Extension celebrates 100 years of county agents

By Katie Pratt

LEXINGTON, Ky., (July 20, 2012) – Whether they rode up to a farm on a horse-drawn buggy or offer advice on the bed of a pick-up truck, county extension agents have been providing unbiased, researched-based information to Kentucky farmers for a century.

“Even though we are a hundred years old, the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service is seeking to find and serve people where they are and in ways they want to receive information,” said Jimmy Henning director of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. “Today, that includes the farm visit and the smartphone. In addition, programs have expanded to encompass youth, families, community development and even fine arts.”

Charles Mahan was hired as the first full-time county agent in agriculture in the fall of 1912 in Henderson County, even though Congress’ Smith-Lever Act didn’t establish the Cooperative Extension Service until 1914. His annual salary of $1,400 was split between the county and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Office of Farm Management. During his first year, he did his work by horse and buggy. After that, local leaders bought him a red motorcycle so he could visit farmers.

Six more agriculture agents were hired by spring 1913. The first home demonstration agents, now called family and consumer sciences extension agents, were hired in early 1914 on a short-term basis. They worked through the summer teaching food preservation techniques to women and girls. J.M. Feltner is listed as a district 4-H club agent for Eastern Kentucky based out of Laurel County in 1917. However, from the late 1930s until the early 1950s, those who primarily worked with counties’ young people held the title of assistant agent in agriculture or assistant agent in home economics. In the 1960s, these agents officially became county 4-H agents.

Mahan left the state for a brief period for extension jobs in Indiana and Ohio. When he returned in 1920, he became the state supervisor for Kentucky Cooperative Extension county agents. In a speech he wrote after returning to Kentucky, Mahan said one of the biggest functions of his job was to “develop sane, safe, local leaders who can be trusted to think things through, see both sides of the question, give wise council and leadership to their fellow men.” To that extent, he helped determine that extension agents’ function should be primarily education, offering unbiased, research-based information to their clients. This continues to be the philosophy of Cooperative Extension today.

For Warren Thompson, becoming a county agent was his goal from a young age. As a boy growing up in Fulton County, he watched his parents work with extension agents on various projects and he
participated in 4-H, which was led by H.C. “Corley” Brown, Fulton County agriculture agent from 1930-1933.

“I held county agents in such high esteem,” he said. “They were bright, listened and worked with everyone. Corley Brown was so full of vigor and vitality. I wanted to be just like him.”

After graduating from UK and being an assistant county agent for a short period, Thompson was hired as the Hickman County agriculture and natural resources extension agent in the spring of 1943.

“The biggest task for an agent was to try to find people who were not satisfied and wanted a better way to do things, and parents who wanted better lives for their kids,” Thompson said.

Thompson said county agents helped bridge the communication gap between the university and rural Kentuckians. As agent, he worked with producers in his county to plant hybrid corn, cross-breed cattle to improve genetics and milk production, and plant tall fescue to control soil erosion. While it would be 30 more years before researchers understood the effects the tall fescue endophyte had on cattle, Thompson worked with producers to seed legumes so cattle could graze the fescue without becoming sick.

During this time, only Clinton, the Hickman County seat, had telephone service, and it wasn’t always functional. To get the latest information from the university, Thompson attended every UK field day that he could in Princeton and Lexington. He shared this information with farmers during farm visits, through articles he wrote for the local newspaper and by word of mouth. He convinced producers to let him put on-farm demonstrations by the road so everyone could see them.

Today, communication is much improved, but UK specialists still have on-farm research trials, and the majority of agents still has weekly columns in the newspapers and makes farm visits. They also use the latest communication tools including the Internet, social media and YouTube to provide farmers with the most current information.

Few people can attest to extension agents’ quality of work better than the descendants of Charles Mahan. A century later, his grandson and great-grandson continue to be heavily involved with Cooperative Extension and agriculture in Central Kentucky.

“My grandfather helped establish the connection between Extension and Farm Bureau, and as a former state director of Kentucky Farm Bureau, I see the value of the two organizations working together,” said Jim Mahan. “By serving on the Agricultural Development Board, I know that the investment the Governor’s Office for Agricultural Policy made in agriculture communities across the state couldn’t have been done without the Extension Service.”
Jim Mahan’s son, John, and Nick Carter, Fayette County agriculture and natural resources extension agent, worked together before Carter became an agent, as he was John Mahan’s banker.

“I’ve always been a part of their operation in providing them with service and education,” Carter said. “I’ve also pointed them to specialists at UK.”

Since Carter became an extension agent, he and John Mahan have worked together on crop production issues such as lodging in corn and fungicide applications and economics related to the Mahans’ agricultural operation.

Jim Mahan has served on the Fayette County District Extension Board and continues to serve on the Fayette County Extension Council. The Mahans and Carter worked to incorporate agriculture back into the Lexington Lions Club Bluegrass Fair.

“Agriculture is Nick’s passion, and it shows through his dedication to his job,” said John Mahan. “There has been more than one occasion when Nick and I have studied an issue in a crop by the lights of a pick-up truck.”

UK College of Agriculture, through its land-grant mission, reaches across the commonwealth with teaching, research and extension to enhance the lives of Kentuckians.