

AFBF: Beyond the Gateway

By Tracy Taylor Grondine

In early January, Farm Bureau members from across the country will convene in Seattle, Washington for the American Farm Bureau Federation's 91st annual meeting. With the theme "Passage to Success," the Jan. 10-13 meeting will offer attendees opportunities and ideas to play a bigger role in the global community while achieving greater success at home.

In 1919, at AFBF's organizing meeting in Chicago, the president of the New York Farm Bureau, S. L. Strivings said, "Farmers must get past their own gateways and get out and see what is going on in the world. We must put agriculture into proper relationship with the rest of the world."

Fast forward 91 years. Farm Bureau remains a grassroots organization with the same ideals and principles of strengthening the lives of rural Americans and building strong, prosperous farm communities. But, U.S. farmers have obtained a predominant status in global affairs. They've passed their own gateways, as Mr. Strivings encouraged, and are dealing with such issues as world trade, a global customer base and, more importantly now than ever, their public image both at home and throughout the world.

And while many farmers' challenges remain the same as they were in 1919: weather, government regulation and commodity prices, more hurdles have been added. No longer can farmers stop their work after a day in the field. Instead, they must wear many hats, such as teacher, economist, scientist, lobbyist and spokesperson. Today, public image and consumer education play as big of a role in agriculture as the tractor and plow once did.

What hasn't changed is the need for farmers and ranchers to go beyond their farm gates to see what is going on in the world. Today, exports are running at a record pace and are the key to prosperity for agriculture, as is how U.S. farmers are viewed around the world, especially during World Trade Organization negotiations and the more recent Copenhagen climate change talks.

On the home front, consumer education about livestock care, food safety and biotechnology is just as important. As animal welfare groups and others continue to wage unfounded war on farmers and ranchers, engaging in dialogue with consumers is not only important, it is essential. Unimaginable 90 years ago, the Internet has become a major component of agriculture. Through blogs, Twitter and Facebook producers have unparalleled access to consumers beyond the farm gate.

At this year's AFBF annual meeting business session, delegates will be discussing and formulating policy on such issues as climate change, government regulation and commodity prices. But, AFBF leaders will also be providing attendees the tools to go beyond their gateways and handle today's challenges, like global perception and consumer education—all while maintaining the same ideals and mission AFBF's founders envisioned in 1919.

Mr. Strivings would be proud.