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**STUDIES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

*Volume XI*

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**THE COUNTY AGENT**

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# THE COUNTY AGENT

By  
GLADYS BAKER



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The writer assumes full responsibility for errors of fact and interpretation.

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE rise of the county agent is an interesting and important development in the field of government. He serves at one and the same time as a representative of the federal, state, and county governments. In many states he is also closely allied with a semiprivate farm organization which he has in part built up. His function as an adult itinerant vocational teacher to carry forth and adapt the findings of the state agricultural colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture has been modified to enable him to assist in conducting national programs to meet major agricultural emergencies: the food production campaigns of the World War period, the post-war attempts to solve the surplus problem through co-operative marketing, and the New Deal adjustments to the post-war depression. The latter emergency has brought the county agent to an important turning-point in extension work. Not only has his work been adapted to meet national objectives, but the new agricultural agencies serve as a challenge to his former methods and objectives.

Interest in the study of the county agent was primarily stimulated by the leadership which the county agent assumed in the various commodity programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Since 1933 he has served as a clearing-house of information on the various federal programs available for farmers. In most sections he has also served as a promoter, adviser, semiadministrator, and even as an administrator of some of these programs in many counties. These New Deal activities brought sharply into focus the major problems of county agent work and in addition raised new questions concerning the adaptation of a decentralized educational system to fit national programs of an emergency character. Several of these problems which have been brought into relief by the county agent's recent experiences can be stated.

1. Can the uniformity and speed necessary for a national-action program be secured through a system of government agents under a system of control divided between federal, state, and county governments?

The evidence secured through the field observations made during this study indicates that a government agent who is responsible to the federal, state, and county governments tends to be more responsive to local, state, and regional influences than to the immediate objectives of a national program, although considerable uniformity of action can be secured during a short emergency period. The federal government found it advisable, or necessary, to allow wide variations in the leadership which county agents assumed in the commodity programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. The county agent's primary responsibility to local and state interests makes the present system unadaptable to administrative work in national-action programs except for a short emergency period.

2. Do government agents under such a system of control conform chiefly to local rather than to state or national influences?

In most states the county governing-board (or the county farm-bureau board acting in lieu of the county governing-board) can bring about the county agent's dismissal and the discontinuance of county extension work by withdrawing county funds. Although the State Extension Office can bring about the county agent's dismissal by withholding state and federal funds, this power is rarely used since the success of county extension work is dependent upon local funds and co-operation. Observations from this county agent study indicate that government agents responsible to federal, state, and county governments find themselves more directly and personally responsible to the local unit and are consequently disproportionately influenced by this unit of government.

3. Can a government agent be controlled partially by private agencies without compromising his public status?

The control of the county farm bureau over county agent

work in some states has resulted in monopolization of the county agent's services by a minority group of taxpayers. At the same time it has tended to lend government support to a private pressure organization. Thus it seems evident that a government agent cannot be controlled partially by a private agency without compromising his public status.

4. Should government agents associated with a national program be subjected to county control through selection, dismissal, and payment of salary?

County groups given the authority to select, to dismiss, and to pay the salary of government agents tend to exercise a disproportionate influence over county agent work. The county agent may be forced to favor certain political or economic groups if he wishes to retain his position. Payment of salary by local groups results in inferior service to the poorer economic counties which are most in need of government assistance. The fact that a county agent may be dismissed because of factional or personal jealousies and that his salary is more an index of the county's ability to pay for and enthusiasm for extension work than of his ability or training is an obstacle to securing and retaining competent personnel in county extension work. Government agents associated with national programs cannot wisely be subjected to local control through selection, dismissal, and payment of salary.

5. Is it likely that an agent representing county, state, and federal governments will primarily serve dominant economic and political groups within his county?

The necessity of pleasing the dominant economic and political leaders because of dependence upon county appropriations as well as the natural tendency to conform to social and economic patterns has resulted in service by the county agent primarily for the more prosperous farmers. The neglect of the "lower third" of farm people has also been due partially to the indifference as well as to the inability of this class to follow the county agent's advice. Government agents receiving substantial funds and direction from the county government tend to be

responsive to the dominant economic and political groups within the county.

