

***FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE***  
***For the week of: May 16, 2011***  
**American Farm Bureau Federation**

**Growing an Idea**  
*By Stewart Truelsen*

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the nation's first county Farm Bureau in Broome County, N.Y. Farm Bureau and the Cooperative Extension Service grew side-by-side in the early years of the last century. Along with farm mechanization and rural electrification, they had a transformational effect on American agriculture.

Membership in Farm Bureau gave farmers and ranchers an organized voice in the development of agriculture and rural America. The land grant universities, through Cooperative Extension, provided the scientific knowledge and training necessary for production agriculture.

Farm Bureau is a true grassroots organization. It began at the county level in 1911; state Farm Bureaus were organized a little later, and they got together in Chicago in 1919 to form the American Farm Bureau Federation. Today there are more than 6 million Farm Bureau member families nationwide.

But in 1911 Farm Bureau was just a seed, a germ of an idea. There is no founding father of the Farm Bureau, but there are several men important to its start, including President Theodore Roosevelt.

The conservationist president took a keen interest in the welfare of rural America. He was concerned that farm life was not appealing in comparison to urban living. Roosevelt appointed a country life commission to investigate the matter in 1908.

The commission was headed by Liberty Hyde Bailey, dean of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell. One of the commission's findings was that farmers needed unity and a voluntary organization to tackle their problems.

Business leaders in Binghamton, N.Y., thought they knew of a way to help. Byers Gitchell, secretary of the chamber of commerce, proposed a farm department within the chamber. Since all the other departments were called bureaus this one would become the "Farm Bureau." A few progressive farmers liked the idea and took out memberships in the chamber.

It is no surprise that business leaders were concerned about agricultural prosperity; the farm community was their best customer. Business owners also worried that a decline in the farm population would lead to food shortages and drive up prices.

In 1911, John Barron was employed as an agent for the first Farm Bureau. Barron was described as an "expert agriculturalist" who could answer questions about farm management, soil fertility, dairy production and other topics. In a flyer distributed throughout the county, Barron promised

to speak to groups of farmers and carry on agricultural experiments and demonstration work. In short order, James Quinn became the first county Farm Bureau president and other farmers took up positions in the organization.

Broome County Farm Bureau broke ties with the chamber of commerce a few years later, and it was the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 establishing the Cooperative Extension Service that gave Farm Bureau great impetus.

The idea for farm improvement became a Farm Bureau movement all over the country, greatly aided by the automobile which made member recruitment a lot easier. Early Farm Bureau leaders would pick a day and drive farm to farm rounding up members.

The idea that became a movement then became a powerful organization of farmers and ranchers, helping them with marketing, insurance and lobbying lawmakers on their behalf.

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*Stewart Truelsen is a regular contributor to the Focus on Agriculture series and is author of a new book marking the American Farm Bureau Federation's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Forward Farm Bureau.*