

8/3/24
Agriculture
Extension Service
John C. Spitler Papers, 1972

Tape 1:

Tape recorded interview, April 18, 1972 (one reel, 1241' + 303' at 3 3/4 IPS)

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| 1 - 3 | Identification of tape. |
| 4 - 9 | <u>Youth.</u> Spitler grew up on a farm near the village of Montrose in Effingham County, Illinois. At age 7 his father died so he was raised by his widowed mother. He was interested in agriculture and did not follow his mother's wish to attend DePauw. |
| 10-37 | <u>Student at University of Illinois.</u> In the fall of 1901, he secured a Farmer's Institute Scholarship and, at age 19, came to Urbana to study agriculture. Spitler never attended high school and came here directly from the 8th grade. A group of college seniors he met suggested he take courses at the preparatory school or academy in University Hall. Spitler followed their advice and graduated from the College of Agriculture in June of 1907. |
| 38-42 | Start in extension work. Eugene Davenport, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Walter F. Handschin, vice director of Agricultural Extension corresponded with Spitler in the summer of 1917 and asked him to help with the federal food production program. "Food to win the War" was the popular slogan. Spitler was aged 35, married with one child when he began his Extension Service work in September, 1917 in cooperation with the USDA food production program. His first assignment was to meet with the Wayne County, Illinois, food administrator and arrange a meeting of local farmers. Spitler told the farmers to plow up their fields of red top and grow more wheat. |
| 73-91 | <u>Davenport insists upon local farmer initiative.</u> Federal officials wanted the number of county agents to increase rapidly to help promote the food production program. "Dean Davenport took the position that if this form of agricultural education was going to mean anything that farmers themselves would have to assume a large part of the responsibility." This was a basic position of Davenport. One of Spitler's early tasks was to meet with groups of farmers and show them how they might develop an agricultural program for increasing production by half in a county agent. |
| 92-108 | <u>Early demonstration work.</u> At the turn of the century Dr. Seaman A. Knapp introduced and promoted the idea that agriculture could be improved through demonstrations. A man might doubt what he saw or heard, but he could not doubt what he actually did. The demonstration idea spread throughout the U.S. during the early 1900's. |
| 109-139 | <u>First Illinois farm advisors.</u> A young graduate of the U. of I. College of Agriculture from DeKalb County named Henry Parke conceived the idea of a man trained in agriculture living in the county and working with farmers to improve farming. Dillon S. Brown and Parke built an |

- organization in the winter of 1911-12 and raised enough money to hire a man. Kankakee County also built an organization and raised money. These organizations came to Urbana, talked with Davenport and took from the U. of I. staff William G. Eckhardt and John S. Collier. They started work as farm advisors in DeKalb and Kankakee Counties on June 1, 1912.
- 140-170 Illinois College of Agriculture policy re. farm advisors. Davenport and the U. of I. instituted certain requirements. Spitler emphasizes that Davenport wanted more than the mere placement of government advisors in each county. If a county wanted a farm advisor the local farmers had to 1) build a county wide organization 2) raise enough money to properly finance the extension work for a period of at least 3 years 3) agree to employ an advisor trained in agriculture and approved by a committee at the College of Agriculture. The first committee included Cyril G. Hopkins and Fred H. Rankin. Part of Spitler's early work included helping counties start county-wide organizations so they could have farm advisors.
- 171-187 Farmers' Institutes. The farm advisor movement replaced Farmers' Institutes after a while, but at first the advisors encouraged attendance at Institute meetings and used them for demonstration work.
- 188-196 Wealthy counties first to have advisors. It was easier for wealthy counties to raise the money to hire agents. Randolph, the first county in southern Illinois to have an advisor, was in 1917 the 26th county in the state to organize.
- 197-271 Local farmer initiative essential. No one in the state can say that the College of Agriculture ever forced them to have a farm advisor. Extension of demonstration workers like Spitler never went out to Illinois counties unless called by someone. Spitler had difficulty in Lawrence County in the fall of 1917 convincing a group of 17 farmers that the farmers should build a local organization in addition to raising money. He suggested they raise \$3,000 by getting 300 members to pay dues of \$10 each. A local organization is necessary because it gives the agent a core to work with to carry out the educational program. One county visited by Spitler in 1917 did not hire an agent until 1946, although some farmers were members of adjoining county farm bureaus. Dean Davenport strongly believed in individual initiative among farmers. This was a central theme in his administration.
- 272-341 County Farm Bureau organization. The first local groups did not use the term Farm Bureau. Tazewell County, Illinois, used the name in 1911. It was the first in the U.S. to use the term applying it to a county wide organization, although the Broome County, New York, Chamber of Commerce used the term in a different sense a year earlier. County farm bureau, although in the early years not all counties used the term farm bureau.
- 342-360 Illinois Agricultural Association and membership dues. In 1916 a group of farm advisors and the presidents of county organizations met at the

