

FARM OPERATORS' STANDINGS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES



High Standing

Level of Living

Church Work

Source of Information

Organizations

Farm Income

Improved Practice Rating

Low Standing

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FARM OPERATORS' STANDINGS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

● In every community of the world, except perhaps the most primitive ones, there are people who are looked up to and those who are looked down upon. Community opinion gives us a ranking, standing, status, prestige rating—or whatever you choose to call it.

An individual's ranking can be different in different groups. For example, a person could possibly have a relatively low standing in his job but a fairly high status in his lodge or church. Apart from this, or likely a composite of these separate group standings, each individual has a community rank.

Occupation is closely associated with community standing. Medical doctors, for example, are generally looked up to while the garbage collector is likely to be looked down upon.

Some medical doctors stand higher than others within their profession. Within the business of farming, the same is true. Some farmers are considered good, some poor, and some average. This bulletin summarizes a study made in two Missouri communities of what was connected with the standing of farm operators.

Several authors in recent years have labeled Americans as "status seekers" in a derogatory sense. What they are referring to is what we might call "trying to get ahead of the Joneses" with a bigger house, newer car, and other material possessions. Actually, every normal human being probably seeks some kind of a status or role to play in life, which may or may not involve a material goal and may or may not be recognized by the group.

In this study we are interested in what causes a community to assign a certain standing to an individ-

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ual, rather than in what the individual is pursuing as a goal.

How the Study Was Made

All of the farm operators in the two communities were interviewed. The one community, which was located in the central Ozarks plateau, will be referred to as "Ozark Community". The other community, called "Prairie Community," is in northwest Missouri. Both are communities around small agricultural towns.

Altogether, 238 farm operators were interviewed in Ozark Community. A total of 219 were interview-

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ed in Prairie Community. Prairie is in a prosperous farming area. Its agriculture is relatively rich, incomes are high, and the general economic situation is good. Ozark Community is in an area where farm incomes are low, farming operations are subject to frequent drouth and the soil tends to be poor. Thus, the two communities represented extremes in Missouri farm conditions.

These divergent communities were chosen to see if their different conditions would have any influence on the way local residents ranked each other.

From stereotypes that have been formed of people in the two areas, Prairie residents might be expected to associate a farmer's standing with his income, schooling, or success as a farmer while the Ozark residents would be more sensitive to age, length of residence in the community, and religious activities.

In each community a group of farm operators was selected to judge the standings of the community's farmers. Each of these "judges" was given

a deck of cards. Each card had the name of a farm operator typed on it. The judge was asked to divide the cards as to how he believed each farmer ranked in the community. Judges were asked to rank only those individuals known to them.

The judges themselves were all farm operators residing in the community.

After all of the judges (13 in Prairie and 16 in Ozark) had rated the farm operators, the average rating for each farm operator was figured. The judges were able to rank most individuals easily and with fairly consistent agreement in their ranking. This indicated there were commonly recognized differences in standing. There was some disagreement on how any individual was ranked but the range was usually not large.

The ratings were compared with data on personal characteristics obtained from the individual interviews in an effort to find factors that were associated with an individual's standing in the community.

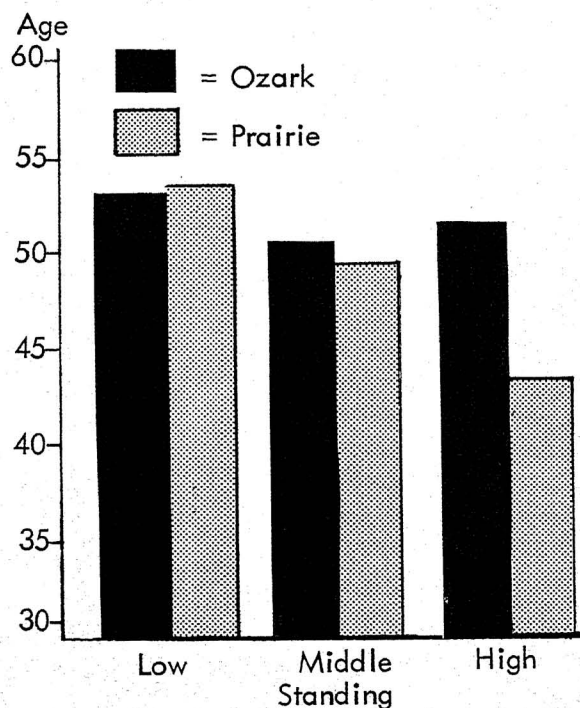
Influence of the Characteristics Studied

