

The Forgotten Leader in Agricultural Education: Rufus W. Stimson

Gary E. Moore, Professor
Vocational Education
Louisiana State University

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In a recent article in The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture, the 10 individuals who had contributed the most to the development of agricultural education were identified (Camp & Crunkilton, 1985). This effort to document the historically important people in the profession is to be commended. The men identified in the article have provided leadership to the profession and deserve the recognition accorded them. However, for those who are well grounded in the history of the profession, one name was noticeably absent--Rufus W. Stimson.

There are several reasons why Mr. Stimson may have been overlooked. He was not a teacher educator (as we now know teacher educators) and, therefore, did not have people study under him to remember his accomplishments. And he retired from the profession 50 years ago. As time passes, people tend to forget.

In the early years of agricultural education, Stimson was well known. In volume 1, issue 3 of The Agricultural Education Magazine, the editor, H. M. Hamlin (1929), wrote (p. 2), "With this issue, we are introducing a series of articles dealing with our current leaders . . . none will question the choice of Rufus W. Stimson of Massachusetts as the subject of the first article." Charles Prosser (1929, p. 15) observed, "To the movement for efficient training in agriculture of secondary grade, Rufus W. Stimson has probably contributed more than any single man." L. H. Dennis, former executive secretary of the American Vocational Association, stated (1929, p. 14), "Dr. R. W. Stimson is one of the pioneers in agricultural education in the United States. Many of us have looked to him for leadership and inspiration in the development of agricultural education programs in the various states."

Who was Rufus Stimson? What were his contributions to agricultural education? The objective of this article is to reacquaint the members of the agricultural education profession with the life and teachings of Rufus Stimson. A careful examination of his life and teachings will provide the members with an insight into the evolution of agricultural education. This information may help provide direction and encouragement for the profession as it faces the future.

An Overview of the Life of Rufus Stimson

Rufus Whittaker Stimson was born February 20, 1868, on a farm near Palmer, Massachusetts (Ohles, 1978). He was educated in the elementary and high schools of Palmer. Stimson attended Colby College in Maine for two years and then went to Harvard University where he studied philosophy under William James. The works of Socrates, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Herbart occupied a prominent place on his desk (Stimson, 1942). In 1895 Stimson received the A.B. degree in philosophy. He continued his studies and was awarded the A.M. degree in 1896. Stimson next attended the Yale Divinity School and received the B.D. in 1897.

From 1897 to 1901, Stimson was a professor of English, ethics and public speaking at the Connecticut Agricultural College (now the

University of Connecticut). He ascended to the position of acting president in 1901 and was made president shortly thereafter. He served as president of the Connecticut Agricultural College until 1908.

In 1908, Stimson became director of Smith's Agricultural School, a secondary school in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1911, he was invited to become state supervisor of agricultural education for Massachusetts. He served in this position until he retired at the age of 70 in 1938.

At the age of 71, Stimson received an appointment as a Research Specialist in Agricultural Education in the U.S. Office of Education for the purpose of writing a history of agricultural education (Stimson, 1940). This book was published in 1942.

Stimson died on May 1, 1947. At the time of his death, he had nearly completed a book on the leaders of agricultural education.

The Contributions of Rufus W. Stimson to Vocational Agriculture

When scholars of the profession discuss the contributions of Rufus W. Stimson to the development of vocational agriculture, "the project method" of teaching is what first comes to mind.

The Project Method

During Stimson's tenure as the President of Connecticut Agricultural College, he became concerned over how agriculture was taught. As president of the College, he attended annual meetings of the American Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations. Educational problems and school reform issues including the need for practical secondary agricultural education were discussed. The common teaching procedure in agriculture during this era was classroom lecture, recitation and manual labor on the school farm. Stimson was against this. He was of the opinion that too many students stood around watching other students work and that labor on somebody else's farm was not ideal (Stimson, 1907).

On Stimson's 40th birthday, it was announced that he was leaving the College to become Director of the new secondary agricultural school in Massachusetts. The accounts of Stimson's tenure as president of the Connecticut Agriculture College were very favorable (Stemmons, 1931). One might question why Stimson would leave for, what appeared to be, a step down. It is this writer's belief that during Stimson's tenure as president, he was formulating the idea for a new way to teach agriculture, the home project method, and needed a place to try his experiment.