- University of Illinois and started the state-wide organization known as the Illinois Agricultural Association. At first a membership fee of \$100 was set for each county. In 1919 the IAA was reorganized with membership now being on an individual instead of county basis. Nearly all county organizations now used the term farm bureau.
- 361-396 Financial contributions of farmers. Individual members paid \$10 annual dues to their local county farm bureaus and \$5 annually to the IAA. The College of Agriculture and Spitler, during his years of service cooperated with county bureaus in financing extension work. By 1949 when Spitler retired Illinois farmers were paying over one million annually through membership dues for farm advisor service. Local farmers paid for the local extension office, the farm advisor's travel expenses and part of his salary. The 1914 Smith-Lever Act created federal funds for extension work. State funds later became available.
- 397-440 Connection between Extension Service and Farm Bureau. The work of the farm advisor was not confined to farm bureau members. This was an important policy. Anyone could consult with the advisor. By 1949 when Spitler retired there was criticism that the Extension Service and the College of Agriculture were cooperating with only the Farm Bureau. Since 1949 under William G. Kammlade and John B. Claar, there has been a complete separation between the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service. Spitler makes no apologies for the old arrangement, because the Extension Service helped grow farm leadership at the local level and increase local initiative.
- 441-463 College of Agriculture organization. In Illinois the agricultural teaching, research and extension functions of the University were all under the dean and director of the College of Agriculture. Each department had its own specialist who worked with farm advisors.
- 464-500 Qualifications of farm advisors. As State Leader of farm advisors Spitler helped find candidates for local counties. Farm advisors had to be graduates of recognized colleges of agriculture and have at least 5 years experience in actual farming or some agricultural work. The selection committee of the college of Agriculture had to approve each advisor.
- 501-506 Travel in Illinois. From 1917 to 1930 Spitler traveled a great deal in southern Illinois. He was usually gone from home Monday through Saturday. At the suggestion of Dan Herbert W. Mumford, he moved from Effingham to Urbana in 1923. There were no paved roads between the two towns then so the trip by auto took nearly 4 hours.
- 561-565 Country Life movement. To some degree it encouraged the development of agricultural extension.
- 566-583 Men prominent in the national development of agricultural extension. Spitler cited Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson, Seaman A. Knapp, and Jonathan B. Turner of Illinois, who helped promote passage of the Morrill Act.

