

Curricula for the Country: Farmers' Institutes in Indiana, 1890-1910

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Abstract

What are farmers' institutes? Why do they matter? Co-organized by the experiment stations of land-grant universities and local farmers' associations, farmers' institutes were widespread nationally, from the 1880s to the 1910s. Today, they are almost forgotten. Through a case study of Indiana, this paper reveals farmers' institutes' formation, institutional design, and curricula; in doing so, it offers sightlines into significant aspects of education and learning in the Progressive Era.

Introduction

The farmers' institute was modeled on the county institutes for teacher training that became widespread in the Midwest after the Civil War (Fuller 1982). Its two-fold mission was to improve agriculture and rural life, by educating people to become better farmers and members of society. At the turn of the twentieth century, the typical farmers' institute was a one or two day event held in a large hall at a county seat or rural town. The program consisted of lectures and discussions on scientific agriculture, practical farming, household economy, and the cultivation of rural life. Professional men and women and leading farmers lectured the audience for half an hour or so, sometimes using diagrams and specimens as props, then opened the floor for discussion. In the discussions, farmers sought clarification, challenged the speaker, or explained how their experiences validated the speaker's propositions. During breaks, farmers scrutinized exhibits of corn, butter, and other farm products, while trading opinions with neighbors about the exhibits and the scores

awarded by expert judges. Music and food were provided during the day; literary exercises and formal addresses took place in the evening. By most accounts, when managed well, the farmers' institute was entertaining and instructive (Shannon 1945).

Maturing and peaking in popularity between 1887 and 1914, the farmers' institutes' moment in history was shaped profoundly by two landmarks of federal legislation. The first, the Hatch Act, initiated the creation of agricultural experiment stations in connection with the land-grant colleges, charging them to diffuse "useful and practical information," in addition to conducting scientific investigations (Knoblauch et al. 1962, 219). The Hatch Act spurred ongoing efforts of land-grant universities and state boards of agriculture to promote some type of lecture-discussion series among farmers. Supported by state legislative appropriations and increasingly effective partnerships between central authorities (university or state) and county-level farmers' associations, the institutes grew quickly. A national association and the agricultural press circulated innovations and experiences, fostering standardization and success. Institutes continued growing until 1913, when over three million people attended nearly 9,000 institutes nationwide (Moss and Lass 1988). At that point, the Smith-Lever Act effectively incorporated the farmers' institutes into an agricultural extension system sponsored cooperatively by land-grant universities and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Despite the farmers' institutes' success,

and their connections to higher education and the federal government, they are almost forgotten. In the past 40 years, only two articles directly address farmers' institutes: one describing "cooking schools" for women (Mink 2008), the other outlining the federal government's role (Moss and Lass 1988). They are not identified in survey histories of higher education and agriculture, despite having a foot in each realm (Lucas 1994; Cochrane 1979). In the land-grant universities' formative years, for good and ill, farmers' institutes were influential in shaping public attitudes (Scott 1963; Marcus 1986). Nonetheless, treatments of land-grant universities fail to mention them (Johnson 1981). One surmises that the institutes' failure to fit contemporary categories—neither agricultural research, nor higher education for adults, nor schooling for youth—is largely responsible for historians' neglect.

This paper represents a recovery effort. Its primary aim is descriptive, to reveal the farmers' institute's features and developmental trajectory. Based on this descriptive analysis, this paper's secondary aim is evaluative, to indicate the farmers' institute's significance for educational developments in the Progressive Era. These aims are carried out through a case study of farmers' institutes in Indiana during the two decades straddling the turn of the twentieth century.

Indiana has been selected for three reasons. First, farmers' institutes were most popular in states bordering the Great Lakes. Second, Indiana's approach to farmers' institutes synthesized key features of prevailing models. In most states, the institutes were managed by a state board of agriculture or a land-grant university, which received a direct appropriation from the state legislature. In a

few states, institutes were subsidized partially by state appropriations given directly to local farmers' associations who managed their own institutes (Scott 1970). In Indiana, state appropriations and decision-making authority were vested in a land-grant university's committee; that committee granted considerable autonomy to local associations for conducting and financing their institute program. This balance of central authority and local autonomy may well account for the third reason why Indiana has been selected: its institutes remained popular, operating in rural communities long after some other states' institutes ceased. As late as 1960, annual institutes were still being held in one-fourth of Indiana's counties (Thompson and Madigan 1966). Interpreting durability as an indicator of quality, Indiana is well-suited for revealing the farmers' institute's nature and significance as an educational institution.

