



# SOUND OFF!

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## GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

No. 14

# HISTORY AND PROGRESS OF FARM BUREAU

### THE BEGINNING



Farm Bureau is younger and larger than the Farmers Union or the Grange. It began about the time of World War I. Yet, it now has as members three out of four of the farm families belonging to these three organizations in the United States.

While the formal organization making the Farm Bureau a national farm organization can be traced to a meeting of State Farm Bureau leaders at Ithaca, New York in February, 1919, credit for the real origin of the Farm Bureau movement must be given to the farmers themselves. In their desire to improve their economic status, they banded together to sponsor an educational approach to farm problems. Just before World War I County Agricultural Agents were beginning their work. They soon found they were most effective whenever they had a local organization of farmers to work with. In fact, many states would not assign county agents until there was a county organization of farmers which would pledge financial support. Farmers also saw the value of this organized approach, and when the War came County agents and County Farm Bureaus came into full stature and implemented the famous slogan, "Food Will Win the War." This, then, is our heritage—a close tie to Extension's educational

programs. Those who talk of Farm Bureau's background as being inspired by "Wall Street" interests are in error. They aren't informed or they intend to deceive.

**IT'S TRUE** the name Farm Bureau was first used by a Chamber of Commerce at Binghamton, New York. As early as 1909 this organization became concerned over farmers' problems. A committee was appointed, and it included a railroad man and two farmers. This logically became a farm bureau to work on rural problems—The Chamber of Commerce already had a traffic and a manufacturers' bureau. A County Agent was hired and funds were provided by the Chamber of Commerce, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the Lackawanna

Railroad. Soon the County Agent found it impossible to work unless he had a local organization. Some farmers were skeptical of the city man's help. In 1913 a County Farm Improvement Association was organized and it took over from the Chamber of Commerce its agricultural responsibilities, and naturally assumed the name of "Broome County Farm Bureau." The local farmers were in complete control of their own affairs. The name caught and was used when a county organization of farmers was formed.

**IN IOWA**, the forerunners of these County Farm Bureaus were Farmers' Institutes, Farmers Clubs, and the Crop Improvement Associations. Each of these was organized for educational purposes—and not by the Chamber of Commerce or any other business organization. One of the first state-wide meetings of the Farmers Clubs was at the State Fair in 1911; a second, in August, 1912. In 1917, still another was held but because of our entry into the War, it did not bring forth a union. In the fall of 1918, John Coverdale, State County Agent Leader, was requested to call a meeting in Des Moines to investigate the setting up of a state organization of Crop Improvement Associations. Because of a flu epidemic this meeting was moved to Marshalltown where on December 27, 1918, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation was organized with J. R. Howard, a farmer in Marshall County, as its first president and Mr. Cloverdale as secretary.





The same men also became the first president and secretary of the American Farm Bureau Federation when it met in November, 1919 to perfect an organization. At this meeting there was much stress and strain. The Midwest wanted to solve agricultural problems through marketing through a well-financed farm organization. Other sections favored an educational approach and a lower budget. These birth pains soon subsided and by March, 1920, the ratification meeting went smoothly following the leadership of Howard, who took the middle ground attitude. He said, "The East and the West, the North and the South, have agricultural problems which are different only in their external aspects. These problems are basically similar or identical. We need to create a national spirit in our agricultural life." Later, he soundly proclaimed, "I stand as a rock against radicalism, but I believe in an organization which strikes out from the shoulder."



## SIGNIFICANCE OF FARM BUREAU'S BEGINNINGS



- Farm Bureau began at the local level—not from the top down. This philosophy is still a guiding principle today.
- Its origin is closely related with the County Agent, but its purpose was to improve the farmers' economic status.
- Top leadership for the American Farm Bureau Federation came from Iowa.
- It provided a general farm organization for farmers who produced different products from every agricultural area.

### QUESTION:

**Why do some people want you to believe that Farm Bureau began as a "tool of big business"?**

## GETTING UNDERWAY

The American Farm Bureau Federation's first thoughts were to improve marketing, but legislative programs soon became important too. To regulate the selling of grain, the committee of 17 was organized. A part of this ambitious program was to ask farmers to sign 5-year iron-clad contracts for marketing their grain. Because of lack of harmony, top-heavy expenses, lack of local support, and opposition by private interests the vision of controlling markets and prices and elimination of speculation was never realized. Committees were established to improve livestock, dairy products, fruit and vegetable marketing, and to set up wool pools and cotton cooperatives.

Chief legislative efforts were packer control measures; laws for cooperatives, credit improvement, revolutionization of production of nitrogen fertilizer at Muscle Shoals, honest labeling of woolen cloth, and tariffs. During the late twenties, Farm Bureau vigorously promoted the McNary-Haugen or equalization fee plan. It was not thought of as a subsidy, but each crop was to pay its own way. Surpluses would be sold abroad, and a fee collected to pay the difference between U.S. and world prices. Even though it was twice passed and vetoed, it brought the farmers' problems before the public.



