

Agricultural progress result of 100-year effort

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous Frenchman who traveled widely in America in the first half of the 1800's, had a great batting average for telling it like it was.

But as the U.S. goes, he missed the mark when he said "Agriculture is perhaps, of all the useful arts, that which improves most slowly among democratic nations."

In his day farmers tilled their crops and cared for their livestock in traditional ways. Although there were

signs of change - the inventions of the moldboard plow, the cotton gin, and the reaper, for example - farmers still were slower to change than businessmen or industrialists of that period.

Hard to predict. We can forgive de Tocqueville for his lack of foresight regarding this one area. Indeed, few could have detected in the agriculture of the mid-1800's the sparks of the technological explosion that would revolutionize farming 100 years later.

Perhaps the greatest change is in the minds of farmers themselves, who eagerly seize and apply new technologies as fast as they leave the laboratories: new varieties, new fertilizers, new pesticides and herbicides, new systems of cultivation, new management techniques.

They welcome with equal enthusiasm new research findings concerning new uses for farm products, more efficient marketing and distribution, and improved technologies in transportation, storage, and processing.

This change didn't just happen. It was the direct payoff from a unique and massive effort over a 100-year period that created a vast network of agricultural research and educational institutions.

Among farmers' contact points for research information are the county extension offices in nearly all 3,044 counties in the 50 States, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the District of Columbia. Each is staffed with one or more full-time professional agriculturists and home economists. The 11,500 county workers are backstopped by 4,500 State extension professionals. A small Federal office in USDA services and coordinates the State offices.

Extension helpers. In recent years, the Extension Services have employed a growing number of para-professionals who help disseminate information on nutrition, health, and family living to poor people in rural and urban areas. In addition, the services use a legion of unpaid, trained, volunteer local leaders.

Research information also reaches farmers and the public through the press, radio, and television. Advertising is another means by which agribusiness firms communicate with farmers and others. Supplier firms


themselves are also important distributors of new knowledge.

Research findings flow into this information network from a variety of sources.

First in research. Largest of the public research agencies is USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS). It operates 127 separate research establishments, including the Agricultural Research Center at Beltsville, Md., and laboratories in each of the States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and several foreign countries. ARS also conducts research in cooperation with, or under contracts or grants with, State agricultural experiment stations, State departments of agriculture, and other groups both public and private.

Other USDA research agencies include the Economic Research Service, the Forest Service, and the Farmer Cooperative Service. Statistics on agricultural production and other subjects are collected by the Statistical Reporting Service.

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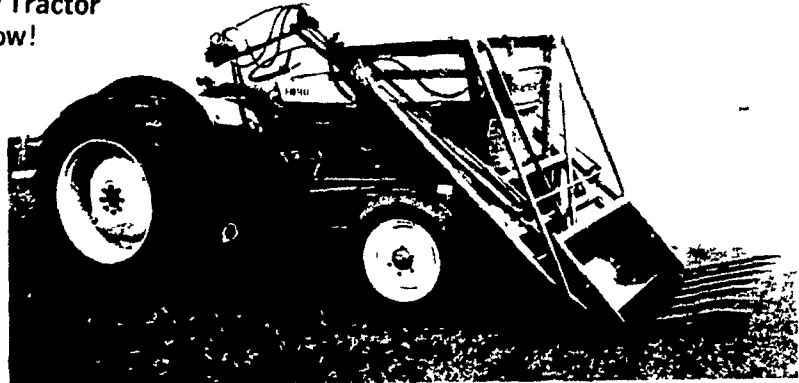
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