Forming a Farmers' Institute System in Indiana

In the 1880s, the prospects for a lecture series among Indiana's farmers were not promising. There was no shortage of agricultural organizations in Indiana. The difficulty lay in getting farmers to join and to attend meetings. Perhaps 15 percent of farmers belonged to county agricultural societies, the Grange, or independent local clubs. Controlled by the county seat's business men, agricultural societies were preoccupied with fairs; unless they were protesting against gambling, drinking, and sideshows, farmers rarely attended their meetings. The Grange, too, had lost the farmers' good will. In the early 1870s, as the Grange spread, farmers enlisted it in a campaign to defend their interests against

railroad monopolies, middlemen, and merchants. Struggling to restrict the membership's ambitions, by the late 1870s, Grange leaders succeeded in turning the local organization into a club for mutual education and socializing, primarily. Most farmers dropped their memberships, having little appreciation for self-study clubs; outside the Grange, only a few local independent clubs persisted (Lauzon 2011).

As an educational event, the closest kin to a farmers' institute in Indiana were the annual meetings of "industrial associations." Members of these associations adopted a particular agricultural pursuit as a specialty for investigation, experimentation, and commercial exploitation. Collectively, the industrial associations represented a very small segment of the population—combined membership was less than 300—but it was the most influential part (Clover Top 1891). Attended by the state's wealthier businessmen and farmers, the industrial associations' annual programs of lectures and discussions took place in Indianapolis, in January, just prior to the convening of the General Assembly. Their memberships overlapped with the State Board of Agriculture and the State Grange.

In the overlapping memberships of farmers' associations, men of like minds found common cause. Communities in Michigan and Ohio were sponsoring institutes for their farmers in the 1880s. Why could not Indiana do likewise? Prominent farmers called repeatedly for the State Board of Agriculture to lobby the General Assembly to provide public financing. Preferring appropriations for the State Fair, the State Board of Agriculture's lobbying committee ignored farmers' request until 1887. Deadlock over partisan appointments prevailed

in that legislative session. Unable to secure public funding, leading farmers called on each member of the State Board of Agriculture to organize an institute in his district, for a projected total of sixteen institutes. At least 13 institutes were held. Everywhere, large crowds showed up and agricultural discussions proved lively. Calling for institutes in their own communities, farmers had no difficulty securing financial support from the next General Assembly (Lauzon 2011).

Indiana's General Assembly gave Purdue University an annual appropriation of \$5,000 to hold institutes in the winter months to instruct "farmers and others" in "the results of the latest investigations in theoretical and practical agriculture and horticulture." Specifying little else, by default the legislature left to a university committee the duty of devising a system to coordinate, conduct, and supervise farmers' institutes throughout the counties ("Farmers' Institutes" 1892).

The committee consisted of Purdue University's president, a professor in charge of the experiment station, and another who served as superintendent of farmers' institutes. Initially, they worked within the hub-and-spoke network formed by the State Board of Agriculture and county agricultural societies. Adopting the plan used in the demonstration trial of 1888, they asked each member of the State Board of Agriculture to coordinate institute-hosting in his district. Two years' trial yielded "intelligent supervision" in about half of the counties only. Consequently, the committee eliminated the State Board of Agriculture's role. Appointing a chairman for each county—typically nominated by a county society or local club—they "placed the responsibility for the success or failure of each

institute where it properly belongs, namely, *within the county*” (“Farmers’ Institutes” 1892, 465).

The man appointed as Superintendent of Farmers’ Institutes, Professor William C. Latta, could have tried to wield considerable authority over the county institutes. That he did not is a testament to his unique qualifications. From his boyhood on a farm in north-central Indiana, Latta acquired the ethos of hard work and practicality characteristic of successful farmers, along with the ethos of personal responsibility to public service associated with devout Methodists. Latta obtained the best schooling in scientific agriculture available, by way of the Michigan Agricultural College. At college he learned about farmers’ institutes and the necessity of cultivating collaborative partnerships with farmers’ associations. Three decades of living in Indiana made him well aware of regional variability in agricultural and marketing conditions. He was well aware, too, that local farmers resented nonresident non-farmers who condescended to instruct them about their business. Few people were suited better than W. C. Latta to promote agricultural education in Indiana (Whitford and Martin 2005).

