

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

Allen Recordings of Agricultural History (Part 3)

UI Centennial Project

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Ralph Allen: The Tazewell County Farm Bureau has been in existence long enough to have accumulated considerable history of inestimable value. And in order to prevent loss of this wealth, it is certainly good management to take advantage of recent inventions which make possible the preservation of this history perpetually, so far as possible. One of our most precious possessions is our first farm advisor, E.T. Robbins. Precious because he is the only one of the kind. No substitute or duplication possible. So right here at the University of Illinois at Urbana, Illinois, the town where he resides in retirement, where we proceed now to capture his personality and preserve it in the county down through the ages. So now here is Mr. E.T. Robbins, first farm advisor of Tazewell County.

E.T. Robbins: Mr. Allen, that is quite a generous introduction. I think I've not lived up to that. I remember so well, though, the various events at the time I was farm advisor, especially the day I first went to Tazewell County and met with the board of directors. Herman Danforth was president. And among the other men I met that day and afterwards, who were very active in the Farm Bureau, were Joseph Morris, Archie Robinson, Fred Allen, Ralph Allen, and many of the men whose names I do not recall at this moment. At that time, no special program was mapped out for doing Farm Bureau work.

I started right in in May 1913, spending most of my time visiting members of the Farm Bureau, finding out from them what the special problems were upon their farms. I remember I carried a soil auger and bored poles down into the subsoil and tested the land especially for limestone requirements. The initial results from limestone were very interesting and impressive. It made it possible to grow alfalfa and sweet clover on land where men had tried before and failed. One of the early projects I remember was treating oats for smut. And it is almost miraculous to see the difference on some farms between oats that are treated and those that were not.

Another early project was the organization of the Tazewell County Percheron Association. Tazewell County had at that time more Percheron breeders than any other county in the world. And that is more Percheron breeders per township than any county in the world. One problem was to find a market for the surplus horses. We sold to the Tazewell County Percheron Association Percheron horses as far east as Massachusetts, as far west as California, as far north as Canada, and as far south as Louisiana. We even sold a good many horses on mail orders. Also, we organized a system for selling market horses to be shipped to Chicago. The different members of the association agreed to buy horses on commission or to drive buyers at so much per day or per mile, and we did a great deal of business in that way and selling horses from Tazewell County far and wide. The fact is that the business thrived so well that Percheron horses were higher priced in Tazewell County after a few years than they were in any of the surrounding counties because of the reputation we'd built up.

The thing about which I feel the most happiness in connection with the Farm Bureau work was the Illinois Agricultural Association. It was just a happy thought of mine one day that while we had a state association of farm advisors, there was no special thing that they could do. I thought it'd be fine if we had a state association of farm bureaus. I talked about that to Herman Dan Fritz, president of the Farm Bureau. He thought it was a good idea. So at the next meeting of the board of directors, we proposed the plan. That was about 1915. The directors voted to instruct us to go ahead and start a state association. Herman and I came over to Urbana and talked to Dean Davenport about it. We called in some other people and consulted their ideas. Then we wrote up a constitution, and I remember we had quite a time deciding on a name. Finally, we settled on Illinois Agricultural Association as being comprehensive and sounding dignified and suitable. And that is the name which has stuck ever since.

The organization at that time was a federation of the different counties. And the fee of \$100, I believe, was charged annually to each county in it. I was the first secretary after I served a year or two with Roy Bishop of Pontiac and Livingston County was secretary for a year or two. Then in 1918, when farming was booming and people began to get the vision of what the state association could do, the organization was reorganized at Peoria and put on a a bigger and

better basis of more finances and the organization thrived and grew in popularity and influence ever since. Now it is the, I suppose, the most successful and well-financed farmers organization in the world.

The Tazewell County Farm Bureau people were very pleasant with whom to work. I became acquainted with all the members of the Farm Bureau. Aimed to visit every one of them at least once a year, and to keep a tab on their interests and requirements. Every time I interviewed a man on his farm, afterwards I made a record of any important things about which we talked or his important problems, made it on duplicate copy so I filed one copy under subject matter and one copy in the file with his name. Then Saturdays, I dictated a pile of letters, one letter to every man with whom I discussed anything important during the week.

One problem that I had was in order to find time enough for that office work. And sometimes a little diplomacy had to be used. Sometimes it would happen that along about Saturday afternoon, I had the material to dictate for the weekly news that I presented to the paper and some more letters to dictate, someone would come in just to visit. When that occurred, I visited with him for about half an hour. And then remarked, I had an errand out on the street and get up and get my hat and he'd take his and we'd walk down on the street and park and I'd go around the block and come back up and go to work. That is perhaps a little trickery, but it got to a point where something had to be done in order to get office work done and do all the field work that I undertook to do in those days.

