

# Harry Sloat reviews 60 years in Lancaster County

BY CURT HARLER

LANCASTER — For 40 years the farmers of Lancaster saw Harry S Sloat on a weekly basis. But during the past 20 years, farmers have been more likely to ask, "What ever happened to Harry?"

The answer is simple nothing happened to Harry Sloat.

The former Lancaster County agricultural extension agent still lives right behind the Manor Shopping Center in a brick home as solid as his reputation as a farm leader.

Although he has suffered what he describes as "tucker trouble," Harry makes only one concession to old age.

"I've given up night driving," he explains.

Until the recent retirement of Max Smith after 44 years, Harry Sloat held the state record for longevity among county agents.

The Carbon County native relocated from Rockport, midway between Allentown and Wilkes-Barre, to Lancaster County in February 1921.

For 40 years, until his retirement in 1961, Sloat made his way around the county discussing poultry, tobacco, vegetables, fruit, and field crops with Lancaster farmers.

First it was in a Ford, later in a Dodge, finally in a Chevy, that he toured the farmland of Lancaster County.

He made his most lasting mark in farm management programs. Even today farmers regularly discuss how Harry Sloat taught them bookkeeping or got them started on a particular record keeping program.

But as Harry spins stories of his past as an extension agent, it quickly becomes apparent that Lancaster County almost didn't have a Harry Sloat in its extension service more times than one.

Harry Sloat had enrolled in Penn State and was to be graduated in 1919. At the time he was in the Reserve Officers Training Corps "When World War II — I mean World War I — broke out, I dropped out of college to serve," he recalls.

That was in the Fall of 1917. Only days before he was due to be shipped overseas he came down with a deathly bout of the flu.

By the time he recovered the hostilities had ended and Harry was on his own again.

He got a job as a chemist running tests on lead and zinc oxide for a plant near his home.

While working he fell victim to an industrial accident and his legs were severely burned. The damage was so bad the physicians wanted to amputate his leg.

But Harry Sloat had other plans. He wanted to join a Masonic Lodge, and the Masons would not accept a person missing limbs.

With a great deal of assistance from a French doctor, Sloat recovered.

"I decided college was better than what I'd been through," he says.

He returned to Penn State, and in February 1921 he received his degree in horticulture.

Harry Sloat started working with Lancaster County farmers a few days before he received his B.S. from Penn State College, as it was known then.

His blue-grey eyes flash from behind gold framed glasses as he recalls the early days of extension work in the county.

"Buchner and I used to go out to farms and see problems firsthand," he says, referring to long-time county agent Dutch Buchner.

"We didn't use radio or TV

programs then," he continues.

Sloat seems resigned to the mass media contacts made by county agents today, but that doesn't mean he has to like them.

Still, he used the media himself. For the last several years he was in extension he did an article every Friday for the Lancaster New Era, covering farm or 4-H happenings.

It was under Dutch Buchner that he got his first promotion, from area farm management specialist to assistant county agent.

But there were troubles working with Dutch. As most oldtimers remember, Dutch Buchner always ran around the county on his motorcycle. When Dutch needed help with a talk or demonstration, Harry would be drafted into riding along in the cycle's sidecar.

"It was between Quarryville and Kirkwood, one day, that we came around a sharp curve a bit too fast. He lifted the third wheel right off the ground.

"I thought I was going to go through the fence head first," Harry recalls. But Buchner got the cycle back on track and the extension service was saved the burden of hiring a whole new ag staff.

There was a thinner extension staff then, Sloat recalls.

"For years before my retirement on February 1, 1961 Buchner and I were doing all the farm work. There was a home economist and her assistant, and that was our whole staff," he says.

He looks with some amazement at a recent brochure which shows twice as many extension directors and nearly three times the staff today as what he and Dutch had to work with.

Harry's mind shifts gears, for a moment.

"You know, Dutch had a girl in Kansas he used to tell me about. Said they came really close to getting married."

"But then he moved away from there, became ill down South, and lost touch. They never did get married," Harry concludes.

For Sloat, though, there was a woman to share the years.

"Emma Carey and I originally were in classes together back in 1919," he recalls. "Psychology, I believe."

As fate would have it, the two never dated at Penn State.

"I ran across her teaching at Lampeter," he continues.

The ag teacher at Lampeter used to be strong on eggs Sloat, long remembered for his ties to the county poultry business, naturally was involved in egg activities.

"I'd help Roy B. Herr and the other poultrymen get together their exhibit. Several years they won the medal for the largest and best exhibit at the Farm Show," he remembers.

Herr, of course, was president of the Poultry Association for about 15 years, following Harry Metzler who was the group's first president.

"Anyway, I ran into her again when she was teaching at Lampeter. Now, Pappy Gibbs who had an ice cream plant, and some others of us would go dancing every Tuesday evening.

"I took Emma to a couple of those dances and we just kept on going," Harry says.

Emma's brother Charles taught vo-ag at Lampeter for a few years and then moved to York County as supervisor. Now he is retired in Williamsport.

Lancaster Sure Crop was the corn variety to beat in those days.