The system Professor Latta developed had circumscribed (but highly effective) central authority and broad local autonomy. Required to organize two-day institutes in 92 counties between November and March, he developed a schedule of institute dates, assembled a roster of traveling speakers, and synchronized their engagements in adjacent counties so that they could attend three two-day institutes per week by traveling from one county to the next on the evening train. Before the institute-hosting season began, Professor Latta distributed the

schedule to agricultural newspapers and sent county chairmen circulars with suggestions, along with record-keeping forms. During the season, Latta resolved scheduling issues created by snowstorms, illness, and delayed trains, while handling receipts to reimburse local expenses with state funds. During the spring and summer, he canvassed institute chairmen for their opinions about topics and speakers in preparation for the upcoming institute season (“Farmers’ Institutes” 1892).

Professor Latta gave county chairmen broad discretion to work with local agricultural associations to plan and host their institute. A broad range of questions were answered locally: in what town and facility to hold the event, what topics and local speakers to place on the program, what entertainments and supplemental events to include, and how best to make use of the county’s portion of the legislative appropriation. When chairmen sought Latta’s advice (or his aid with a local dispute), he urged them to seek the opinions of “thoughtful, conservative and successful men both in town and country” (Latta 1894b). When given, his opinions were tempered, clarifying issues more so than delivering a verdict. Characteristically, Latta would remind a chairman that, since he was a man of the community, he was more qualified to judge what was best. Latta even cautioned traveling speakers (who represented the statewide management at institutes) that it “is always best to defer to the local authorities” when problems arose, and that they should “use a good deal of tact” when correcting chairmen’s questionable judgments (Latta 1894a). These self-imposed limits on his controlling authority reflected Latta’s conviction that the farmers’ institute had to be planted and grown in Indiana’s rural

counties. To the extent that it reflected popular preferences, it would thrive or die.

Cultivating the public's good will was essential for the man chosen to serve as an institute chairman. Indiana's \$5,000 annual appropriation was hardly over-generous, less than one-half of that provided by some states in the 1890s. To defray local expenses, each county received \$25 in state funds. To host a successful institute, a county chairman had to draw upon local resources. Newspapers announced institute dates and programs at no cost. Town businesses paid to print programs (complete with advertisements). Sessions were held in courthouses and churches. The home talent rarely charged fees. Schoolchildren and glee clubs supplied music. Improved seed varieties, along with agricultural newspapers, were distributed free of charge (McMahan 1893).home talent rarely charged fees. Schoolchildren and glee clubs supplied music. Improved seed varieties, along with agricultural newspapers, were distributed free of charge (McMahan 1893).home talent rarely charged fees. Schoolchildren and glee clubs supplied music. Improved seed varieties, along with agricultural newspapers, were distributed free of charge (McMahan 1893).

Relying upon local initiative and rousing the volunteer spirit were not "boom methods." Professor Latta and others sought "steady and healthy" growth ("Farmers' Institutes" 1899, 993). Their approach was well-suited to a rural community that had been made skeptical, by repeated exposure to gimmicks and puffery that, supposedly, would improve agriculture (Hayter 1973). The way to earn farmers' trust was to build credibility over time, through personal testimonials, direct experiences, and constancy. By the mid-1890s,

in counties with well-run institutes (and at least one thriving farmers' club), institutes were overflowing "the largest halls that can be secured" at county seats ("Farmers' Institutes" 1895, 409). By the decade's end, an average of 300 people per county attended institutes yearly, with a state-wide aggregate of about 27,000 attendees ("Farmers' Institutes" 1906-07). Without overstating matters, Professor Latta claimed that institute work had "gained a firm foothold" among Indiana's "most substantial farmers" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1897, 602).

For an educational campaign among farmers dispersed across the Hoosier countryside, the institutes' steady growth in their first decade was impressive. It should be noted, though, that attendance estimates included town-dwellers, and that Indiana boasted over 200,000 farms. Every county had its share of men who were diehard opponents of "book-farming" as well as its share of men who thought "they knew all about farming and could not learn from others" (Harlan 1893). Throughout Indiana, "the *average* and *poor* farmers [had] yet to feel the energizing influence of a closer contact with their most wide-awake fellow farmers" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1892-3, 472). This was particularly so for farmers who were separated from central towns by poor roads and difficult terrain. Persuading a farmer to travel for miles in the winter cold to attend a "book-farming" meeting was a hard sell. Taking institutes into rural townships formed the next phase of the farmers' institute's development as an institution of agricultural education.

Extending the Institute System

County institute chairmen's cooperation

with local farmers' clubs was necessary to host an institute at the county seat. Local farmers' clubs—usually consisting of several families—met monthly at members' homes. With relative ease, farmers could organize more elaborate events, such as club picnics or one-day township fairs. Almost immediately, institute chairmen began organizing additional meetings in the help of local clubs. Inevitably, the home counties of Purdue University and *The Farmers' Guide* (Indiana's leading weekly agricultural newspaper) led the way, holding "some six or eight independent meetings at outlying points," thereby "bringing the work within the reach of every farmer in the county." By 1898, some 15-20 counties were "holding such meetings with excellent results" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1898, 590).