A number of personal characteristics of farm operators which were thought to be important were selected for special study. Included were *age, education, size of farm, number of years farming for himself, length of residence in the community, gross farm income, level-of-living, membership and participation in organizations, church membership and participation, adoption of improved farm practices, number of times mentioned as a source of farming information, and number of times named as an innovator.* All of these were compared with the farm operator's standing in his community.

Age

In the Ozark community age was not associated with the farm operator's standing though there was some variation in the average ages for the various groups. However, the differences were not consistent as illustrated by the lowest and highest group having a similar age. (See Fig. 1).

Figure 1. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Age



There was some association of age with standing in Prairie Community. The highest standing operators were slightly younger and the lowest were the oldest group. There was a range of more than ten years between the highest and the lowest group. However, in both communities there was considerable variation within the groups; that is, both high and low groups had mixtures of young and old farm operators.

Education

As stated earlier, stereotypes of the two communities would forecast education to be more important to a farm operator's standing in Prairie than in Ozark. This was not borne out in the study. (See Fig. 2).

In Ozark Community, the highest standing group had a large proportion of the people with above average education. In the next group below, the average education completed dropped considerably and there was relatively little variation between the last two groups.

In Prairie also there was a variation between the high and low groups but there were more people with high school and college education. Thus, between the groups there was a more consistent decline in average education.

Length of Residence in the Community

This was not a very important factor in either community, although in both communities the group with the highest ratings had also lived longest in the community. Thus, again the popular ideas were in error. (See Fig. 3).

Figure 2. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Education

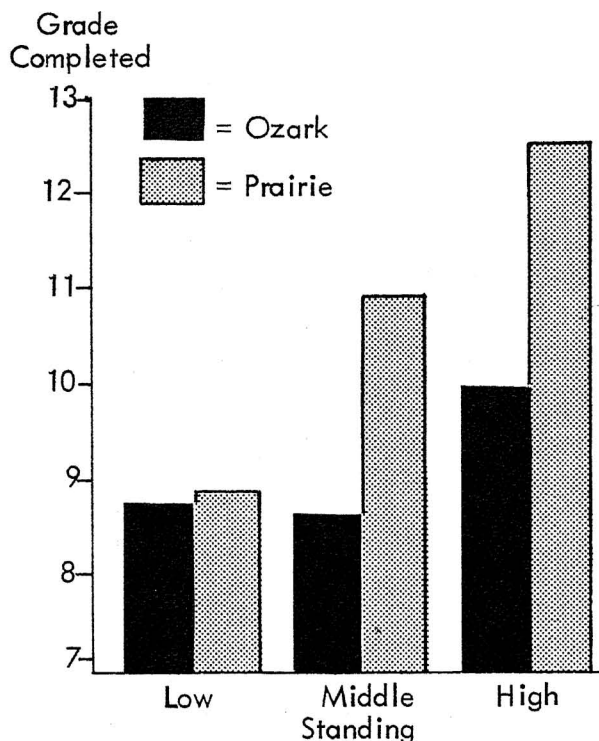
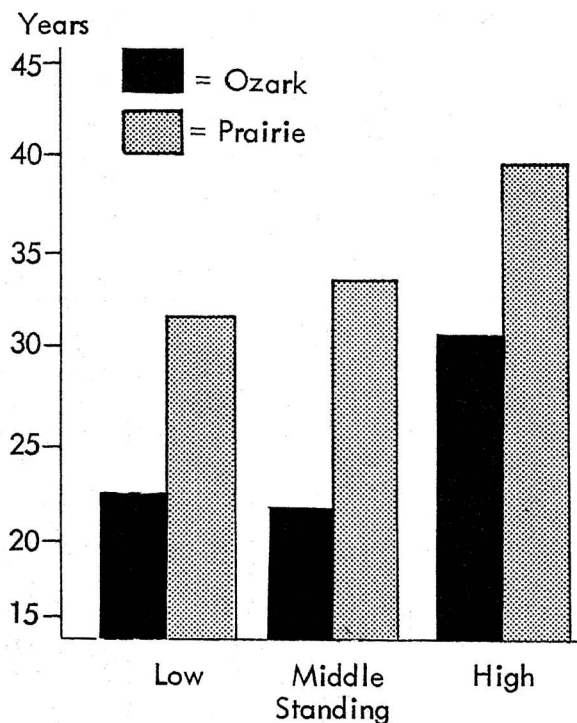