6. Even though the county agent should become an administrative rather than an educational official, is it best that he remain associated with the state college of agriculture to avoid partisan political influence?

County extension work has been, on the whole, remarkably free from partisan politics. Although county agents are at times dismissed because of partisan or factional politics, the rule that county agents cannot serve in their home counties and the fact that they must be college graduates approved by the state agricultural college have kept the system remarkably free from political appointments and political domination. County agent appointments have not been used as patronage for state political parties. The county agent study indicates that government programs conducted through state agricultural colleges are less subject to political manipulation than those conducted through regular state governmental agencies. If the county agent should become primarily an administrative officer with only a few functions of an educational nature, it is questionable whether the state agricultural college should compromise its objective academic status by continuing to assume responsibility for county agent work.

7. Is a county agent trained for scientific agricultural education best fitted to assume administrative functions?

The county agent's experience in conducting the commodity programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration as well as other national agricultural programs shows the need for training in broader social and economic fields as well as special training in extension methods. If the county agent is to continue to assume administrative functions, he will need a different type of training than his present background in scientific agricultural subject matter.

8. With the present diffusion of agricultural knowledge through Smith-Hughes vocational teachers, agricultural journals, bulletins, and the radio, accompanied by the present sur-

plus in the production of agricultural commodities, can the continuance of a tax-supported adult educational program for farmers to promote efficiency in agricultural production be justified? Is there a need for reorienting county agent work to accord better with long-time national objectives?

The present diffusion of agricultural information and methods in addition to the present surplus problem demands a change in the emphasis of county agent work from scientific agricultural production to longer-range social and economic objectives.

The available published material views the county agent simply as an itinerant adult vocational teacher and therefore does not offer adequate answers to the present problems involving major policy as to the future of county agent work. Dr. Alfred C. True has given a very thorough and detailed account of the development of county extension work up to 1923 in his book, *A History of Agricultural Extension Work, 1785-1923*.<sup>1</sup> The book is, however, too detailed for the general reader and does not contain an analysis of the major problems and relationships arising in county extension work. Dr. C. B. Smith and M. C. Wilson in their *Agricultural Extension System of the United States*<sup>2</sup> have given a good generalized description of county agent work up to 1930 as a system of adult vocational education. They have not treated the state and regional variations in extension work or analyzed the problems arising from the county agent's relationships to the federal, state, and county governments. M. C. Burritt in his *The County Agent and the Farm Bureau*<sup>3</sup> describes the special relationship between the county agent and the county farm bureau up to 1922. This book gives a fairly accurate description of county agent work as it is still carried on in New York State, but it does not treat the different type of work and local extension organizations in

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Pub. 15 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928).

<sup>2</sup> New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1930.

<sup>3</sup> New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922.



other sections. It was written too soon after the federation of county farm bureaus to provide an analysis of many problems which the organization of federations have brought about for county, state, and federal extension workers. O. B. Martin's *The Demonstration Work: Dr. Seaman A. Knapp's Contribution to Civilization*<sup>4</sup> gives a good description of the early development of county agent work in the southern states.

No previous study has been made of the county agent as a semiadministrative and governmental officer representing not only the educational-service aspects of government but also serving as an effective co-ordinator for different governmental levels and for many and varied agricultural programs. Most of the data here presented, therefore, were obtained from interviews and observations in the field. These field studies were made possible in the spring and summer of 1935 by a grant from the Special Fund for Training and Research in Public Administration of the University of Chicago and, later, by a Social Science Research Council Field Fellowship in 1936-37. Since it was originally intended to confine the study to the Iowa county agent, approximately six months' time was spent in that state in 1935 interviewing county agents, farmers, county officials, and officials of farm organizations and of federal agricultural programs in thirty-five counties. State leaders of the extension service and of the federal agricultural programs were also interviewed. This study was supplemented in 1936-37 by a similar field study for a period of two months in Alabama, two months in New York, one month in Tennessee, and one month in Illinois. In addition, extension leaders at the state agricultural colleges of Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, and South Carolina were interviewed. Approximately four and one-half months were spent in Washington, D.C., securing information concerning the Federal Extension Office and its relation to other federal agencies in the agricultural field.

The three states selected for special study—Iowa, New

<sup>4</sup> Boston: Stratford Co., 1921.