A campaign among the institutes of 1900-1901 convinced the General Assembly to double the annual appropriation for farmers' institutes to \$10,000. Professor Latta planned to use most of the increased funding to host supplemental institutes "near the boundaries or corners of the counties," to reach farmers for whom meetings at county seats were "comparatively inaccessible" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1900, 671). Latta expected about 50 supplemental institutes to be held in the inaugural season (Latta 1901). Despite a few "misunderstandings" about distributing public funds, 93 supplemental institutes in total were held, 70 two-day events and 23 one-day events devoted exclusively to dairying ("Farmers' Institutes" 1901).

The township-based institutes proliferated. During their second season, their number nearly doubled. Farmers' demands for more institutes compelled Professor Latta to adopt a formula that allocated institutes based

on the counties' square mileage. By the winter of 1906-07, a combined total of 273 county and township institutes were attended by 50,000 Hoosiers. Since the township institutes rotated from place to place each winter, there were few places where a man could claim that inadequate roads prevented him from attending. Intended to supplement the county institutes, the township institutes supplanted them, by taking the message of agricultural improvement "directly into good farm neighborhoods" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1906-07, 719).

Had it compelled chairmen to rely on too many non-farmers to serve as speakers, the increase in meetings could have undermined the institute's credibility. A "plan of securing effective institute speakers" that Professor Latta claimed was unique to Indiana prevented that from happening. Purdue University had never supplied enough "scientific experts" to fill the demand. Necessity compelled Latta to cultivate "practical workers from the ranks of the everyday farmers." Each year he compiled a list of traveling speakers and their topics. The list contained experienced speakers as well as some "who have never addressed a meeting outside of the home county." To get on the list, a person had to speak at local institutes (at no cost) and be recommended by a county chairman. Once listed, a person traveled and earned speaking fees largely to the extent that he was invited ("Farmers' Institutes" 1903, 665).

Making exceptions for scientists and a few specialists, to be successful with farmers a person had to be a solid farmer and an effective public speaker. Of the two qualities, the former was "the *one fundamental* qualification": "no amount of training of tongue or pen can take the place of a successful experience in the

growing of crops and livestock” (Latta 1900). Whatever the topic—whether corn-planting or cattle-feeding—farmers demanded applications and results. They insisted that speakers testify about practical experiences, and pressed for particulars in question-and-answer sessions. Speakers might be denounced still as “humbugs” who “really knew nothing about farming,” except what they “had prepared out of books to suit the occasion” (Husselman 1899, 275). Some farmers went so far as to pay unannounced home-visits to confirm that a speaker “is a farmer, lives on a farm and conducts farming operations” (Doubting Thomases 1899, 567). Not even men who had reputations that reached beyond Indiana by way of written pieces and advertisements in agricultural newspapers were immune from suspicion of chicanery.

Farmers’ skepticism stemmed only in part from speakers’ seemingly exaggerated claims of yields, profits, and accomplishments. The fact that they were speaking in front of an audience of strangers cast doubt on their claim to be genuine farmers. Farmers’ own aversion to speaking in public forums limited the institutes’ appeal, initially. People were inclined to think of the speaker’s work as reading prepared texts interlaced with literary and historical allusions while audiences “seldom took an active part in discussing the subjects.” To break the crust of formality, institute chairmen were told to discourage the “mere reading of a paper without any fixing of the points by informal discussion” (Latta 1896a). To bolster participation, chairmen borrowed from the Grange the query box technique. Into a box, farmers placed slips of paper containing questions; later, the speaker drew questions and invited others to respond.

In addition, speakers were encouraged to reserve one-fourth of their allocated time for discussion and to give informal presentations. It was hardly unusual to find a speaker reading a prepared text, word-for-word, but the next speaker might speak from an outline, use diagrams, charts, and a blackboard, and permit spontaneous questioning. As the corps of institute speakers gained experience, “the methods of the school room” became increasingly common (“Farmers’ Institutes” 1903, 665).