Figure 3. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Length of Residence in the Community.



Size of Farm

Agriculture is the major industry in both communities. Therefore it would seem reasonable that a person's achievement in farming would be a factor in how he stood in the community. Size of farm may be used as one way of looking at this. However, it is realized that a person may obtain a large farm in many ways besides being a good farmer.

In Ozark, size of farm was associated with a person's standing. If a person had a large farm he was more likely to have a high standing than if he had a small farm. For the group of operators with highest standings the average size of the farm was 175 acres while the group with lowest standing had an average of 113 acres. (See Fig. 4).

In Prairie Community the decline in size with decline in standing of the operator was even more striking. The average size of farm for the highest group was 394 acres, compared with 152 acres for the lowest group.

Improved Practice Rating

Another way of judging a farmer's occupational abilities is his use of new farming practices. If a farmer is to keep up and be successful he must always be ready to change his farming practices; for example, he must try new varieties of seed, and adopt new soil and crop technologies as they are developed by research workers. This improved practice rating measures the percent that each farm operator used. The practices measured for the operator were only those that could be applied to his farm.

The popular stereotype would be that the difference between the improved practice rating of the highest standing group and the lowest standing group would be less in Ozark than in Prairie. The study did not support this stereotype.

In both communities the improved practice rating was highly associated with the operator's standing. The highest standing group in Ozark had an average percent rating of 43 while the lowest class had only 22 and there was a consistent decline in the average score for each class from the highest to the lowest. (See Fig. 5).

In Prairie, a similar association was found with the highest ranking class having a score of 72 and the lowest 36. When the complete range was examined it was found Ozark had the widest range, but the association was more consistent in Prairie so that the popular ideas concerning the two communities in relation to this characteristic are in doubt.

Figure 4. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Size of Farm

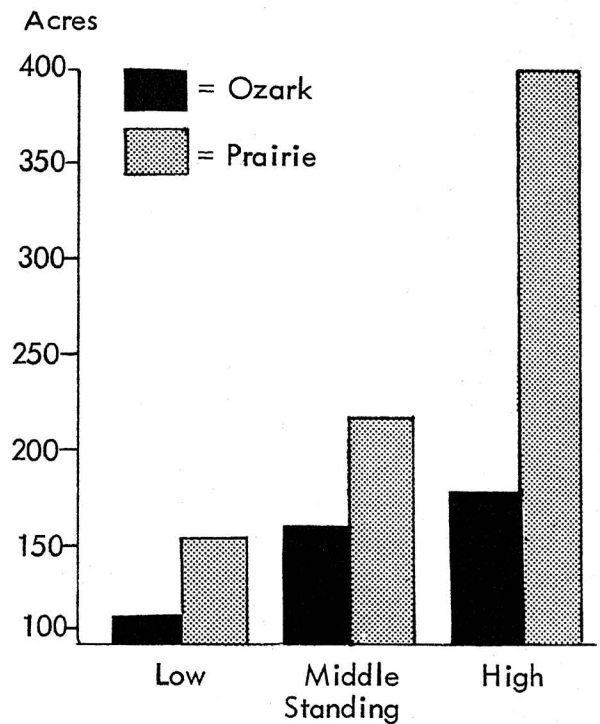
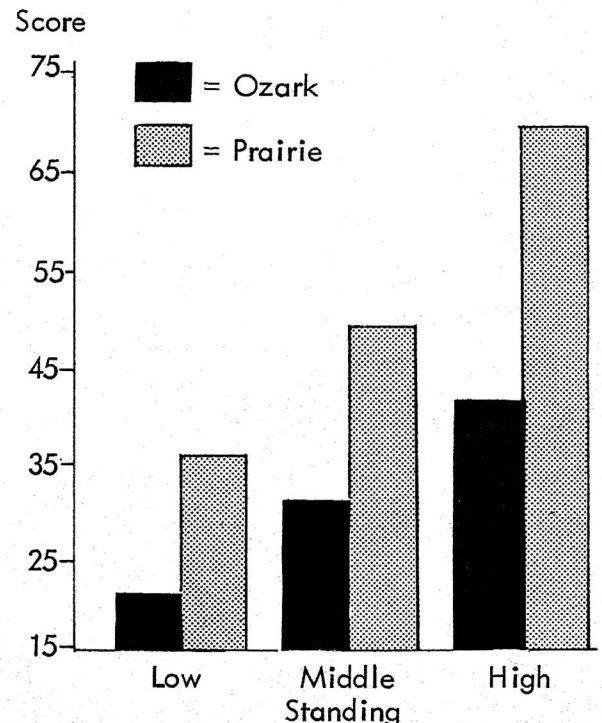