- 584-600 Illinois Politicians. Senator William McKinley was quite interested in agriculture. Lawrence Y. Sherman was not too active in promoting agricultural legislation.
- 601-662 Men prominent in the development of Illinois agriculture. Spitler cited: Cyril G. Hopkins, who developed the idea of the "Illinois permanent system of agriculture;" Eugene Davenport, who had a great influence on the College of Agriculture and agricultural work throughout the state; A.P. Grout, the first man to bring alfalfa into Illinois; Frank I. Mann, a follower of Hopkins and promoter of phosphate crop rotation; Senator Henry M. Dunlap, the developer of the Dunlap strawberry; the Funk family and Ralph Allen.
- 663-704 Soybean development illustrates type of information given by advisors changed. The kind of information given farmers changed as new ideas and research developed. Spitler's first experience with soybeans was unrewarding. In 1916 he planted 10 acres in Effingham, and the crop was ruined early by a heavy rain. Soybeans and corn were at first raised to be "hogged off." Beans are now an important cash crop largely through the efforts of W. L. Burlison, who found outlets and interested manufacturers in the crop.
- 705-783 Relationship between the Experiment Station and Extension Service. The farm advisor was "the carrier" of new ideas from the specialist at Urbana to the local farmer. Insect control, especially of the cinch bug, was a major problem the organization at the U. of I. with one man in charge of both the extension service and experiment station helped create close ties. "We were telling the same story. The thing the professor was teaching in the classroom the farm advisor was teaching . . . to a group of farmers out in the county." Specialists traveled around the state to speak at special meetings of crops people arranged by farm advisors. Before the days of hybrid seed corn one important extension project was the "field selection of seed corn." Local counties developed their own specific extension work programs so they would relate to local needs and problems.
- 784-805 Relationships with federal government. Unlike recent years, conflicts or disagreements between the Illinois Extension Service and Washington did not exist in Spitler's day. "We looked upon the federal Smith-Lever funds as a gift of money that the state could use as the state saw fit."
- 806-817 Local tax money seldom used for extension in Illinois. In 1949 only 1 or 2 Illinois county boards appropriated money to help finance extension work. A state law now prohibits the practice. When it was legal Spitler and the College of Agriculture never encouraged the use of local public funds, although it was common practice in the neighboring states of Indiana and Iowa.
- 818-854 Patronage and the distribution of state funds. Patronage was never a problem in the Extension Service. Spitler can recall no instance of pressure being applied on his office to hire a certain man. The college of

- Agriculture got state and federal money "with no strings attached." Dean Mumford once had a dispute with the state director of agriculture who wanted to assume control over the distribution of farm advisor salary money which was traditionally handled by the College of Agriculture. Mumford kept control.
- 855-871 Spitler served under four deans. The four men were Davenport, Mumford, Joseph C. Blair and Henry P. Rusk. All were outstanding men, although different personalities.
- 872-890 Separation of Extension Service and Farm Bureau. At federal urging the separation began at the time Spitler retired when Rusk was dean of the College of Agriculture. "He was a little rough on the federal people. He wanted them to know we were running our own show out here."
- 891-934 Problems with farm advisors. "A particular man would not fit in a particular county." The actual hiring was done at the local level. Sometimes local boards would be dissatisfied and want to replace a man. Advisors sometimes found they did not enjoy their work. To have been a successful advisor you had to like people and know how to work with them.
- 935-964 The Thirties bring more work. The depression, the farm programs of the New Deal and IAA commercial enterprises increased the workload of farm advisors. They had to learn a good deal of new information to help start cooperatives. Economics problems of the day were tough.
- 965-1063 Philosophy of Extension Service. To illustrate his own philosophic view of extension work and the role of farm advisors in bettering the lot of farmers, Spitler read a statement made by Walter F. Handschin in 1919. (The statement appears in Orville M. Kile, The Farm Bureau Movement. New York, 1921 pp.107-110.) Handschin said it was not the chief or even secondary business of the farm bureau and much less the farm advisor to attempt to purchase commodities on which money might be saved because of the high cost in time and overhead and because the county as a unit does not lend itself well to the distribution of commodities. "Both production and distribution are still very inefficient . . . Progress is not made by class prejudice or class hatred. If our motive principle is to 'get' someone, we shall 'get' no one except ourselves... . What we need is to face the facts, to stand for fair play, and to apply reason as well as rawhide." Times were rough in the Thirties. The farm advisor was caught between the devil and the deep sea.
- 1064-1149 World War II. The Extension Service was better organized and carried a greater responsibility than during World War I. Spitler's office was largely responsible for the rationing of gas. Throughout the war only one man got angry with Spitler when denied gas. Farm advisors faced different problems during World War II. Although communications were much improved advisors still spent a great deal of time explaining to farmers what they "could and could not do."