For even the best speakers, the farmers’ institute audience could be a tough crowd. It contained farmers and non-farmers, people who were college-educated and others who were functionally-literate only. Some people sought entertainment, others useful instruction. Some people insisted that speakers talk about their own farms, while others denounced such talk as “boasting” and anecdotal stories (Latta 1899c). While most people wanted practical farming tips, in every community, a few people’s knowledge of agricultural science rivaled that of the experts. To meet the conflicting demands, the institute program included at least one experienced state-sponsored traveling speaker who led a few sessions and was joined by the home talent, people from the community who talked about local farming conditions during daytime sessions, and performed literary exercises in the evening. Through the blending of emphasis and style, the institute appealed to a broad audience and, simultaneously, reflected the local community.

Developing and Broadening the Institute Program

To better discern and meet the needs of Indiana’s rural communities, in 1898, chairmen

and other people involved in farmers' institutes began gathering annually. Known as the Conference of Institute Workers, the meeting was essentially a model farmers' institute. Based on their observations and experiences, people suggested topics to Professor Latta, who solicited speakers and developed the program. Some sessions were devoted to the practical side of institute work. These sessions were divided into several informal talks (each 10-15 minutes) on issues such as choosing subjects for the program, enlisting the support of local businesses, advertising the institute, or improving the means of instruction; following the series of talks, a general discussion was held. The immediate objective was to make participants aware of ways to interest local farmers in institute work more efficiently and effectively.

The Conference of Institute Workers' program included sessions featuring high-profile authorities from Indiana, other states, land grant universities, and government agencies. Typically, such sessions presented three different perspectives. At a session devoted to the beef industry, for instance, a slaughterhouse representative revealed the "Outlook for beef cattle in Indiana"; afterwards, two farmers described their experiences using "Silage in beef making," followed by a University of Wisconsin scientist who explained "Feeding problems" various forages posed for animal health. Similarly, at another session, after two prominent Hoosiers explained how improved roadways would benefit farmers and municipalities, respectively, the Chairman of the National Commission for Highway Improvement's gave his rationale as to why the state government's financial support was necessary ("Farmers'

Institutes" 1899).

The Conference of Institute Workers' sessions were educational and promotional. On the educational side, bringing in the experts and examining a topic from three sides was "a powerful means of opening the eyes and enlarging the ideas" of an audience (Latta 1899a). On the promotional side, the Conference of Institute Workers was not just any audience. As the Conference closed, participants declared their collective opinion on particular issues. Acting on the resolutions, traveling speakers revised their topics and presentations for the upcoming institute season. In townships and counties, the chairmen were ultimately responsible for selecting both topics and the speakers. As such, whether the topic was "Good Roads" or "Rural Schools," the Conference of Institute Workers was "a golden opportunity to sow good seed" on the right kind of soil (Latta 1899b). Speakers and chairmen could make an issue a prominent subject of conversation among Indiana's farmers, and through them, its legislators.

Initially, the Conference of Institute Workers directed its efforts to increasing the institutes' public funding. A bit slower to take root and grow, the Conference sought to increase the number of farmers' wives and children at institute meetings. Significant for boosting the attendance of adult male farmers, prioritizing women and youth's inclusion brought their interests onto the program, broadening the farmers' institute's scope and refashioning its educational purposes.

Women had always been involved in farmers' institutes, most often by participating in musical interludes and literary exercises. Only the occasional woman delivered a lecture on women's issues, such as the well-managed

kitchen, the wife's duties in the farm home, or properly educating the farmer's daughter. Committed to women's equality and to growing institutes, Professor Latta repeatedly informed chairmen that "in not employing the ladies" they were making a "great mistake." At the least, he insisted, one lady ought to give a paper in the evening, to "give tone to the Institute and help to draw out a good attendance" (Latta 1896b). Beyond that, Latta urged chairmen to feature topics of interest to women. By the late 1890s, roughly 20 counties were holding separate sessions for women ("Farmers' Institutes" 1899).

Professor Latta made women's issues part of the overarching agenda of the Conference of Institute Workers. He designated a full session (one of five) at the second annual meetings as a women's session, importing two women from Michigan and Illinois to tell the audience about the "Needs of the Farmers' Wife and Daughter" and "Industrial Education for Women" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1899). The following year, Indiana's most prominent farmer's wife, the wife of Governor James Mount, addressed a session on "The Farm Home." Meanwhile, Professor Latta, acting on his own initiative, hired a woman from Wisconsin to travel to farmers' institutes for several weeks demonstrating cooking techniques and delivering lectures on nutrition and kitchen management. Her mission was to supply knowledge of domestic science and economy to Indiana's farm women and to create a demand for more of it. Building on the interest the lady-lecturer generated, Professor Latta sponsored a Women's Conference in 1901 for women who were involved in institute work.

