

-AAEA Senior Section Track Session Panel, Orlando, Florida, July 28, 2008.

“Greatest Contributions to Our Profession by Agricultural and Resource Economists - Some Musings to Stir Discussion”.

By Alex F. McCalla, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Davis

The possibilities for tackling a topic this broad are endless. My choice is to address the contributions made to our profession by general economics departments. I have decided to look at the issue from related two perspectives: 1. the historical origins of our Association, the AAEA; and 2. from how you view the world of agricultural economics from where you sit.

Let me try to explain. The name “Agricultural Economics” implies a relationship both with the agricultural sector and with the discipline of economics. I first was exposed to the name “agricultural economics” in a class on the Economics of Agriculture taught in the Political Economy Department at the University of Alberta. My Professor, William Mackenzie, commented strongly and with some frequency about how disturbed he was that the Faculty of Agriculture was trying to create a Department of Agricultural Economics. At that time the only Agricultural Economics courses at Alberta were taught by him in the Faculty of Arts and Science. His view was that trying to create such a department gave the false impression that “agricultural economics” was a discipline. He was he said an economist who studied the “Economics of Agriculture” as others studied “labor economics” or “transportation economics”. At the time, as a third year raw faced Alberta farm boy, it seemed like splitting hairs or playing with words and dismissed him as a disgruntled Prof whose was about to lose his teaching assignments to another Department.

Much later it became clear to me that there were real difference in how you looked at the subject. Bill Mackenzie was a sarcastic Scott who was an Oxford trained general economist interested in agriculture. He had also studied at Harvard under John D. Black. His case was that studying agriculture as a part of the total economy from the perspective of an Economics Department situated in a Liberal Arts College in a full scope University made you think

differently than if you started out studying Farm Management in an Agricultural Economics Department in a College of Agriculture in a Land Grant University.

Recently I have been thinking about it again because historically economists interested in Agriculture situated in economics departments in both public and private universities have made enormous contributions to our Profession- think only of Harvard, Chicago, and Stanford. And now with the passing of D. Gale Johnson and Ted Schultz, all of these places have little involvement with Agricultural Economics. The question I asked myself was -- should we care??

In 2010 the AAEA will celebrate its Centennial when we will all be reminded that our Association came from two quite different “tributaries” to quote O. B. Jesness writing on the occasion of our fiftieth anniversary<sup>1</sup>. One was the American Farm Management Association established circa 1910 by people like George Warren and Andrew Boss who wanted to study the economics of farming coming at the issue from the disciplines of horticulture and agronomy. The other stream, is associated with names like Henry C. Taylor and Thomas Nixon Carver, who came from general economics departments and wanted to study the “economics of agriculture”. They pushed to establish a National Association of Agricultural Economists circa 1915. The two joined hands in 1919 to form the AFEA.

So the debate was enjoined and continues --is it “the economics of agriculture” a field of economics or its own *quasi – discipline*- “agricultural economics”. Think about it historically- John D. Black and John Kenneth Galbraith at Harvard, Ted Schultz and D. Gale Johnson at Chicago, and J.S. Davis and the Working Brothers at Stanford- all would be identified as people who have made significant contributions to Agricultural Economics both in terms of the research they published but, probably more importantly in terms of how they thought about issues and what they imparted to their students. Also think of the contributions of Economics Departments like Wisconsin and Iowa State, before, and after the “margarine Incident”<sup>2</sup>, and of

---

<sup>1</sup> O.B. Jesness, “The First Fifty Years” *JFE* Vol. 41, # 5, December 1959, pps 900-908.

<sup>2</sup> I sometimes muse, over my first cocktail, about how would the profession have looked like if the margarine incident had not happened and Ted Schultz and his impressive stable of bright young graduate students had stayed at Iowa State. I firmly believe great people have great influences but that they are also influenced by their environment. Would the history of Agricultural Economics post 1943 have been different?

other combined departments like NC State used to be, Montana State is and new comers like Washington State and VPI have become. All in my view have brought rich and different perspectives to our Association.

If you are interested in policy, trade and agricultural development as I am, tracing the family tree from these places turns up people who have been incredibly influential in shaping the policy debate. From Harvard, people like Murray Benedict, Willard Cochrane, Jim Bonnen and Dale Hathaway, not to mention Dick King and many others. From Chicago, people like Glen Johnson, Ed Schuh, Bruce Gardner and Vern Ruttan not mention Bill Nichols, who set up shop at Vanderbilt, Bob Evenson at Yale and Dan Sumner at Davis. From Stanford think of the pioneering work on commodity trade of Farnsworth, Swerling and Timeshenko, later the likes of Bruce Johnston and Wally Falcon seemingly populated half of the rural development staff at the World Bank. Laurian Unnevr and Will Masters are of the last generation of FRI graduates.

I could go on and talk more about the next generations of Agricultural Economists who have been spawned by these folks but you get my drift. In my view they tend to look at the world differently because the context that shaped their thinking required them to think about the Agricultural sector in the context of the national and international economy not just about producing and marketing of tomatoes and corn in rural California or Iowa.

This is not to say they all think alike because we know they don't. But I trace my lineage to Black and Harvard twice through Mackenzie, and Cochrane and Learn and I know I think differently than the boys and girls who have Chicago in their blood and of course Stanford was another world.

So where am I going with this story? Plurality in origin and plurality in evolution have been very good for agricultural economics. Will the fact that the study of "the economics of agriculture" in a formal sense has disappeared from Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, Vanderbilt and may soon do so at Yale with Evenson's retirement, be bad for our profession? Clearly not all icons or extensive family trees came from the economics origin. I suggest just three of many possible examples – George Brandow, Earl Heady, and Ray Bressler, that didn't. But there are extensive family trees that did.

So should we care? Think about it as we approach our centennial. I do and I wonder about the loss of the genetic diversity that these perspectives brought to us. It worries me a lot.