

HEROES, VILLAINS, PRETTY GIRLS AND MODERN FARMING PRACTICES:
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ADOLESCENT AGRICULTURAL NOVELS TO
AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION, 1925-1940¹

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In 1955, a book by Rudolph Flesch grabbed the attention of the nation. It was titled Why Johnny Can't Read. This book ignited a national concern about the reading ability of our youth.

Agricultural educators and other vocational educators have historically been concerned about the reading ability of their students. In 1954 Brunner and Koble found that school librarians and vocational agriculture teachers in Pennsylvania had difficulty getting vocational agriculture students interested in reading. Galloway's 1960 doctoral dissertation was on the reading level of agricultural students and their textbooks. During the 1970s Sherrell (1978) found vocational students in Missouri to read below the grade level they had obtained and also found that most texts were written one to seven grade levels above the ability of the students. Kotrlik's dissertation in 1978 looked at suitability of curriculum materials in Texas. Welch's 1981 dissertation looked at readability of horticultural materials. As recent as 1989 we find an article in The Agricultural Education Magazine concerned about selecting books for high school agricultural students (Moss and Moss, 1989).

The interest in getting students to read in vocational agriculture is not a post World War II phenomena. The roots go back into the 1920s and 1930s. During this era a number of "vocational agriculture" novels were written with the intent to encourage students to read. There were other purposes as well including using the books as propaganda for the promotion of vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America. Agricultural educators of today might learn more about helping students to improve their reading ability if we examine the adolescent agricultural novels found in vocational agriculture between 1925 and 1940.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the "vocational agriculture" novels read by vocational agriculture students during the 1925-1940 era.
2. To analyze the contents of the "vocational agriculture" novels.
3. To determine the purpose and uses of the adolescent "vocational agriculture" novels.

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PROCEDURE

Standard historical research procedures were used in this study. First, all issues of The Agricultural Education Magazine published between 1925 and 1940 were examined to identify agricultural novels. During this era numerous news items were published in the Magazine, including announcements of new books. The researcher also searched the Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife and Successful Farming. Brief discussions of new books were regularly featured in these publications. Suggested lists of readings for vocational agriculture students published in The Agricultural Education Magazine (Brunner, 1954) and by the agricultural education faculty at North Carolina State starting in 1935 were examined. After identifying the agricultural education novels and their authors from these sources, the Union Serial Listing was consulted to determine if additional, but yet unidentified books, had been written by the same authors. After the researcher was satisfied that all the books had been identified, a personal search was conducted for the identified books in university, school, public and private libraries in Wisconsin, Colorado, Louisiana, Indiana, Texas, Georgia and North Carolina. Copies of all but two of the books were obtained by the researcher and read. Next, personal or phone interviews were held with individuals in Virginia, Georgia, Illinois, Washington (DC) and Louisiana to secure more information about the books and to determine how they were used. This was followed by a trip to the National Agricultural Library for additional research on the topic. This research was conducted over a seven year period. It should be noted that several novels concerned with youth activities in 4-H, scouting and home economics education were found but fell outside the scope of this research effort.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Novels and Authors

Eight novels and one collection of short stories for vocational agriculture students were published between 1925 and 1940. Three authors were involved in writing the novels and one author was involved in collecting the short stories. A listing of the authors and their works is found in Table 1.

The Case Novels

John F. Case, editor of the Missouri Ruralist and President of the Missouri Board of Agriculture, wrote three "vocational agriculture" novels. The first, Tom of Peace Valley (subtitled Boy Knight of Agriculture) published in 1925 tells how the hero and main character of all three novels, Tom Woodson became involved in vocational agriculture. Tom, who was reared in an isolated backwoods valley where trapping and hunting were the main stays of existence and "education" was ridiculed, had the opportunity to go "outside" to the little town of Blanton 10 miles away for schooling. With moral support from his mother and financial support from an "outside" uncle, Tom went to Blanton, found a place to board, and enrolled in school. Tom's decision to go outside the valley for education was not warmly received by the populace in Peace Valley.

On the way to school the first morning, Tom came across a group of local boys beating up on the town drunk. He broke up the altercation but this action was the start of a lasting hostility between Tom and the local "in group" which

Table 1

Adolescent Vocational Agriculture Books, 1925-1940

Author	Title	Publication Date
John Case	Tom of Peace Valley	1925
	Moon Valley	1932
	Peace Valley Warrior	1937
Paul Chapman	The Greenhand	1932
A. W. Nolan	Short Stories for Future Farmers	1936
Sarah Lindsay Schmidt	New Land	1933
	Ranching on Eagle Eye	1936
	The Secret of Silver Peak	1938
	Shadow over Winding Ranch	1940

was lead by "Bull" Durham, the only son of the town banker and school board president. It was only a matter of time before a fist fight was provoked by Bull. Bull received a thrashing in an honest and fair fight but told his father that Woodson and a gang of boys beat him up. Mr. Durham convened the school board and attempted to get Tom kicked out of school, but was not successful because the agriculture teacher, John Roberts had seen the fight and told what happened.