Many of the thirty or so women who

attended the Women's Conference went to the annual Conference of Institute Workers several weeks later and secured its commitment to bolster women's work in the local farmers' institutes ("Farmers' Institutes" 1901). Professor Latta sponsored another lady-lecturer to travel to nearly half of Indiana's counties. She complained about talking to "empty seats" in some places, but her promotional efforts were effective (Latta 1902). The Conference of Institute Workers called for every institute to dedicate at least one session to "home topics, such as health, clothing, furnishings, food, standards of living, the use of money, etc." Institute chairmen were instructed to appoint committees of women to help prepare the program and to encourage women to form home-makers' clubs. The Conference of Institute Workers also requested Professor Latta to hire expert lady-lecturers and to give financial aid to summer meetings ("Farmers' Institutes" 1904). The next winter, when another lady-lecturer toured Indiana, she could not meet the demand for engagements, despite being employed for the entire season and attending 72 different institutes ("Farmers' Institutes" 1905).

The lady-lecturers' successful winter tours depended, in large measure, on promotional work the previous summer. In some places, farmers' clubs held annual picnic gatherings. With Professor Latta offering to solicit and reimburse speakers (especially lady-lecturers), the earliest "summer institutes" grew out of these picnic gatherings. At the summer picnic institutes, adult men and their farming concerns were conspicuous by their absence. Instead, farmers' wives encountered an educational fare of food preparation and kitchen management, poultry-keeping, and

child-raising, intermixed with kids' games, socializing, and food from picnic baskets. Together, the touring lady-lecturers and summer picnic institutes gave a powerful boost to interest in using educational means to improve farm women's conditions. It became standard practice almost immediately to hold at least one women's session during the winter season's farmers' institutes ("Farmers' Institutes" 1906-07).

The priority given to women's work reflected a growing conviction that the institutes ought to have a broader purpose than presenting farmers with "results of the latest investigations in theoretical and practical agriculture and horticulture." In practice, farmers' institutes had always encompassed more than their legislative mandate. Professor Latta, for his part, made no effort to discourage topics such as the mutual interdependence of town and country, rural free delivery, road improvement, and the status of farmers. These were not strictly agricultural topics, but people assumed that they belonged on the program. By the late-1890s, the same could be said about the needs of farm women, district schools' neglect of agriculture, or tips to make farm life more appealing to youth. As the twentieth century opened, farmers' institutes centered on practical farming, but gave a good deal of attention to the household, farm life, and rural community. When President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a commission in 1908 to investigate "country life" he popularized a label that captured the curricular varieties in farmers' institutes.

In its report, the Country Life Commission devoted much attention to rural schools and farm youth (Country Life Commission, 1975). Local and state farmers'

institutes were well ahead of the national commission. In 1899, Indiana's Conference of Institute Workers featured the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's advice on "How to make the rural schools most helpful to agriculture" ("Farmers' Institutes" 1899). Two years later, the Conference resolved that institute chairmen should use part of their sessions to awaken public interest in introducing "Nature Study and the simpler elements of agriculture" into the district schools ("Farmers' Institutes" 1901). After two more years, the Conference gave its full promotional muscle to farm youth. In a session titled "Farmers' Institutes and the Rural Schools," the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and four county superintendents presented ideas and examples of collaboration between institutes and district schools. The Conference as a whole approved a committee report that made two revealing recommendations: holding joint sessions of farmers' and teachers' institutes, and inviting schoolteachers and county superintendents to supervise half-sessions spotlighting the agricultural work of local youth ("Farmers' Institutes" 1904).

Broadly speaking, by promoting youth's involvement in the institutes, the Conference hoped to instill "a higher appreciation of farm life and farm business." Concerns about the out-migration of youth from rural communities were endemic in the early twentieth century. The Conference faulted adult farmers for their habit of magnifying the allurements of other professions by continually disparaging their own. The remedy was straightforward: adult farmers needed to show "pride in their vocation" and to encourage their children to take pride in it, too ("Farmers' Institutes" 1904,

785). As a public forum in which people could display their work-related learning and accomplishments, a farmers' institute was well-suited for achieving that aim. Offering a prize for writing and reading an essay on a farm-topic was unlikely to enthruse youth. Far more excitement was generated when local institutes began holding competitive exhibits of farm and home products made by youth.