Soon after assuming the director's position at Smith's Agricultural School, Stimson prepared a brochure about the new school. In the brochure, he outlined a new plan for the teaching of agriculture--the project method. In the brochure, it was stated that students would learn agriculture at the school but would apply what they had learned on their home farms through the use of home projects. The project method concept appears to have evolved out of Stimson's experiences while President of the Connecticut Agricultural College, the pragmatic philosophy of his mentor William James, and the other philosophers such as Pestalozzi whom Stimson had read.

During the 1908-1909 school year, Stimson worked diligently at developing the new school and installing the project concept. The project method of teaching soon proved to be successful (Thayer, 1928).

Early in 1910, Stimson's project work caught the attention of two state education leaders, David Snedden and Charles Prosser. They asked Stimson to become state supervisor of agricultural education in 1911. During Stimson's first year with the board of education, he traveled widely, espousing the project method. He addressed both the American Association for the Advancement of Agricultural Teaching (Stimson, 1912a) and the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) (Stimson, 1912b). His NSSE paper, 31 printed pages in length, contained a detailed description of the project concept. The terms improvement project, experimental project, and productive project were described in detail.

The annual Report of the Commissioner of Education for the United States in 1911 contained an article describing Stimson's work at Smith's Agricultural School (Monohan, 1912). A 104-page bulletin describing the home-project plan of teaching was published by the United States Bureau of Education in 1914 (Stimson, 1914). It was not long before the project method of teaching agriculture was being used in many states.

The project method of teaching received considerable attention at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition that was held in San Francisco. The state of Massachusetts had an exhibit on state-aided vocational education (Foght, 1917a), with the project method being the focal point of the exhibit. This exhibit won the Grand Prix (gold medal) award (Stimson, 1919).

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 contained a provision that all agricultural students were required to have supervised farm practice. Prosser drafted the bill (Barlow, 1976). According to Deyoe (1943) and Thayer (1928), there was no doubt that the work of Stimson served as the model for the supervised practice aspect of the legislation.

Progressive educators soon adapted Stimson's project method of teaching agriculture to other areas of education. By the mid 1920s, the project method of teaching was being used in many areas of education and was being promoted by many leading educators. However, the fact that the project concept originated in agricultural education with Rufus Stimson was quickly lost by general educators. Many people erroneously believe William Heard Kilpatrick of Teachers College (Columbia University) was the originator of the project method. This is probably one of the greatest misconceptions in the history of education. In 1966, an entire issue of Educational Theory was devoted to Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick's project method of teaching was cited by several authors as revolutionizing education in the world.

Kilpatrick became famous for the project method of teaching for two reasons. One was an article he wrote in the September 1918 issue of the Teachers College Record titled "The Project Method." The Record was a leading educational journal of that era. In this article Kilpatrick thoroughly discussed the merits and implication of the project method of teaching.

The second reason for Kilpatrick's fame was that, between 1910 and 1930, Teachers College was the leading doctoral-granting institution in education in America. Many of the leading educators in America and the world received their doctorates from Teachers College and were influenced by Kilpatrick (agricultural educators who received their doctorates from Teachers College include W. F. Stewart, T. H. Eaton, Ray Fife, G. A. Schmidt, and Harold Byram).

There is ample historical evidence to show that Stimson, not Kilpatrick, was the originator of the project concept. However, one has to

dig deep and be discerning because much of the project literature was done in the 1920s by graduate students of Kilpatrick. A friend and colleague of Kilpatrick's, V. T. Thayer, set the record straight in 1928 in a book titled The Passing of the Recitation. Thayer (p. 229) wrote:

Some 20 years ago R. W. Stimson . . . devised a plan for revitalizing the teaching of agriculture . . . this plan was successful from the start. . . . What began as simple endeavor to facilitate the application at home of what a pupil learns in an agricultural school, has developed into a proposed "method" for reorganizing the entire school curriculum; and the term "project method" is now used by no less an authority than William Heard Kilpatrick."

For a detailed discussion of the events and personal factors surrounding the "appropriation" of the project method by Kilpatrick, see "Where are you when we need you, Rufus W. Stimson?" in the proceedings of the 1985 National Agricultural Education Research Meeting.

Three other points need to be made about the origin of the project method. Some believe that Dewey originated the project, others have suggested that we imported it from Europe, and others assert the concept existed before Stimson's work.

Dewey wrote about the project as a distinct teaching method but did not claim credit for it; he cited the work of his disciple, Kilpatrick, in regard to the development of the project (Dewey, 1951). Dewey's educational ideas and thoughts were in harmony with the project concept, but the project method as implemented was not conceived by Dewey.