Because of his love for the outdoors, Tom had been enrolled in vocational agriculture which was a new program that year. Mr. Roberts was not only the agriculture teacher but a collegiate football star and Blanton High's football coach. He encouraged Tom to join the team. Even though Tom had never played the game he quickly caught on and was soon giving Bull Durham considerable competition on the playing field.

Tom found vocational agriculture to his liking and was soon planning a corn project and was enrolled in the state corn growing contest. Tom, with help from Mr. Roberts, rented a plot of land in Peace Valley for the project. Because of Tom's outstanding performance in a state corn judging contest, the top corn grower in the state gave Tom some seed corn. However, the plot thickened when a midnight thief stole Tom's seed corn. Tom enlisted the aid of his mountain kin (and dog) in following the trail of the thief and found where the seed corn had been hidden.

Soon Tom was preparing the ground and planting corn to the great amusement of the locals in Peace Valley. Everyone knew crops just didn't grow in Peace Valley, farming was hard work, and the time could be better spent fishing and hunting. Tom was soon studying the art of growing corn with great determination and applying what he learned in the vocational agriculture class; to the great derision of the locals in Peace Valley. However, after a while it became evident that Tom would have an exceptional corn yield and the

hill folk started taking pride in Tom's field and even started protecting the field from varmints, both two legged and four legged.

The book concluded with Woodson and Durham grudgingly working together to carry Blanton High to a major football victory over arch rival Denman High. This stirring victory united the town folk and the hill people. Tom made a profit of \$700 on his corn crop, placed second in the state corn growing contest and won a prize of \$250. The books ends with Bull Durham repenting of his treacherous ways and confessing to stealing the seed corn and trying to destroy Tom's corn field.

In the second Case novel (Moon Valley), Tom has graduated from the state agricultural college as a vocational agriculture teacher and has the hard job of convincing the adults and students in a new school district, Moon Valley, of the values of vocational agriculture. Tom is also the school principal and teaches adult farmer classes. In a suspenseful plot, the school is torched, bullets are fired, and a girl is wooed before Tom and vocational agriculture triumph. In the third novel (Peace Valley Warrior), Tom is elected to Congress and goes to Washington.

Case also wrote a novel on the 4-H (Under the 4-H Flag, 1927) and one on Scouting (Banners of Scoutcraft, 1929).

The Chapman Novel

The most celebrated vocational agriculture novel was The Greenhand written by Paul Chapman in 1932. In this novel a backwoods rowdy, Fred Dale, after disrupting a Future Farmers of America Banquet and accidentally shooting the vocational agriculture teacher during a deer hunt, is persuaded to enroll in vocational agriculture and join the FFA. Slowly he becomes involved in the FFA and public speaking. He gets the vocational agriculture students involved in a cooperative project growing tomatoes for a soup company, falls in love with the beautiful daughter of the soup company president, and wins the national FFA public speaking contest just in time to rescue the home farm on which he and his widow mother live from the clutches of the about-to-foreclose banker. His winning FFA speech is about the South and how modern agricultural practices can lead the South out of poverty. He also wins the heart of the girl.

The Greenhand was made into a 90 minute movie by the Sears Roebuck Foundation in 1939. In describing the movie, the Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife (Andersen, 1940, p. 43) describe it as "...a romance-coated plug for scientific agriculture and better farming in the South." The setting for the movie and the novel was Georgia. The actors were all amateurs and included state and federal vocational agricultural officials.

Chapman was Dean of Agriculture at the University of Georgia and wrote numerous technical books. This was his only novel.

The Schmidt Novels

Sarah Lindsay Schmidt wrote at least four books about vocational agriculture students. Even though each book is different there are similarities in all the books. The setting for each book is in the West (Colorado or Wyoming). In

each story there is typically a nary-do-well father with a motherless family composed of one or two boys (one still in school and one out) and a strong sister, and a malevolent school age adversary whose father is typically the prominent citizen in the community. In each novel there is conflict, suspicions of dirty dealings, a neighboring girl to be wooed, and a foreboding mortgage. In each novel, the application of modern agriculture practices saves the day (irrigation of alfalfa, marketing livestock cooperatively, developing a hybrid corn). There is also a strong, patriotic dose of the Future Farmers of America in each book. One student even became the Star Farmer of America (David in Shadow over Winding Ranch).

It is interesting to note the Ms. Schmidt's husband was G. A. Schmidt, the agricultural teacher educator at Colorado State. She also wrote a book in 1943 titled The Hurricane Mystery, or which this writer has no knowledge. Her memoirs, This is my Heritage, were published in 1953 by Aberlard Press in New York.