Although county fairs and farmers' clubs had been holding agricultural exhibits for decades, few exhibits were educational in a systematic sense before the turn of the twentieth century. To be sure, it was possible for a person to learn by observing products of the field and kitchen on display at the county fair, particularly if the exhibits' merits were discussed with others. That sort of learning was undirected and incidental. By design, exhibits at farmers' institutes were different. At a minimum, scorecards identifying criteria and numerical point allocations accompanied the exhibits. Directing observers' attention toward particular features and indicating their relative significance via point values, the scorecards were educational devices in their own right. Widely-distributed at institutes and in agricultural newspapers, scorecards set standards, frames of reference that people used to discuss the exhibits' merits and demerits.

The scorecards formed the basis of an additional educational feature that was absent, typically, from a nineteenth-century county fair: public judging. For most fair exhibits, a judge or committee awarded prizes without ceremony, and without offering rationales. At a farmers' institute, judging was used to educate the audience. Two basic styles emerged. In the more common style, judging was an "object lesson." An expert judge evaluated the exhibit

using the scorecard, then, criterion by criterion, identified the point values assigned and explained his reasoning. In the alternative "class exercise" style, a small group of people (youth exhibitors, typically) evaluated items on display using a scorecard; an expert judge then reviewed their scores and explained why his judgments differed ("Farmers' Institutes" 1903). Regardless of the style, the intent was to guide people's observation, thinking, and judgment, and both the exhibitors and spectators were the targeted students of an expert.

For the youth who prepared an exhibit, the judging exercise culminated a year's worth of learning. An upcoming contest would be announced at a farmers' institute meeting and an informational circular distributed. The scorecard set the benchmarks for success; the circular outlined the rules for participating. Competing youths learned and worked largely in self-directed fashion, as they saw fit seeking information and guidance from other people, agricultural newspapers, and bulletins issued by agricultural experiment stations. In places where county fair associations joined with farmers' institutes to sponsor contests, youths had two opportunities to exhibit. They could show at the county fair and then again at the farmers' institute, if they wrote a report of production processes and results. For showing at the county fair, youth won small cash prizes; farmers' institutes also offered first-place winners scholarships to a week-long agricultural short course held at Purdue University during the winter ("Farmers' Institutes" 1903).

Opportunities for youth to exhibit might be available at district schools as well, especially for boys who were interested in

growing corn. By 1905, at least nine county school superintendents were cooperating with farmers' institutes and the state-wide Corn Growers' Association to organize corn contests and clubs for boys ("Farmers' Institutes" 1905). Directly and personally involved, county school superintendents solicited financial support (for seed corn and prizes) from township businesses, held informational meetings with parents, distributed seed corn and instructed youth in planting and tillage, inspected the boys' corn plots during the summer, and worked with teachers to host one-day "fairs" at district schoolhouses (Haines 1905). Success with boys' corn clubs fueled interest in similar clubs for girls in making bread and butter. At farmers' institutes, youth displays and judging began receiving full sessions; district schools began closing their doors for the day so that all children could attend (Latta 1907).

By 1908 boys' and girls' competitive exhibits were being held in more than one-third of Indiana's counties, and it seemed obvious that they would be central to the future of farmers' institutes. For the long-range future, the contests were "reaching the farmers of tomorrow," inspiring and equipping youth to apply agricultural science on Indiana's farms. For the immediate future, institute chairmen had "a prime means of interesting the old folks." It simply could not be denied: "where the boys and girls have come out successful Institutes have been held" (Latta 1908). Local communities experimented with an expanding array of contests: wheat, oats, potatoes, poultry, pickles, preserved fruit, aprons, and more. Adults' enthusiasm for youth contests and club work lay behind the Indiana General Assembly's third—and penultimate—major

action affecting farmers' institutes.

The farmers' institute legislation of 1907 did three main things: it sanctioned the expanded scope and purposes of institute work; it instituted standing county-wide organizations; and, it offered the prospect of direct public funding to meet local expenses. The legislature's endorsement of farmers' institutes' role in cooperatively-sponsoring boys' and girls' contests was the most significant feature. To assume that role, however, the other two components seemed necessary. After all, initiating and sustaining youth work throughout the growing season required some kind of institutional and financial support. As envisioned in the law, counties that formed standing associations and raised at least \$100 in annual membership fees were eligible to draw matching funds from the county treasury. The money was to be used to cover local expenses incurred in hosting institutes and contests for youth ("Farmers' Institutes" 1906-07). With an invigorated mission, sources of funding, and a permanent infrastructure, the farmers' institute seemed to be on the verge of expansion.