After a thorough review of the literature, both Branom (1919) and McMurry (1920) concluded that the project originated in this century in America. It is true that Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel, and Herbart may have provided some of the philosophical underpinnings for the concept; however, the project method as conceptualized and implemented as a pedagogical device was uniquely American.

The word "project" was not invented by Stimson. The term had been used to designate carefully planned investigations in agricultural science, generally by agricultural experiment stations. Additionally, demonstration "projects" were being conducted by universities. Some high school science teachers were conducting in-class experiments, and some manual arts teachers were having students build items. At times the term "project" was used in conjunction with these activities (Lane, 1926). However, the use of the word "project" in a school setting before Stimson's work was a chance use of the term and did not designate a systematic, structured, pedagogical procedure for teaching.

There is no doubt that Stimson was the father of the project method of teaching. His conception of the project method was based on a sound philosophical basis. There is little difference today between how the project method is being implemented in agricultural education and how Stimson originally envisioned it. The project method of teaching was only one of several contributions Stimson made to the development of agricultural education.

Itinerant Teacher Training

After the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, most states had to scramble to establish teacher education programs to train agriculture teachers since there were few existing systems for training agriculture teachers before 1917. However, Stimson had been involved in teacher

training for nearly 10 years (Stimson, 1942). In an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Agriculture Teaching in 1918, Stimson shared his experiences regarding teacher training. Stimson's views on teacher training were also highlighted in the fourth publication in the Agricultural Series of the Federal Board for Vocational Education (Stimson, 1918). The profession looked to Stimson for leadership in teacher training. Heald (1929) recognized Stimson as the founder of the itinerant teacher-training approach to preparing teachers.

Traveling Seminars

"Most men see better than they visualize." This statement was made by Stimson in 1918 (p. 30). He believed the best way to get his teachers to adopt new practices and improve their programs was to see ideas in practice. Therefore, he regularly organized traveling seminars as a part of the professional workshops he conducted for teachers. During Stimson's tenure as supervisor, there was a professional improvement workshop the week before Christmas and a second one-week professional improvement workshop during late July (Stimson, 1918). It was a common practice for Stimson to use the July workshop for "A conference on 'wheels' . . ." (Heald, 1929, p. 4). The agriculture teachers spent a week on the road, complete with a police escort, visiting agricultural programs and farms.

Task Analysis

Stimson was the first person in agriculture to use task analysis in developing the curriculum (Charters, 1923). He began using the task analysis procedure in 1911 in conjunction with home projects (Stimson, 1922a). Stimson asked his teachers to take the projects of their students and determine what tasks were involved in each of the projects. The listing of the tasks served as outlines for instruction. These task outlines were duplicated and distributed to the teachers.

Advisory Councils

H. M. Hamlin probably did more to promote the use of advisory committees than any other agricultural educator (Camp & Crunkilton, 1985); however, it was Stimson who first advocated the idea. Hamlin (1952, p. 177) wrote, "The author [referring to himself] has traced the use of advisory councils in agricultural education back to 1911. Rufus W. Stimson . . . apparently originated the first advisory group in this field." In a 1911 report to the Massachusetts legislature, several ideas were presented by Stimson, Snedden, and Prosser that were incorporated into legislation. One of these concepts was the use of an advisory council (Foght, 1917b).

Adult Education

Although the Federal Board for Vocational Education was slow in recognizing the need for adult education after the Smith-Hughes Act passed, Stimson was not. In Foght's (1917b) book, The Rural Teacher and His Work, the adult education program in agriculture in Massachusetts was discussed. Foght (p. 217) described the program as being designed for ". . . persons above 17 years of age, regularly engaged in productive agriculture, who devote evenings to study at the school. This group includes dairymen, truck-farmers, fruit-growers, etc." Foght described the benefits of the program and concluded (p. 217), "Much of the success is due to the thoroughgoing supervision employed. The state supervisor [Stimson] cooperates closely with each local instructor."