Altogether, the Tazewell County Farm Bureau work was very pleasant to me. I enjoyed the people, liked to look at their stock, and I went over their farms till I could picture almost any man's farm in the county and just the layout of his buildings and fields and everything. Perhaps I had the best fun in the fall about corn husking time. Then everybody knows days of home husking corn. Of course, it was husked by hand. I carried a corn husking pin in my pocket, and when I found a man husking corn, I'd husk one of his rows while he husked the other. We got along a little faster than he would get along alone, and we did the talking at the same time. So nobody, I think, begrudged the visits I made to them at cornhusking time. During those years

and subsequent years in Dewitt County, I wore out that husky peg and threw it away. I don't know how many bushels of corn I husked with it, but enough to pay my way at the time.

RA: Well, Mr. Robbins, I saw you getting a little fatigued, but we certainly appreciate everything you've told us so far, so I'll ask you a few questions which maybe will be easier for you. I not long ago picked up the information that while you were in Tazewell County, you started a system of farm accounting. I would like to have a little more information about that. Can you tell us some about that? Is that the fact that you started farm accounting?

ER: Oh yes, that's the fact and I forgot about at the moment. In the fall of 1913, we started the farm account project in the county. A man named Williams from Washington, D.C. came out to help me with it. The first thing we did was to map the territory right east of Washington where the Farm Bureau office was located. Mark the location of every farm and who owned it on a map. And then visits were made to each one of those farms to get what information they could give from their accounts they may have had and from memory about their operation during the preceding year.

From that fragmentary information, we made an analysis which indicated that some systems which they followed in their farming were better than others. And we got information as to about the amount of income they made, both gross income and net income. Then before the next year started, we made up a farm account book with the blanks for recording the different types of information which we had secured in that survey. And we went over that time and again to make sure that it fit the case that we had in mind. Then we got those printed up and those are distributed to farmers, and they kept accounts in those books during the year and we summarized them at the end of the year. So it was about 1915 probably when that really got on a good going basis. Professor H.C.M. Case was a young man in those days and helped with that work of one of those years. That was really the start of the farm account work in the Farm Bureaus of Illinois.

RA: Well, thank you Mr. Robbins for that information. We certainly will value it down through the years. Another question is, I understand the name Farm Bureau originated in Tazewell County. Can you give us any enlightenment about the circumstances about the origin of the name Farm Bureau?

ER: Well, I think that's correct that the origin was there, but it's my recollection that the Farm Bureau directors had agreed upon a name before they hired me as farm advisor. They wanted a name that was short and sapient to the point, and they thought that that was good.

RA: Then you're telling about the Percheron and horses in the county brings it simply to mind that the horses are becoming obsolete. Any history about horses in later years will be valuable. Also, about the [husum?] pig, that's also becoming obsolete. And also the habit of farming or farmers working like these two I believe is becoming obsolete. Do you agree with some of these ideas?

ER: Yes, I think that's correct. There's been great changes since those days. I certainly regretted to see my dear horses fading out of the picture because I like them and like to work them and like to see them work. But the time came gradually when they rapidly disappeared from Illinois farms. As many of you probably know, after my experience in Tazewell County, I conceived the idea of making horses continue their popularity by working more horses in one team. And as livestock extension specialist at the university, I put on demonstrations with five, six, eight, 10, and 12 horse teams, all driven with one pair of lines to the outfit. And those were going fine all over the state until the tractors were sufficiently improved and perfected that they could cultivate corn well. And then after that, the horses disappeared, much to my regret, although I'm glad to see anything work and go [if it pays?] its way.

RA: You stated that your office was at Washington. How did that happen to be located there?

ER: Yes, Herman Danfress, I think, was a spark plug in organizing the Farm Bureau, and he lived at Washington. And the largest number of Farm Bureau members were in the north half of the county, that is north of the river, so that the Farm Bureau people were much more numerous in the townships near Washington than they were in the townships in the south part of the county. That was one reason. Another was economy. The bank there in Washington donated the, the two upstairs rooms that [you?] had for the Farm Bureau office.

RA: You mentioned the necessity of having office help. Can you tell us who some of that personnel were?

ER: Yes, Robert Stormer was the first office secretary, I think, and he was a very good one. I could dictate a pile of letters to him on Saturday and during the succeeding week he would get them all written an, and they were just about correct. Fact is, I often didn't have time to read the carbon copies and just trusted that they were right. And I never got mixed up in anything by trusting him.