Figure 5. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Improved Practice Rating



Apparently, in both communities the improved practice rating of a farmer was very important in determining how he stood in relation to his neighbors.

Influence of Income

Income can be viewed as influencing standing in at least three different ways.

- 1) The people within the community measure a farm operator's success and award him standing or prestige on the basis of how well he succeeds in his business. This is reflected by his gross farm income.
- 2) Standing may be judged on a level-of-living basis, reflecting both income and how it was used.
- 3) Income may be used as a means of obtaining power such as by the use of credit.

The first two of these influences of income on community standing were studied.

Gross Farm Income

In Ozark the top group received an average gross income of \$4,384 while the operators in the next group received only \$2,237. (See Fig. 6).

In Prairie, much the same situation was found, but on a larger scale. The highest group had an average gross farm income of \$14,822 while the lowest group averaged only \$2,875.

This evidence would indicate that a person's income was very closely associated with his standing in the community.

Level-of-Living

Is keeping up with the Joneses important in rural communities? It is commonly assumed that in America today everyone tries to have as many material possessions such as cars and television sets as possible. Thus, a person's standing in a group is influenced by his accumulation of material possessions. The level-of-living score used here included selected household furnishing such as freezers; house facilities, such as running water; and the ownership and model of automobiles.

In Ozark, the highest group had a level-of-living score of 17 while the lowest had 13 and the decline was consistent between the two groups. (See Fig. 7). A similar pattern was found in Prairie. The highest prestige group had a score of 24 while the lowest had a score of 18. The large difference between the highest and lowest groups in Ozark might be interpreted to indicate that level-of-living was as important in Ozark as in Prairie.

