

Agriculture -

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our forests today-and forestry is within the U.S. Department of Agriculture - it could be logically argued that forestry and related industries, such as paper, are part of agriculture.

In addition, a substantial portion of the region's manufacturing jobs in chemicals (1,100 jobs), machinery (6,400 jobs), electrical equipment and supplies (3,200 jobs), and transportation equipment (3,400 jobs, exclusive of aircraft and ships) exist because of the money Washington's farmers spend for these products to operate their farms.

In the non-manufacturing realm, the Seattle-Everett area has 26,400 transportation jobs, 12,700 communications and utilities jobs, and 35,100 finance, insurance, and real estate jobs. Agriculture accounts for an apparently unknown portion of each of them. The impact should be especially great in transportation.

Agriculture also is responsible for a portion of the 78,700 "services" jobs and of the 43,600 "other government" jobs outside of education. A number of state and federal Department of Agriculture jobs are located in Seattle.

Much of agriculture's role in creating these jobs is conjecture; but the guesses are necessitated

by the apparent lack of hard information about not only agriculture, but the nature of Seattle's and the state's economic base. In the absence of facts, it would appear that there is more than adequate substance to justify - if not demand - greater interest on the part of Seattle's newspapers in what is transpiring in agriculture.

Having examined the bread-and-butter reason why metropolitan newspapers should re-evaluate their treatment of agriculturally-related news, let's briefly examine two other important reasons

THE PUBLIC NEED

With farm population shrunken to less than five percent of the nation's population and the one-man, one-vote rule of the U.S. Supreme Court, the emaciated farm bloc is a feeble vestige of the power it once was. And it appears destined for still further enfeeblement unless coalitions are developed between farm and agribusiness-oriented congressmen.

Agricultural leaders now recognize, and admonish farmers, that farm policy will be made increasingly by urban-dominated legislators with little understanding of the unique problems of agriculture.

If agriculture is unable to get its side of the story across to the man in the city - and that effort is certainly severely handicapped by the absence of farm editors on metropolitan newspapers and by the general disinterest of city

editors in "farm" news - the urban man very well may awaken some morning to find food prices really high, and a scarcity of many of the commodities which he now takes for granted

This is a real danger and could come about through restrictive legislation (on the ecological front, for instance) or the lack of legislation (such as failure to appropriate sufficient research funds to enable agriculture to cope with diseases and changing technology).

Agricultural leaders, and their few city friends who are attuned to their problems, are becoming increasingly concerned over the difficulty - if not impossibility - of presenting the case for agriculture in the cities

Perhaps a classical example of the need for urban knowledge of agriculture lies in the Agribusiness Accountability Project's book-length report, "Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times," released just this month in Washington, D.C. It takes the nation's land grant colleges and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to task for the trust of agricultural research. Without criticizing or defending the report, which admits its bias, it should be pointed out that it proclaims: "It is the objective of the Task Force to provoke a public response that will help realign the land grant complex with the public interest."

The Agribusiness Accountability Project is taking its

case to the urban masses, knowing that an urban press will give abundant attention to its "expose." But will the urban newspaper have people on their staffs who have the perspective to ask searching questions of the Agribusiness Accountability Project, or will even have the interest to inquire intelligently into the other side of the story? In other words, will the issue receive a fair hearing? Or will public sentiment be stampeded to the support of legislation which could be contrary to the public interest?

A QUESTION OF INTEREST

And finally, Seattle readers (and urban readers all over America) are interested in farms and farm people. They will read avidly about agriculture if - IF - articles and features about agriculture are written for THEM. Of course they aren't interested in reading something written for farmers, stories which require a farmer's knowledge to comprehend. This is where so many newspapers have taken a wrong turn. When rural circulation declined and news executives could no longer justify a farm editor to write for farmers, they plowed under their farm beats.

Interestingly, editors don't expect an aerospace editor to write for Boeing or NASA employees. They don't have an antique automobile editor because great numbers of their

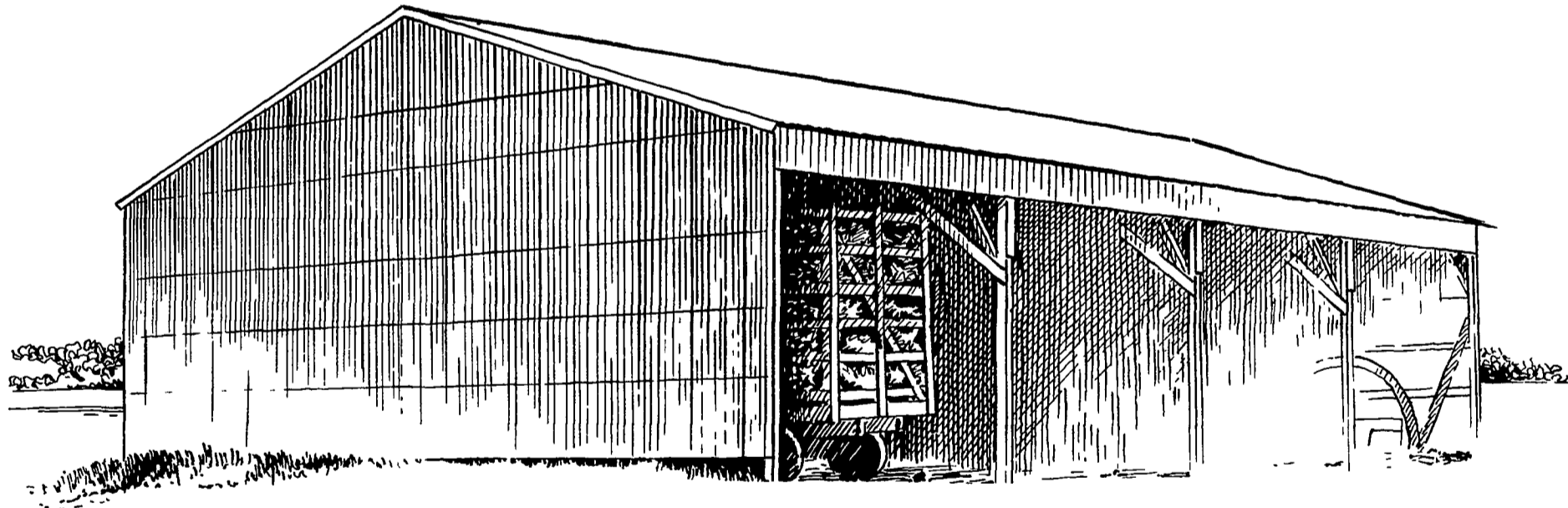
readers restore, or own, antique vehicles. They don't ask the science writer to write for scientist subscribers, nor education writers to aim their features and articles at educators. All of these and the many other specialists on metropolitan newspaper staffs write about these fields for that mythical "average" reader who they know will be engrossed with well-presented material on the subject

Theoretically, there is a larger community of interest in agriculture because every subscriber eats and wears clothes. Not every reader has children in school, or gives a tinker's verb about the machinations of politicians. At a superficial glance one may conclude that the food editor fulfills the reader's interest in his food, but a more careful examination reveals that food editors as we know them today don't begin to fill the vacuum between the consumer and the farms without which few could live for more than two weeks

In summary, there is a void in many metropolitan newspapers today, a chasm which left unbridged could contribute to serious problems for society. A reassessment of the importance of agricultural news to urban residents would appear to be not only warranted on the basis of reader interest, but demanded by urban welfare.

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