RA: Well, Mr. Robbins, maybe the organization set up at the present time is different than when you served in the county. How was it during your regime?

ER: Well, while I was there, we organized communities. For instance, there was a community around Washington and around Tremont, Minear, Hope Dale, Delavan, Beacon, where the people met, Farm Bureau people met and elected officers and arranged for regular meetings, especially during the winter. Some of the best work I thought that I could do in the winter was done at those meetings. It was not so one could travel anywhere easily in those days as you can now. The roads were so muddy or so rough and no paved roads that is practically impossible to travel for except by train. So I would start out in the morning on the 6:00 train to Peoria and then catch a train to wherever it was to go and get back to Washington on the 1:00 train at night. I made the amount of sleep a little short, but I could sleep on the train and I didn't die at it. And I did think we got a good deal of very good winter work done in that way.

RA: Mr. Robinson has been very generous in telling us of your early recollection of the Tazewell County Farm Bureau. And now I think everyone would like to hear about your present circumstances or from the time you left Tazewell County up until your present circumstances.

ER: Well, I was farm advisor in Tazewell County from 1913 to 1918. Then I managed land in Western Illinois for a couple of years. Then I was farm advisor in DeWitt County, the headquarters at Clinton for three years. Then after that, there was a need for a livestock extension specialist at the university. And knowing my interest in livestock and my connection with it all my life, Dean Rusk, who was then head of the animal husbandry department, asked me if I would consider that position. So I took up that work, was glad to do it for two reasons. One is I liked the livestock work better than any other phase of farming. And another was that I had a family of four girls coming on and the oldest one about ready for college. So I thought a college town would be a good place in which to live as well as in which to work. So I was farm advisor here then from 1923 to 1945. At that time, I retired. The work is now going on in a fine way with Harry G. Russell taking my place and associated with him is Nick Carlisle. They're a good pair of stock men and I'm sure will carry on the work better than I could do it myself. I live at 804 Pennsylvania, just a little ways east of the southeast corner of the forestry. I've lived there for 15 years and I expect to live there till I die.

RA: Thank you, Mr. Robbins. I think that day when you die is a long time off because we want to preserve these recollections and maybe renew them at frequent intervals in succeeding years. So temporarily, goodbye and God bless you.

Herman Danforth: Mr. Allen, it was very pleasant indeed to hear. My old friend Robbins' voice and very interesting to hear him recall some of the early experiences in the Tazewell County Farm Bureau. If I make any comment at all, I would say that Mr. Robbins was just a little bit modest in regard to his activities in the Farm Bureau. While it is true that I was president of the Farm Bureau and had a great deal to do with organizing it, I must say that the great amount of the success that we've made was due to Robbins and his advice. I was glad to have him to

consult on all occasions. It might be interesting to know how the Farm Bureau hired Mr. Robbins or secured him as our agent.

After the organization was completed, we had a meeting in Washington of the directors and wanted to secure a county advisor. We discussed [this thing calling count?] and finally a committee was appointed to go to Champaign, interview Mr. Rankin, Dr. Hopkins, and Dean Davenport, get their advice. They presented us with a list of available men, at the head of which was a man by the name E.T. Robbins.

But we were informed that Mr. Robbins at that time associated with the British Gazette, had quite a salary, something like \$4,000, which seemed to be a little bit more than we could afford. So we asked him to give us the names of three or four others, three others, and we asked him to come to Washington for an interview with the board of directors. One of them appeared first and stated his case. We interviewed him, then the second, and finally Robbins came last. And without knowing the salary they required, they immediately, without any hesitation, decided that Robbins was the man. They wouldn't listen to the other two at all.

And when I informed them that the amount of money that was necessary to procure Mr. Robbins, we determined we'd have him anyway and we set out to raise the funds, which we finally succeeded in doing. One of the methods was to go to one of the banks in Pekin and some 35 or 40 of the farmers signed a note and borrowed the money sufficiently to start the bureau going.

RA: I'm wondering if listeners have guessed who the speaker is, who they have just been listening to. Maybe you'd better identify yourself now. The character that Mr. Robbins calls the spark plug of the Tazewell County Farm Bureau.

HD: This is Herman Danforth. I'll have to admit that I was the first president of the Tazewell County Farm Bureau, and later on the first president of the Agriculture Association.

Unknown: It's so natural, I'd just like to say hello to the Robbins. Greetings to all the family.