Figure 6. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Gross Farm Income

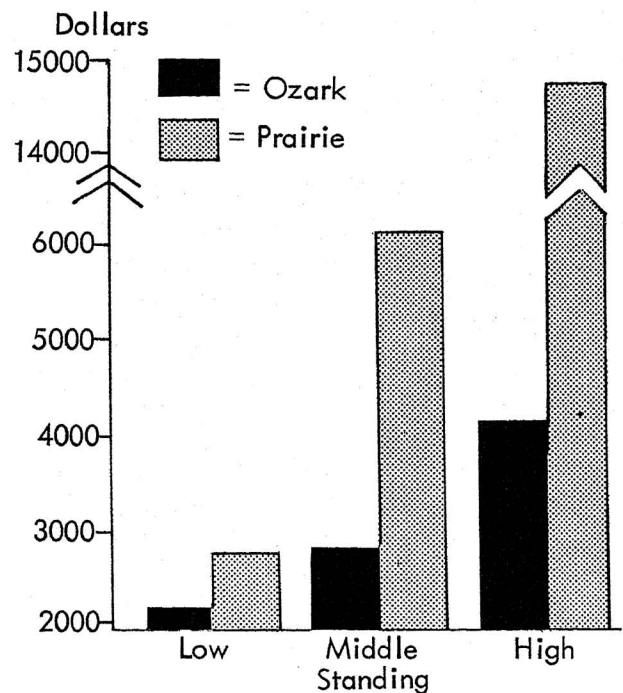
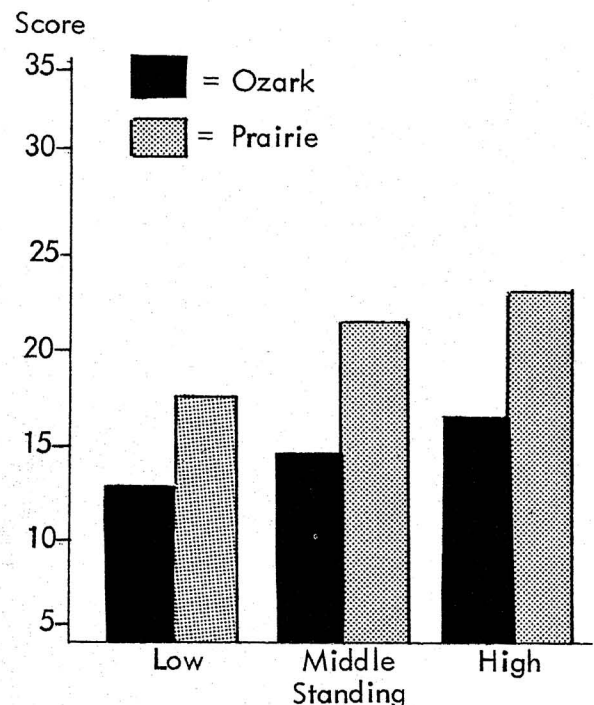


Figure 7. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Level-of-Living



Church Membership Score

Another point that was made in the original statement concerning the two communities was that church membership and attendance would be more important in the south Missouri community than in the northern community. This comes from the description of the Ozarks as the "Bible Belt". To check this assumption the operators were asked if they belonged to a church and if they attended regularly. In Ozark the highest prestige group had the highest church membership and attendance score. The average for each group score decreased with the lowest group having the lowest score. (See Fig. 8).

In Prairie, much the same pattern was found with the highest group having the highest score and the lowest group the lowest score. However, the association between church membership and standing was greater in Prairie than it was in Ozark. Thus again, the commonly held ideas would appear to be in error.

Membership and Participation in Other Organizations

It may be that for a person to have a high standing he must take part in community activities. One way to do this is by belonging to and attending a large number of organizations. To examine this idea, the operators were asked what organizations they belonged to and if they attended the meetings of these organizations. From this a total score was developed to include all of their memberships in organizations which were not strictly religious or of a fraternal nature. Included in the listings were farm organizations, social, advisory, marketing control, and other types of organizations.

Standing definitely decreased as the amount of membership and participation declined in both communities. However, the association between membership and community standing was slightly higher in Prairie than it was in Ozark. Thus it would seem that the statement about the effect of taking part in organizations was correct: it does influence an operator's standing. Again the difference between the two communities was very small. (See Fig. 9).

