

Happy Birthday Cooperative Extension Service

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Thursday of this week (May 8th) was a big birthday! On May 8th, 1914, a federal act was signed called the Smith-Lever Act. The Smith-Lever act was the legislation that started the Cooperative Extension System across the country. On Thursday we celebrated in Kansas, and all over the country, with the signing of proclamations recognizing the impact that Cooperative Extension Services have had.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s the Land Grant Colleges had been busily educating folks in agriculture and the practical sciences. Then, just as now, groundbreaking research was being done and new knowledge on the best methods of crop and livestock production were being developed. But such a small percentage of the population was going to college that the information was only slowly being disseminated to the public. That was about to change!

An agriculturalist by the name of Seaman Knapp had done many things, agriculturally related, including the novel idea of conducting agricultural demonstrations. By 1902 Knapp had been employed by the USDA to promote good agricultural production practices in the South. Texas was plagued by boll weevil at that time. The residents of Terrell, Texas requested help with the boll weevil problem and the USDA sent Knapp. A local farmer was selected to work with Knapp and the city of Terrell set aside \$1,000 to support the demonstrations of boll weevil control and cotton production or to cover any potential crop production losses.

Knapp worked with the farmer to set up a series of experiments not only on boll weevil control but also using new experimental fertilizers and nitrogen fixing legumes to double the normal yield of cotton. The experiments were so successful that the \$1,000 was never used! Word got out of the successes, the USDA allocated more money and hired more farm demonstration agents. By 1904 there were 20 similar agents in Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas and soon they were in Alabama and Mississippi too! Seaman Knapp once wrote, "What a man hears, he may doubt; what he sees, he may possibly doubt; but what he does himself, he cannot doubt." That basic concept is still the foundation of Extension demonstrations.

Word of the success of these farm demonstration agents started to be well known. Legislators in Washington, D.C. felt that this same concept needed to be utilized all across the country to aid the rural and small town economies. Out of this came the Smith-Lever Act that established the framework of Cooperative Extension System. While many folks feel that agriculture was the basis for this, it is interesting to note the wording in the original legislation.

The purpose of the act: "In order to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture, uses of solar energy with respect to agriculture, home economics, and rural energy, and to encourage the application of the same, there may be continued or inaugurated in connection with the college of colleges in each State, Territory, or possession..."

So the first century is done, and we are all now working on the second century. While some of the problems have changed, we are still here, helping anyone in our community, county or state solve problems. When those problems are solved, the individual and the community is then raised up to a higher level for the benefit of all!