

A law which is not widely known

The Capper-Volstead Act gave birth to farmer co-ops

Ever heard of Capper-Volstead? No, they weren't a song-and-dance team, but they were well-known during the vaudeville era—1922 to be exact.

Senator Arthur Capper and Congressman Andrew Volstead were two congressmen who sponsored legislation that resulted in the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922. Their crusade was simple enough—they wanted to give farmers the right to organize their own marketing companies. Their basic idea was to try to put the individual family farmer in a stronger bargaining position—if he was willing to work with others in a special non-profit, self-help organization.

Today, after 52 years, there are about 5,000 farmer marketing cooperatives (involving over 3 million farmer memberships in the U.S.) ranging from small organizations to large food companies. In some cases, the public knows co-ops by such well known brand names as Sun-kist, Land 'O Lakes, Welch's, Sun-Maid, Sunsweet, Sue Bee, Ocean Spray, Diamond Walnut and many others.

An important part of Senator Capper's and Representative Volstead's original idea was granting the farmer the option of starting his own cooperative company if he wanted to. This meant that if he didn't like the price offered by a big processor—or for that matter, if he felt the



Senator Arthur Capper



Congressman Andrew Volstead

buyer wasn't handling his product in the right way—he could take care of his own marketing.

Volstead were in favor of this! In 50 years, few people outside the farm community ever knew what a co-op was

How important is the Capper-Volstead Act?

Many Congressmen don't even know.

Also important was the idea that a farmer-owned company would bring more competi-

—that is until illegal campaign contributions put a few co-ops in the news. While there

The vast majority of cooperatives have a clean bill of health

tion to the market place and hold food prices down Like all politicians, Capper and

were similar violations by numerous non-co-op companies, the ones by co-ops gave their

special type of business a black eye. And in today's world, that means hearings and investigations.

So far, all examinations have given the vast majority of co-ops a clean bill of health. And a re-examination of Capper-Volstead has brought to light the important contribution that farmer cooperatives make, in terms of added competition, improved quality and reasonable prices.

Of course, co-ops still have their detractors: some officials in the Justice Department want to take away the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture to supervise price behavior of co-ops—as Capper and Volstead specified. Some powerful food interests which face co-op competition want co-op activity curtailed—for obvious reasons. But as the debate intensifies over the law that Senator Capper and Representative Volstead gave us, one thing is certain: public apathy over a technical issue of this nature gives the bureaucracy more freedom to do what it wishes without serious opposition.

And yet, most people (even government officials) don't realize that "cooperation" (the way farm people say it) is an important component of our agricultural system—and is doubtless one of the major reasons why Americans enjoy an unrivaled abundance of food at proportionately less cost than any other people in the world.



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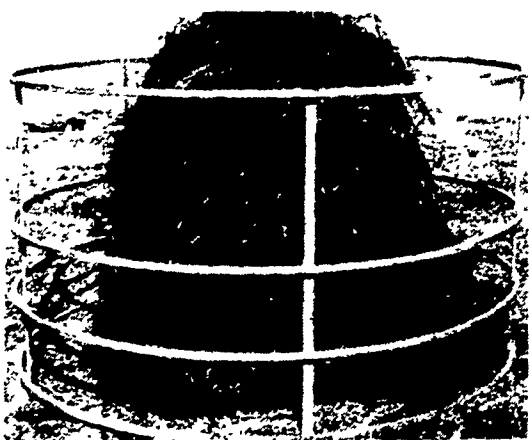
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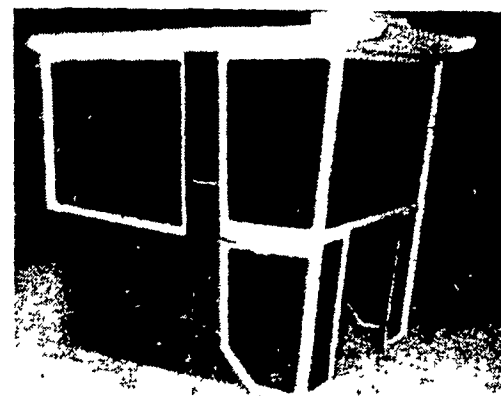


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