Figure 8. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Church Membership

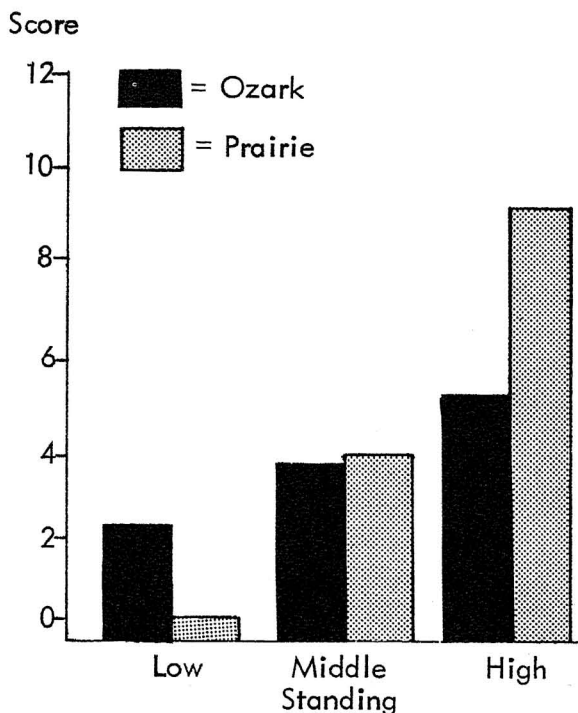
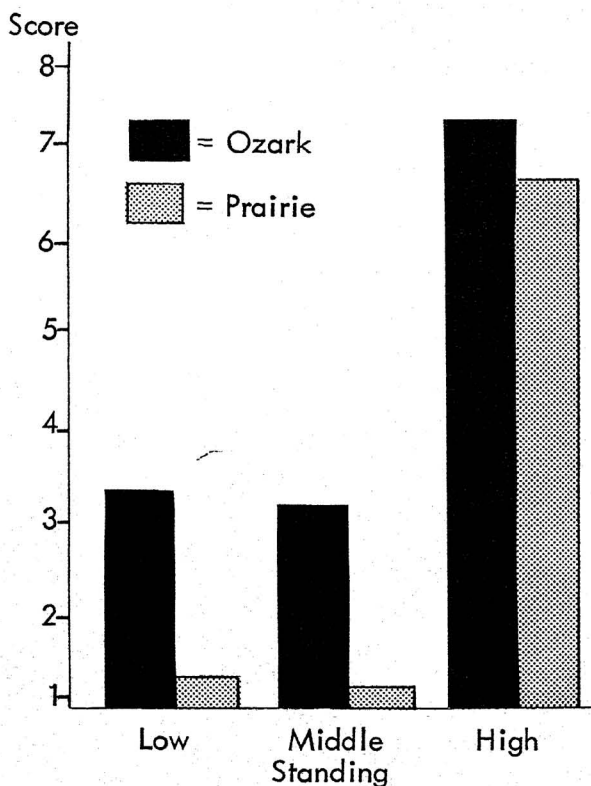


Figure 9. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Membership and Participation in Other Organizations

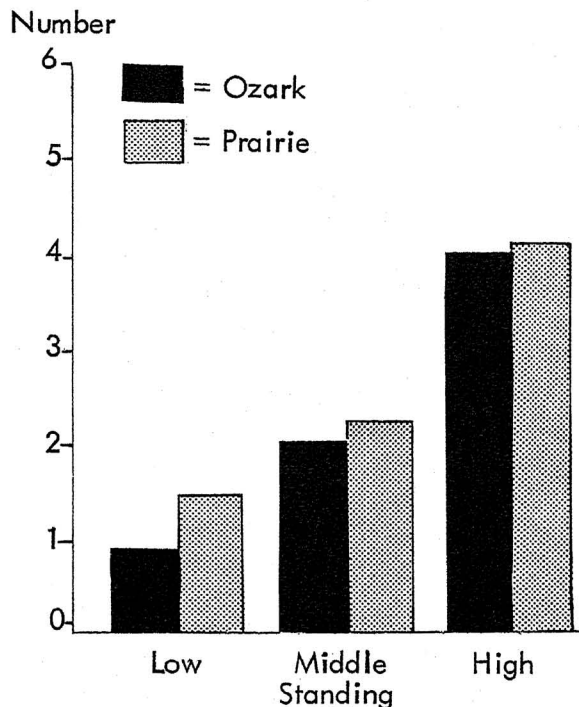


Number of Times Mentioned by Other Farmers as a Source of Farming Information

Another indication of a farmer's standing in the community might be the way that other farmers regard him as a source of farming information. It is doubtful whether a person who is not in good standing and does not have considerable prestige or standing within the community will be named by other farm operators as being a source of farming information. The score used is the total number of times each farm operator was named as a source of farming information.