When he hailed the 1907 legislation's potential for moving "Indiana into the foremost rank in the Farmers' Institute work," Professor Latta was surely correct. Equipped with, potentially, up to \$18,400 (from membership fees and county treasuries) annually to cover local expenses, surely farmers' institutes could do a great deal more good for Indiana's rural communities ("Farmers' Institutes" 1906-07, 741). Professor Latta could not have anticipated that, in the next decade the farmers' institute would be relieved of much of its educational burden. Through the combined impact of legislation passed by Indiana's General

Assembly and the United States Congress, farmers' institutes were incorporated into a system of agricultural extension that included (among other agencies) the 4-H, the Farm Bureau, and the county demonstration agent. For the rest of the twentieth century, these institutions were generally associated with agricultural extension, even though in some communities farmers' institutes continued for decades.

Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, the farmers' institute was well-established in an educational niche that overlapped roles played by the weekly agricultural newspapers (self-study), local granges and farmers' clubs (monthly mutual education), and county fairs (annual exhibits of innovations and excellence). Comprised of an interdisciplinary curriculum and the best pedagogies, at its finest, the farmers' institute gave participants an encounter with recent scientific investigations, an array of practical applications via oral explanations, demonstrations, and exhibits, and ample opportunities for exchanging ideas among an assembly that included experts, practitioners, novices, and youth. Educational experiences resembled those of a university-level classroom, a Chautauqua, a farmer's club, and a county fair. The farmers' institute was an innovative educational agency. It was also highly adaptable, particularly in light of the Conference of Institute Workers' role in sifting local experiments and redeploying ideas into the townships. That, of course, raises the question: why was the farmers' institute supplanted by other institutions of agricultural extension?

Earlier generations of agricultural

historians claimed that farmers' institutes fell victim to their success. Instrumental in awakening farmers' interest in agricultural science, the institutes "outlived their usefulness," as farmers began demanding instruction that was more advanced, specialized, and specific to the problems of their home farms (Scott 1970, 136; True 1969). That claim holds merit insofar as it goes, but it is insufficient. Even if some farmers' agricultural learning outpaced the institutes' carrying capacity, the institutes were discovering new purposes. Moreover, if a sizable proportion of farmers had grown discontented, institute-attendance would have declined. Attendance actually increased steadily, a fact that can be verified by the statistics found in the USDA *Yearbook*. That situation changed after Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, when some state governments and universities' agricultural departments stopped sponsoring farmers' institutes and channeled resources into other forms of agricultural extension.

It may be useful to envision the farmers' institute as the watershed of the nineteenth century's educational efforts in agricultural improvement. Agricultural education institutions that had existed for several decades did not pave the way toward, or culminate in, the farmers' institute. Rather, a miscellany of organizational features, instructional purposes, and teaching strategies were brought into the farmers' institute. Several streams of educational effort flowed out, carrying a fairly coherent agenda into federal policy (notably, the Country Life Commission and Smith-Lever Act), into the land-grant universities (agricultural programs and extension courses), into rural schools (nature

study and vocational agriculture), and into rural communities (4-H clubs and county extension agents). Arguably, the farmers' institutes' greatest crop was a coalition of people who learned how to use mechanisms of public policy to redesign the institutional and educational context that surrounded it. That learning did not take place in instructional sessions devoted to livestock or farm life. Rather, it was generated by an institutional infrastructure that stretched across geographic space, bringing farmers into interchange and coordination with farmers in other places, experts in land-grant universities and the USDA, and decision-makers in all levels of government within the federal system.

As an educational form straddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the farmers' institute is fairly typical of the Progressive Era's early years, particularly in its supporters' growing preferences for formalized instruction, government-affiliation, and permanent funding sources. As such, the farmers' institute offers a glimpse into the kinds of educational efforts reform-minded people directed toward their adult counterparts. The farmers' institute may serve, also, as a useful counterpoint to prevalent conceptions of how education and reform operated in the Progressive Era. As a delivery system for conveying ideas and ideals, the farmers' institute relied upon voluntarism and suasion, in sharp contrast to say, urban vocational schooling or citizenship training for recent immigrants.

A final point about intergenerational learning: the farmers' institute carried the nineteenth century's tradition of self-improvement through the pursuit of useful knowledge into the twentieth century. Applying rationality and emergent scientific knowledge

to pressing concerns in everyday life formed its main mission. More often than not, adult learners became convinced of both the value of science and the potency of education. That they did so by participating in an educational institution that incorporated youth was significant; the experience surely shaped the rising generation's normative expectations for dealing with contemporary social problems, deploying scientific expertise, and educating youth to participate in civil society. In light of the sightlines it offers into these dimensions of American society in the early twentieth century, what seems remarkable about the farmers' institute is its absence from the history of education.

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