York, and Alabama—were chosen partly because of their geographical position in different farming areas and partly because of special conditions in these particular states. Iowa was selected in the Corn Belt because it is the home state of the writer, who is consequently more familiar with the economic, social, and political background of the work. It was also of particular interest because it served as the center of early “farm revolt” leadership which was extremely critical of the county agents and their relationship to the county farm bureaus and the federal agricultural programs. New York was chosen because it has been credited with inaugurating the county farm-bureau organizations. These county farm bureaus were reported to have retained their original educational function without adding commercial and legislative activities. Alabama was chosen because of its cotton economy and its race and tenancy problems. The field work in particular states was supplemented by information from federal regional extension agents, by reports, and by correspondence, as well as by attendance at several meetings of extension and land-grant college officials.

The following study is an attempt to describe and analyze the development and functions of the county agricultural agent movement from its inception through the New Deal period of work. The first part of the study is concerned with a description of the development and functions of the county agent. Then follows an analysis of his relationship to the federal, state, and county governments and to the semiofficial farm-bureau organization. The factors forming this relationship arise from the county agent's administrative responsibility, his financial support, and the various influences bearing on his selection, training, and length of service. A special chapter is devoted to the Negro county agent, who supplements the work of the white county agent in the southern states. In conclusion, an attempt is made to analyze the trends, special problems, and dilemmas in county agent work. Throughout the study particular emphasis is given to the county agent's changing

function and to the need for adjustment in his responsibilities and directions which has come about as a result of the changing national agricultural policy.

Although this book is devoted to a study of the development and present status of the county agent in his relationship to the federal, state, and county government, it throws some light on the possibility of eliminating duplication, waste, and overlapping between units of government through the federal grant-in-aid supplemented by local finance and responsibility. This system has possibilities for effective co-ordination of various government programs in the function of education, information, and promotion. The present intense localism and the lack of effective administrative control on the part of the federal government in the case of county agents raise serious questions concerning the application of the county agent system to an administrative position where national programs are involved and the need for quick and co-ordinated action is imperative.

An official with advisory educational functions similar to the county agricultural agent might be used in a number of general educational programs where the problems are national in character but do not require immediate and unified action. Such an official might be used effectively in a national public health program to carry on educational advisory work in rural sanitation and hygiene as well as in maternal and infant welfare. An educational-service agent representing federal, state, and local governments might conceivably be used in a program of advisory education for consumers' counsels. A land-use planner representing national, state, and county governments may be needed to assist local people in the formulation of plans and at the same time to keep the technical planners aware of the practical problems in the application of their blueprints. The county agent may, of course, assume the role, or he may be provided with an assistant to carry on this activity.

Other examples of the possible application of the grant-in-aid combined with local finance for the employment of a joint

agent representing various governmental levels could be given. It is beyond the scope of this study to judge whether such possible services justify the necessary expenditures involved or to decide to which activity the pattern might be applied most effectively. Some practical limitations, however, seem apparent. The advisability of applying the county agent pattern to an administrative position in a national program or to any program involving the distribution of large grants of federal funds for relief or rehabilitation seems questionable. Such an official directly responsible to the local government would find it difficult to resist local political and economic pressure.

In this study the term "county agent" is used to refer to the county agricultural agent as distinguished from the county home-demonstration agent and the county club agent. Although these agents are also county agents, the shorter term is usually applied to the county agricultural agent and the full terms used for the home-demonstration and club agents. The term "assistant agent" is likewise used to refer to the assistant agent in agriculture. Although the county agent represents the ultimate field unit of the Co-operative Extension Service which is composed of the federal, state, and county offices, the term "extension leader" is used to refer to the federal and state administrative and supervisory personnel rather than to the county agents. State subject-matter specialists, who have headquarters at the state agricultural college but whose main function is to keep the county agents up to date in specialized fields, are often referred to as extension specialists.

Any attempt to generalize on the work and functions of the county agent, whose responsibilities vary considerably from state to state and particularly from one agricultural region to another, must necessarily reveal inaccuracies if the generalizations be applied to any particular state. An attempt has been made to indicate some of these regional and state variations, but the conclusions are undoubtedly somewhat affected by the county agent's functions and responsibilities in the states personally visited.

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