Nolan's Collection of Short Stories

One other book should be mentioned. In 1936 A. W. Nolan, agricultural teacher educator at the University of Illinois, compiled a collection of 16 short stories for Future Farmers. This book titled Short Stories for Future Farmers was published by Interstate. The stories are mixture of action packed adventures emphasizing the outdoor life.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

During the course of this research, the investigator discovered other sources of literature that were popular with vocational agriculture students. A number of the farming magazines carried fiction pieces and special columns for young people. For example, Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife often carried a column during the 1940s titled "Young America" or "Young Farmers" or "Farm Journal Boys" (yes, there was a "Farm Journal Girls" column that featured recipes and answered letters from girls). At times there were short pieces designed to appeal to teen-age boys such as how to hunt for crows, how to throw a curve ball, how to go camping, and how to take good pictures. It was common to have a mini-novel that was full of adventure carrying over from issue to issue.

One magazine that was specifally designed for the vocational agriculture student was a publication called The American Farm Youth. This publication was started in 1935 by Homer Paul Anderson of Utah and carried of variety of features designed to appeal to the rural youth. The minutes of the national FFA Board of Trustees Meeting from October 18-25, 1935 indicate that the following resolution was drafted:

Encourage the efforts of Homer Paul Anderson, editor of "The American Farm Youth Magazine" and suggesting further cooperation and support from the F.F.A.

At this meeting there was some discussion of possibly turning this publication into an official national FFA magazine but the leaders thought it would not be wise at this time.

The American Farm Youth publication was discussed again in 1936 but with an entirely different view. The minutes of the F.F.A. National Board of Trustees from April show over a page of discussion concerning the magazine. The trustees were upset over the use of the FFA emblem on the front cover, the statement that this was "The only national publication for F.F.A. chapters," the advertisement for sale of stuffed owls, and advertisements for the "Chapter Supply Company." Chapman agreed to cooperate with the board more on matters related to policy.

Chapman sold the publication to a group in Danville, Illinois (Russ Guin was a minority owner) where it continued to be published until the 1950s. Interstate printed the publication but was not involved in the actual operations of the magazine. A copy of the magazine is on display at the National FFA Center.

USES OF THE NOVELS

The avowed purpose for most of the novels was to provide worthwhile leisure time reading for rural students because "... there has been a dearth of good books, available for farm boys and girls." (Nolan, 1936, i). However, the novels were also used to promote agriculture and vocational agriculture. During the period in which most of these books were written, American was in a depression and there was a mass exodus from the farm. These novels showed the success one could achieve by applying modern farming practices and becoming involved with the Future Farmers of America. One book (New Land) showed how out-of-school youth could benefit from the part-time program of vocational agriculture. It was clear from reading the books, that in spite of the depression, mistrust of scientific agriculture by some of the elders, and adversity (generally, the town bully), vocational agriculture held the promise for a better rural life. And you could also win the heart of the girl.

The reading of these novels was strictly voluntary in most cases. Many agricultural departments had copies of these books and would loan them to the students. A series of "Suggestive Helps to Teachers of Vocational Agriculture" was started in 1935 by the agricultural education staff at North Carolina State. The first publication was a "General Reference List for Teachers of Agriculture." This publication recommended Tom of Peace Valley, Moon Valley, The Greenhand, and New Land to the vocational agriculture teachers. A 1937 update of the list included Ranching on Eagle Eye. Brunner and Koble (1954) compiled a list of recommended fiction for Future Farmers. Most of their recommendations were general outdoor action books by authors such as Zane Grey, Jack London, and Rudyard Kipling. However, they do list the Case novels.

It should be remembered that at this point in time in America, 92% of the rural residents had limited access to libraries (Streeter, 1940) but eagerly sought books. Rural electrification was yet to come in many areas and television was non-existent. After the sun went down in rural areas, you either read, listened to a battery operated radio or visited the neighbors on weekends. People were constantly searching for good reading material.

In a few instances, reading these novels was not voluntary. In some areas of Louisiana, The Greenhand had to be read in order to get the Greenhand degree and Tom of Peace Valley had to be read to get the Chapter Farmer degree (Curtis, 1984).

One additional purpose of this literature was to develop character. According to Nolan (1936, i), "They should be definitely contributive to character education, since justice and right are consistently exalted, and punitive nemesis properly dealt out. Good will, good deeds and noble personalities are exemplified..."

CONCLUSIONS

Agricultural education novels were an important component of vocational agriculture during the 1925-1940 era. They provided worthwhile leisure reading for students but also contained moral lessons and promoted modern farming practices. The underlying theme in each novel was that good triumphs over evil. It was also apparent that vocational agriculture, modern farming practices, and the Future Farmers of America were the keys to success.

The use of similar novels in agricultural education could be of value today. Samuels (1989) found that students like "problem novels" and teen protagonists. Johns and Davis (1990) indicate students can be better readers if teachers suggest books that match student interests and make a great number of books available to students. This was happening in vocational agriculture in the 1925-1940 era. Should it be happening today?

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