

Telling the Agricultural Story

Robert G. Rupp

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Abstract

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Telling the Agricultural Story

Robert G. Rupp

I have regarded your Rueben Brigham Award highly ever since I helped select a recipient for it several years ago. I know many of the past recipients; they are all competent agricultural communicators. I am honored to be listed with them.

I also feel a close kinship with ACE. I have been both an active and associate member. I have had the privilege of working for the agricultural extension information service in Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota and with it in North and South Dakota, and other states. My mentors have included George Round, who I worked for briefly while a student at the University of Nebraska; Paul Johnson, who I worked for while taking graduate work at the University of Minnesota, and C. R. "Dutch" Elder, who it was my good fortune to have worked under for 1½ years at Iowa State University. He and Paul taught me more about how to write *for* farmers than any other editors I have worked for or with. Later, while extension news editor at the University of Minnesota, I had the opportunity and pleasure to work with Harold Swanson. All of these men have been illustrious members of your organization.

In accepting this award, I would like to issue one challenge—that you, as well as we in the private sector of agricultural communication, learn how to better tell the story for farmers . . . tell better the economic story of farmers to non-farmers in the years ahead. We need to speak for

Rueben Brigham Award acceptance speech by Rupp, (who is editor/associate publisher, The FARMER/The DAKOTA FARMER), at national ACE meeting, Biloxi, Mississippi, 7 July 1981.

farmers' economic well-being. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 65 (1998), Article 2

We all know and can recite agricultural statistics . . . that the average farmer:

- Produces enough to feed about 78 other people . . . produces 375,000 pounds of food crops per year, compared to 35,000 pounds for the average European farmer and 33,000 for the average Russian farmer.
- Makes up 3 percent of the U.S. population, but provide work for 15 million other people in processing and transporting of food products.
- Provides 40 percent of the total income in a state like Minnesota and does it with non-depleting resources renewed as new wealth each year.

Statistics like those are a litany too easily repeated. It's a litany that falls short. Repeating statistics doesn't get the full story to non-farm consumers. The true story is that too many farmers are doing that production job at too great an economic sacrifice to themselves, their families and their soil.

Let me illustrate how it falls short: A city woman when I told her how tough it is for farmers this year, said she couldn't feel much sympathy for farmers. "Anybody who can buy \$100,000 tractors doesn't seem to be too bad off to me," were her words. No one had properly explained the economics of agriculture to her.

Along that line, Farm City Week and National Agricultural Day events which line up machinery in a farmer's yard, put price tags on each implement and parade a group of city visitors past it may be doing more disservice than service to farmers. Many who see such a display may interpret that as an indication that farmer has a lot of money in the bank. What it's really showing is that a banker has a lot of trust in a farmer.

An accurate farm economics story is not easy to tell. It is often told incompletely. A Minnesota metropolitan newspaper, earlier this year, carried a story on how FHA delinquencies were running at a record-high 49 percent as of April 1. The story inferred that large numbers of foreclosures were just around the corner. But it failed to explain that many FHA payments are handled by computers today and that when a payment is not in the St. Louis office by March 31, the end of the first quarter, that account is automatically declared delinquent even though payment comes in the next day. It also failed to point out that some

borrowers chose not to make payments during a certain quarter for tax reasons. Also, that there is no direct correlation between delinquencies and farm bankruptcies.

Foreclosures are running higher this year than last, true, but knowledgeable rural bankers expect them to range in the 1 or 2 percent level, nowhere near the 49 percent level the story on delinquencies implied. One of the most common questions I get from farm audiences is “How can we tell our story to consumers?” We, as farm magazine editors, can’t reach non-farm audiences. Our publications are directed almost exclusively to farmers. But you in ACE have tailor-made print and electronic media contacts which reach consumers. You have on-campus resource personnel, who are recognized as qualified and unbiased, to be quoted directly for the asking.

Telling the ag economic story—of food supply and a fair return to producers—is a worldwide need.

I heard Josef Ertel, West Germany Minister of Agriculture, speak on food prices and farm income at the opening of the Berlin Green Week last January in Berlin. The president of the European Communities Farmer’s Organization, who is a farmer, also spoke on the same issue. Both were addressing that problem because it is as much a concern in Europe as in the U.S. Unfortunately, each was speaking on a different side of the issue.

Speaking of international agriculture, I think we’ll see more cooperation of communicators between countries in the years ahead. The International Federation of Agricultural Journalists (IFAJ), of which I am the U.S. representative, is now looking for ways to develop both student and writer exchanges between countries. We in IFAJ want to work more closely with organizations like ACE, AAEA, Farm Broadcasters and the Newspaper Ag Editors Association. There is a growing need to tell the story *for* farmers at both national and international levels.

We are all in an exciting business. It is one with a lot of new techniques and new electronic hardware coming to the forefront.

But while techniques may change, the story doesn’t. Only farmers produce food. Their economic well-being is essential to the physical welfare of all of us. Their business deserves to be understood. We need people skilled in communications who can, and will, tell the basics of food production economics accurately, thoroughly and convincingly. You can help do that.