**IN IOWA** Farm Bureau got under way with a successful state-wide membership campaign in the fall of 1919. Dues were \$5.00, and in addition farmers contributed more than \$300,000 to a special fund to pay initial expenses of the organization. Farmers realized they had to go into their own pockets if they were going to get anywhere presenting their problems. At first the office was in Ames, then moved to Des Moines. From the beginning there was concern with marketing and legislation just as in the American Farm Bureau Federation. A Cooperative Livestock Shippers Association was organized. There was a lot of work in cost-of-production statistics and tax legislation.



## SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE FIRST EFFORTS:

1. Farm Bureau became established as a Voice for Agriculture.
2. The economic efforts were self-help type programs. Even the legislative proposals were not designed as direct government assistance, but to help the farmer help himself, and to give agriculture the same economic opportunities as other groups.

### QUESTION:

*Are farmers more inclined to "stay hitched" in cooperative marketing today than they were in the twenties?*

## THE DEPRESSION ERA

Both the AFBF and the IFBF fell to their lowest membership levels in the thirties. Yet, the fight for legislative and economic aids never ended. Farm Bureau worked hard for passage of the ill-fated AAA, and its successor the Soil Conservation Act. It endorsed the Ever-normal Granary concept as a mechanism for orderly marketing, and not as a vehicle to implement high, rigid price supports. It endorsed the reciprocal trade idea. As more and more government laws were being passed the Farm Bureau opposed "socialistic type" subsidies, and creation of pressure groups within government agencies.



IN IOWA, the county Farm Bureau office was usually the center point for AAA organization and operation. There was one ambitious cooperative venture to establish the Iowa Poultry Producers Marketing Association (IPPM). The IFBF had no control or voting stock, but it did contribute money and its good name and other assistance in this effort to raise egg and poultry prices.

For a while it did raise prices, but poor management and lack of cooperation caused it to fail.

Even though membership was low, an organization director with regional men were hired, and dues were raised to \$10.00. Insurance for members was being handled on a commission basis with an outside company. Considerable assistance and money was given to initiate the REA.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PERIOD:

- The dedication, courage, and faith of the Farm Bureau leaders during the depression not only kept Farm Bureau alive but influential.
- There was recognition that Farm Bureau needed adequate staff and finances to supplement the voluntary leadership.

### QUESTION:

*Is Your Farm Bureau developing the necessary leadership for the future.*

## FORWARD IN THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

Farm Bureau is now in the era of greatest growth. The AFBF membership exceeds a million and a half families and membership has increased in eighteen of the last nineteen years. It continues to be influential in all farm and related legislation—production adjustment, price supports, export programs, promotion programs, federal aid to education, public power development, and monopoly controls is only a partial list. A major objective of Farm Bureau policy is to create conditions which will make it possible for farmers to earn and get a high per family real income in a manner which will preserve freedom and gradually eliminate government regulation of individual farming operation.



**THIS PERIOD** in Iowa is replete with guideposts of progress. Its membership rose to 142,883 in 1955, the highest in its history.

Early failures in cooperative ventures have taught lessons that put the Service-to-Member program on a sound basis. In the late thirties and forties, when the Farm Bureau leadership launched an expanded Service-to-Member program, it remembered the failures of the past such as the IPPMA. A basic principle was established—Farm Bureau would never lend its name or put its money in a service-to-member program unless the members had complete control through organiza-

tional structure. Also, the dividends and patronage refunds would be limited to members only. Consequently the Iowa Farm Supply, Iowa Farm Mutual Insurance and Iowa Life Insurance Companies are owned, controlled, and financed by the Farm Bureau members.

In this period, a revitalized system of policy development and legislation was inaugurated. No organization goes to greater effort to find out what its members believe and to put their wishes into action, whether it be via legislation or non-governmental methods.

Along with its policy development, legislative and service-to-member programs, the educational phase has continued to be important. As early as 1921 an agreement was signed between Farm Bureau and the Extension Service setting forth the County Agent's educational functions and limiting his other activities connected with the Farm Bureau. This agreement was seldom violated as the Farm Bureau's legislative and service programs grew. In November, 1954, the Secretary of Agriculture issued a memorandum prohibiting any employee of the U.S.D.A. from accepting salary or sponsorship from any general or specialized organization of farmers. State legislation to separate the Farm Bureau and Extension in Iowa was passed in March, 1955. The legal separation has in no way reduced Farm Bureau's desire to cooperate and assist Extension. Without this obligation to sponsor the county Extension program, however, Farm Bureau is spending more time on its own educational program through county committees.



The Farm Bureau strengthened its organizational make-up by raising dues to \$15.00 and hiring county Farm Bureau fieldmen. Many counties have followed the state organization's lead by purchasing their own Farm Bureau building.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FARM BUREAU'S RECENT PROGRESS

1. Farm Bureau was and is a chief exponent of freedom of the individual, self help, free choice system, decentralization of government, and a minimum of government controls.
2. Farm Bureau is a democratic organization whose policies are presented in a constructive manner. It is not a protest movement.

### QUESTION:

**What changes, if any, in Farm Bureau will be necessary for it to continue to be the Voice of Agriculture?**

*This is one of a series of discussion folders which are available at your Farm Bureau Office.*