- 1150-1197 Grange and Farmers Union. The Extension Service received excellent cooperation from the Grange. (The Grange was particularly strong around Belleville and Rockford.) The Farmers Union criticized the Extension Service during Spitler's tenure. The Union had the philosophy that the government should do something for them.
- 1198-1241 Experiment Station staff. The staff published scientific research results in Experiment Station bulletins and traveled around the state to take their information firsthand to farmers. Some men were too technical to be useful in talking at local farmer meetings. W. P. Flint was a good example of a man who could sit down and the language of scientific people or the language of a group of farmers. Fred W. Slife in weed control was also effective.

Side 2

- 3-68 Farm management and recordkeeping. The Illinois Extension Service gave strong emphasis to farm management. Handschin was trained in the field. M. L. Mosher was another great contributor along with Harold C. M. Case. Illinois has had a "pretty good" record for years regarding the extent to which individuals have kept records of their farming operations. The Cooperative Farm Management Service assisted farmers. Data was sent to the U. of I. and Mosher helped summarize and clarify the local records. Farms have grown in size recently and good management is more essential than ever. Law requires that farmers now keep accurate records of farm accidents and injuries. We are no longer in the horse-drawn era. In Effingham County today 900 cows are milked on a single farm.
- 69-92 Specialists communicating directly with farmers. Farmers sometimes contacted directly the specialists in Urbana, often because of the "little pride" they had in knowing a specialist personally. They did not frequently bypass their local farm advisors, so it never created problems. Local group meetings allowed specialists to contact many farmers directly. Today a specialist can talk by closed circuit telephone with 15 or 20 groups at a time.
- 93-131 Extension work by commercial organizations. International Harvester does extension work in the agricultural equipment field. the University Extension Service policy is to cooperate with commercial outfits. Farm advisors send commercial sprayers to Urbana where they are trained in insect control. 'Starting around 1930 the Extension Service ran 2 training schools for people helping farmers with their income tax returns. This year 28 schools were held which reached 2000 individuals.
- 132-149 Extension reached farmers wanting help. "We probably might be criticized that we were reaching the man who wanted to be reached." The government now wants to reach all men regardless of the income, but extension men of Spitler's day felt they had to reach the actual producers who wanted help. They neglected subsistence farmers. Spitler feels this is

- justified.
- 150-162 Home Economic extension. Women had equal billing from the beginning and the same general principles applied. Kankakee County was the first to have a home advisor.
- 163-174 Joint county farm bureau organizations. Marshall-Putnam, Pope-Hardin and Pulaski-Alexander Counties had joint farm bureau organizations. county boundaries are not always meaningful in terms of agricultural production.
- 175-215 Farm youth. In the 1930's farm youth are included in extension work. W. B. Otwell in Macoupin County around 1900 started 4-H Club work in Illinois. He distributed seed corn to farm children so they would grow corn to bring to a county show and hopefully increase attendance. Under Spitler extension work was generally with rural youth, but now it is moving into urban areas. Boys and girls clubs are great leadership developers.
- 216-229 College of Education. Cooperation between the Extension Service and the vocational agriculture teachers trained in the College of Education has been excellent.
- 230-282 Junior Colleges; possible merger of University and Cooperative Extension. The rapid development of junior colleges in Illinois will change extension work. There is now an effort being made to combine the University and cooperative Extension organizations. Wisconsin and Missouri have done this recently. Unlike cooperative Extension, University Extension charges a fee for its services to the public. Junior colleges are now in direct competition with vocational agriculture schools at high schools. There are now 46 junior colleges in Illinois. Many are teaching material once covered by extension work.
- 283-303 Philosophy of Extension Service. "We were responsible for building county-wide organizations." They grew into a state organization. "We make no apologies for doing what we did." William F. Kuhfuss of Illinois is now president of the American Farm Bureau. Charles B. Shuman, past president of the IAA, has been criticized by the Farmers Union, but Spitler is a Shuman follower. Spitler does not think farmers should always "run to the government" for things they need or want.