In Ozark the group that had been rated highest in prestige was mentioned as a source of farming information an average of 3.9 times and the lowest prestige group was mentioned 0.9 times. (See Fig. 10). In Prairie, the same situation existed. The top prestige operators were named much more. (4.0 times) than the lowest group (1.4 times). The difference was not as great as it was in Ozark, but in both communities it indicated that the high standing operators were credited with being the chief sources of information.

Figure 10. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Number of Times Mentioned by Other Farmers as a Source of Farming Information.

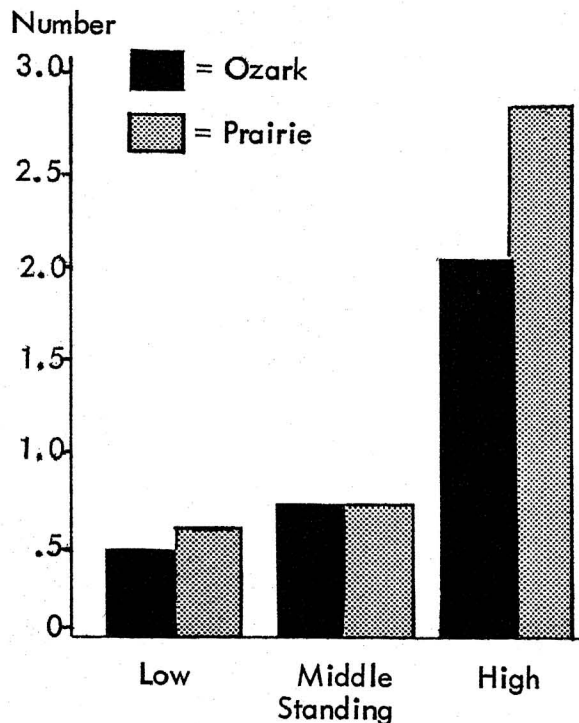


Number of Times Mentioned as an Innovator

If a farm operator is the first in his community to try something new in farming, does this contribute to his standing in his community? Popular ideas are that it does and that it would be more important in the Prairie community than in the Ozark.

In Ozark, the group with highest standing had the highest average score, being mentioned 1.9 times as one of the first to try new practices. This dropped to 0.6 in the second group and remained almost constant for the others. (See Fig. 11). In Prairie much the same pattern was found. The top group had a score of 2.7, the second 0.6 and the third was about the same. Thus, the popular assumption concerning the communities would have to be rejected.

Figure 11. A Comparison of the Farm Operator's Standing in the Community with Number of Times Mentioned as an Innovator



The Two Communities Compared

Comparison of the two communities reveals no great differences in characteristics associated with standing; thus, a farm operator's standing depends on about the same items in one as in the other (the same things are associated with how an operator stands in either community.) Thus, most commonly held ideas about the differential nature of factors affecting standing in the two communities would seem to have been wrong. However, it is somewhat in error to consider each one of the characteristics separately because, for example, the operator's education, may also influence his income.

By using certain mathematical procedures it is easy to look at each factor while the others are controlled. When this was done for Ozark the two most important factors associated with a person's standing in a community were his *level-of-living* and how

other people regarded him as being *a source of farming information*. When this was done for Prairie, the most important factor was *church membership and participation*.

Thus, the conclusion given at the first of the section would still stand. More specifically, in the first part of this bulletin, it was stated that by popular stereotypes one of the things which would be associated with a person's standing in Ozark was his church membership and participation. The study showed this was more important in Prairie. In Prairie, it was thought that one of the most important things would be a person's material possessions; and this in reality was one of the more important items in Ozark. Thus, the stereotypes of the Ozark "hillbilly" and north Missouri corn-hog farmer were not in agreement with reality.

Conclusions

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this research:

- 1) Farm operators can be divided into levels or groups according to their standing or prestige.
- 2) There are certain distinctive characteristics associated with each of these groups.
- 3) The characteristics associated with each of these groups are similar even for the two widely different rural communities.

- 4) Many of the popular ideas or stereotypes held by many about people living in certain areas of the state are in error.

It should not be assumed that these are the only factors that are associated with a person's standing in the community. Other factors which may influence his standing are: his behavior and his personality, that is, whether he is friendly or cold, etc. The study of these characteristics must await another research project in the future.