an emerging issue and select the most outstanding submissions on the topic and publish the papers in the *SJAE*?

Honesty is an issue where the SAEA must take a firm stand. This includes research honesty and teaching honesty. Plagiarism is dishonest. It has touched our very *Journal*, and most members are unaware of that fact. Publishing unreplicable research results is dishonest. Serving students a curriculum that leaves them ill-prepared for the real world is dishonest. Feeding extension audiences or consulting clients the answers they want to hear is dishonest. In our world, for most of us the world of the Land Grant University, the reward system is largely structured around associations like ours. Perhaps we need to use the stick as well as the carrot. Can we develop codes of ethical conduct? Penalize wrongdoers? I recognize that there are no easy answers, that legal issues and liability problems can arise. We need to grapple with the honesty issue.

The best economists I know possess great breadth as well as depth, and they have multidisciplinary breadth as well as breadth within our profession. Twenty years ago, it is possible that the slower march of technology and our firsthand familiarity with subject areas like animal husbandry sufficed to give agricultural economists that needed breadth. That is no longer the case. Most of us work on multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary projects back at home. Why not use the SAAS meetings to bring that multidisciplinary focus to a higher plane and to improve the professional recognition of such efforts? This means something much more than a joint session with the rural sociologists every few years. What better organization than SAEA to take the lead?

If we don't take this opportunity, the justification of continuing to meet with SAAS is dubious. In my view it is more expensive, more congested, and it occurs at a very bad time of the year.

CONCLUSIONS

J.B. and I are in complete agreement that it has been a good 20 years. In the vernacular of our region, "We done good!"

Compare the latest issue of the *SJAE* to the initial issue, December 1969. Note that the original does not say Vol. 1, No. 1. Perhaps the founders were not sure there would be a Volume 2. You will find similarities. Twenty years ago the membership addressed questions of competition in the food industry, farm policies, agricultural capital, regional economics, marketing orders, economic development, federal-state research coordination, the market for agricultural economists. The list hasn't changed all that much. We have pretty much kept on track, as Harold Breimyer stated at that initial meeting, by "being sensitive to the needs of the times and being willing to apply our talents to them."

There are opportunities ahead, and risks. Twenty years ago Breimyer also stated that in the land grant university "the temptation, if not the trend is that toward an obscurant scholasticism. This is a denial of all that the land grant concept has stood for. If my credit line for that concept is valid, we depart from it at our peril." For the next 20 years, the SAEA must continue to help protect us from our worst potential enemy—ourselves.

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