"I remember at one demonstration near Strasburg we had an 18-foot tall Mexican line that was

"It was so high you had to reach up to touch the ear," Harry says, reaching high over his head for emphasis.

Hybrid varieties eventually made the old lines obsolete. Meanwhile, the age of chemicals was arriving.

"In the late 30s we started a program to spray for spittlebug," Harry says.

One of the first demonstrations was on a farm below Kirkwood.

Sloat went out to the farm with Penn State specialist John Pepper. Pepper, Sloat recalls, was a bit reluctant to make the drive because he doubted there would be much farmer interest.

"When we got there we saw cars parked along the road for a mile and a half," Harry recalls.

By the next summer a lot of fellows had rigged up sprayers and in a short time the practice of spraying alfalfa became common. In those days, Sloat says, a specialist from the College would be through the county every 10 days or two weeks.

There was Elmer Pfeifer or Jim Eakin to talk about agronomy. John Pepper would be through to look at disease or insect problems.

"In between times, I'd send out personal letters to farmers to help with their problems. Now they send out these books," he says holding up an Orchard Management book and an Agronomy Guide, "and the farmers come in for meetings."

4-H activities kept agents busy at that time the youth club was everyone's responsibility.

"We used to be out every night to a 4-H club meeting, except Saturday and Sunday. Now club leaders do that work," he says.

Sloat continues to talk slowly, remembering how things were. Money, then as now, was a constant worry.

"Mrs. Collins McSparran and I were delegated to see the County Commissioners for the extension appropriation," he says.

Getting dollars to support the ag extension program then, as now, was a major undertaking.

He remembers one particular commission chairman as "a politician and much the tightwad."

But with a great deal of coaxing the pair managed to get the county appropriation doubled from \$5000 to \$10,000.

"That was for all expenses, staff, office space and the rest," Harry emphasizes, noting today's budget has grown but still represents a challenge to extension leaders.

Even newcomers to the County can remember when there was no modern Farm and Home Center to support agricultural activities.

But how many can remember walking into the office where Harry Sloat first started his work, the one out East Orange Street in Lancaster?

From there the extension office was moved to the top of the Woolworth Building near the square in Lancaster, and later to the second floor of the Post Office Building.

"At the Post Office there was no charge for rent," Harry notes with apparent glee.

Harry Sloat took calls at all of those locations, and notes that it often would be 2 p.m. before he could slip out to eat lunch.

He says with some surprise that he still gets calls and requests for information at home.

"Memory doesn't hold up as good as it used to," he says just before spouting off names and lists of places, like the recent fruit and poultry meetings he attended.



Harry S. Sloat relaxes in the living room of his Lancaster home, surrounded by magazines and books—many of which are Yearbooks of Agriculture or plant and garden volumes.

Last Monday, for example, he and J Wilbur Houser of Lampeter went to the beekeepers and fruitgrowers meeting.

During the 60 years he has travelled Lancaster County roads, Harry Sloat has seen thousands of changes—some for the good, some not so good.

"There is a crying need for more work to be done on soil conservation," he says.

"We need help to keep industry and housing from encroaching on good farmland. Look at the Manheim Pike, or around Mount Joy, or along the Lincoln Highway," he says.

Since his early days in Lancaster County, except in the Eastern parts where the Amish and Pike Menmonite have been; farms have become totally mechanized, he points out.

Big dairymen with 25 cows now have 90 to 100. They ship to giant co-ops rather than to local dairies, he continues.

Confinement feeding of swine and cattle is fairly common.

Poultry and broiler industry expansion has pretty well covered the whole county.

"All of that has helped keep Lancaster in front of the non-irrigated counties in the United States," he emphasizes.

He also throws in a pitch for Eastern products.

"Eaten any of those Washington apples?" he asks. "They may produce color out West with all that sunshine and irrigation.

But their apples have little or no flavor. If I want apples, I want Eastern apples," he says.

Harry pauses for a moment to check on his wife.

She had an aneurism of the brain some time ago and underwent five hours surgery.

"She has had problems," he says. "It falls to me to do the work around here."

Returning to the room he speculates on how Lancaster County's farms will fare during the coming 60 years.

"If I'd be able to come back to Lancaster County and look at agriculture I'd like to see lower, stable interest rates.

"There has to be a retrenchment and balancing of budgets for farmers as well as the government if they both are going to keep from going bankrupt," he declares.

"I hope we can continue to adjust to things and then we'll succeed," he says.

Harry Sloat still can't get over how people remember him.

When he worked as agent he was honored many times. One in particular he recalls was an award presented in New York's Waldorf Astoria hotel for helping farmers use pest control materials.

He has a folder of over 100 letters given him upon his retirement. He still looks through them now and then.

"You'd be surprised at the calls and questions I get at times. I seem to have reached the farmers more personally than some do today," Harry muses.

With all the years spent in agriculture, Harry Sloat can't keep far from the soil.

His garden is lush with rhododendron, magnolia, bridal wreath, and roses.

He takes a few quick, short steps to show his visitor to the door. "It's amazing they still remember," he says.

No, that's not amazing—the surprising thing about Harry S. Sloat is that he doesn't expect people to remember him.