No Sex Discrimination in Agriculture

Stimson wrote (1922b, p. 95), "Year after year, girls have demonstrated that they can profit from our vocational agricultural education. . . . we must, of course, agree, that there can be no discrimination as to sex in our entrance privileges." Stimson was a strong advocate for girls in vocational agriculture and the FFA. If one examined the proceedings of the National FFA Convention and the proceedings of the annual agricultural education conferences in the North Atlantic (now Eastern) region during the 1930s, they would discover a fierce struggle between Stimson and the national FFA in regard to the membership of girls. The national FFA advisor went to Massachusetts to investigate the matter of girls being in the FFA and to check state laws. During the 1930s, the delegates to the National FFA convention went behind closed doors to discuss the Massachusetts situation. Stimson lost the fight to get girls in the FFA. After Stimson retired in 1938, the matter of allowing girls into the FFA did not emerge again until the 1960s.

Advocate of Balanced Education

In the formative years of vocational agriculture, many people were opposed to this "new" type of education. A number of people did not view agriculture as being worthy of study. The classical school of thought was still prevalent during the early 1900s. Stimson, whose formal education was about as classical as you could get, was a strong advocate for a balanced education that stressed the cultural as well as the vocational. He wrote a number of articles such as "Whither Agricultural Education? Balanced Education" that argued for a balanced education (Stimson, 1919, 1933, 1937). In describing what the vocational agriculture student should learn, Stimson (1937, p. 101) wrote:

The vocational agriculture pupil will be given the best his high school has to offer in disciplines good for us simply because we are human beings. These should include mastery of the mother-tongue, acquaintance with the best things that have been thought and said and done in the world, anywhere, anytime, and by anybody . . .

Having a person with Stimson's background and training arguing for a balanced education, one which included vocational education, did much to advance vocational education.

Additional Contributions of Rufus Stimson

Stimson authored more than 18 articles in The Agricultural Education Magazine. He served as associate editor of The Vocational Education Magazine during the 1920s and authored several articles in that magazine. He also wrote articles for the Quarterly of Alpha Zeta, Business America, the New England Homestead, the Congregationalist and the Christian World, the School Review, and American Education.

Stimson compiled the history of agricultural education. The 1942 publication of the History of Agricultural Education stands alone as the most authoritative work on the history of vocational agricultural education. Stimson also wrote the history of agricultural education in Massachusetts, which was 330 pages long.

Stimson helped organize and later served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Agricultural Teaching. The AAAAT was started in 1910 and disbanded in 1932 when it was decided the work of the group could be carried on in the agricultural section of the American Vocational Association. Stimson was active in this group and

often presented papers. Shinn (1942, p. 577) indicated the discussions of the AAAAT ". . . have contributed to the development of a sound philosophy of vocational education and to improved methods of teaching agriculture in the secondary schools."

What Can the Profession Learn from Stimson?

There are a number of things the profession should learn from Stimson. The profession needs to advocate a balanced education for students. Both "academic" and "vocational" subjects are important. Stimson argued for both. As agricultural educators we cannot make the mistake of narrowly arguing just for vocational education as the proponents of back-to-the-basics argue narrowly for academic education. More progress will be made if we argue for both.

The profession should be a vocal proponent for agricultural education. Stimson spoke to a variety of general education groups and wrote in a number of different journals for the cause of agricultural education. As a profession, we need to expand our audience; we primarily talk and write among ourselves.

The current thought in agricultural education is to make it more scientific. There is nothing wrong with this, but the profession needs to be careful that it does not become the bookish agricultural science that helped motivate Stimson to start the project in the first place. We must not forget the practical, applied aspects of agriculture. The project method of teaching, with slight modification, could be used to teach scientific agriculture.

There is a solid philosophical base in agricultural education. Our early leaders were well versed in philosophy and history. This knowledge provided the foundation for the growth of agricultural education. Because of this knowledge, the early leaders were able to effectively advance the cause of vocational education. Current and prospective leaders in agricultural education would do well to learn more about the history and philosophy of both vocational education and education in general.

Some Final Words

Lamar (1965, p. 18), in a call for leadership from the profession, wrote:

Our early leaders in agricultural education had very few guidelines. They were called on to blaze a new trail and develop a new program. They had the responsibility to develop a theoretical foundation for vocational education in agriculture which is essential for any sound program. Theirs was the task to develop a basic philosophy and formulate the aim and objectives to serve as guidelines for program development and evaluation.

If agricultural education, in the emerging era, is to serve the vocational education needs of the agricultural industry as well as it has done so in the era just ended, leaders in agricultural education must acquire the same kind of vision, desire, dedication, and capability that characterized the leaders who have carried us to this point.

Rufus Stimson was one of those leaders. His philosophy and views can still provide direction for the future. The profession cannot allow Stimson to become the forgotten leader.

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