

Happy Birthday, Smith-Hughes Act

By Debra J. Groom

About 100 years ago, a piece of national legislation became law and began U.S. youth on a voyage that today has spread into schools, communities, factories and onto farms across the country.

The Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act of 1917 formally established federal aid for a network of vocational agricultural education to train people “who have entered upon or who are preparing to enter upon the work on the farm.”

The bill, signed Feb. 23, 1917 by President Woodrow Wilson, would eventually lead to agriculture programs popping up in high schools across the country. It also would lead to the creation of Future Farmers of America, now called FFA.

“Our whole program here began because of Smith-Hughes,” said Steve Perry, assistant principal of the agriculture department at John Bowne High School in Flushing, Queens.

Bowne’s agriculture program boasts more than 700 students and the school, located not far from the Long Island Expressway, has the largest FFA chapter in New York state.

FARMING IN NEW YORK CITY

There probably isn’t a better example of the importance of agriculture education than the agriculture program at Bowne High School.

But just how does an agriculture program and FFA chapter end up in the middle of Queens?

“This program initially started because of the people needed to replace male farmers during World War I,” Perry said.

“During World War I, young men and women were recruited from New York City to work on farms Upstate in order to fill positions of men fighting overseas,” states the school’s website. “Many of these boys upon returning requested to learn more about agriculture.”

“By a happy coincidence, a New York City reform school with a farm was being closed in Queens and so in 1917, the agriculture program began,” the website states.

“Initially the program was known as the Newtown Aggies, an annex to Newtown High School. The farm/land laboratory has shrunk considerably since then, with Queens College and then Bowne being built on the land. Since 1964 we have been the John Bowne Aggies and growing strong,” the website states.

Today, the Bowne agriculture program is the most comprehensive in the state, Perry said. Students study plant and animal sciences in fields such as floriculture, horticulture, landscaping, landscape architecture, retail, greenhouse production and marketing, small animal and large animals

“There is a wide variety of interest from our kids,” Perry said. The program’s students run a 4-acre farm, run a farmstand in the summer, gather and sell eggs from 200 hens and operate a farm truck selling items grown on their farm.

“We’re the round peg in the square hole,” said Perry. “Agriculture education is provided here to give the students the opportunity to pursue their passion. There may not always be a chance for that in an urban setting.”

Perry said these city kids got into studying animals and plants through having parents who lived on farms, seeing other people working with animals and plants or simply coming into contact with these subjects at some time and falling in love with studying them.

“We have to let them pursue that interest,” he said. And even if the students do not go on to study animal science or plant science in college, “it is never wasted. They will always have an appreciation for that field.”

Perry said 90 percent of the Bowne ag students go on to college and 46 percent go on to ag majors at colleges such as Cornell, Penn State, University of Connecticut, Rutgers, SUNY Cobleskill, Farmingdale State College and Delaware Valley.

AG EDUCATION IMPORTANCE

Agricultural education is important because this knowledge helps feed our nation and the world, said Keith Schiebel, the ag teacher and FFA adviser at the Vernon-Verona-Sherrill High School in Oneida County.

This FFA chapter, which runs its own maple syrup business, has won the New York State Agricultural Society’s FFA Chapter of the Year award numerous times and is well known for its traveling maple syrup exhibit.

“Our forefathers had the vision to prepare the younger people so farming could produce the food for our country,” Schiebel said.

“The population today doesn’t have the connection with where the food comes from and safety of our food.” “Historically, ag has been concentrated on farming,” he said. “But today, it’s much more and agriculture is not necessarily on the farm.”

Schiebel said students studying agriculture today learn about food processing, food inspection, marketing, how to develop new food products and research into how to grow food without pests or disease.

“In maple, there is more and more of a resurgence in the product and marketing is important,” he said. “We have shown there is more variety in the use of maple, such as a sweetener.”

Smith-Hughes Act (cont)

Both Schiebel and Chuck Chafee, superintendent of the Waterville Central Schools in southern Oneida County, say ag education is becoming more and more important in today's society.

About 20 to 25 years ago, almost every school district — especially rural ones — had agriculture classes and a FFA chapter.

But as the years went on, those chapters dissolved and ag education faded into the sunset.

Chafee and his school board have worked for the past couple of years to bring agriculture back to Waterville classrooms. The first ag program and FFA chapter in the school in more than 20 years will begin in the fall of 2017.

It will be headed by Cindy Gallagher, a well-known dairy farmer in the Waterville area and co-owner with her husband Paul of Luckyvale Farm. They milk about 100 Guernsey cattle and are active in the New York Guernsey Breeders' Association.

The Waterville program grew out of the district's Farm to School Program, which expanded the use of locally grown foods in school and boosted knowledge of the importance of eating healthy foods.

"This is a rural community and even though we are diversified here, the core population is ag-related," Chafee said. "In the last budget, we included money for building a greenhouse and then discussed how to put that to use.

In March, Cindy Gallagher will begin writing the curriculum for our (ag education) program and then we'll move ahead to obtain an FFA charter."

AG EDUCATION IN 2017

Chafee said he hopes Waterville can obtain some of the money proposed for ag education and FFA chapters included in the governor's budget for 2017-18.

According to a news release from Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office, agricultural education has long been a priority in New York with programs that pre-date the Smith-Hughes Act and the oldest urban agriculture program in the U.S.

"The state was also one of the first in the country to allow girls to pursue these curriculums and continues to set an example for the rest of the nation with cutting-edge programs that influence more than 10,000 students annually," the news release states.

To continue this agricultural learning, Cuomo has proposed a

record \$1.3 million in his 2017-18 budget to support 100 new FFA chapters through start-up grants, expand the New York Agriculture in the Classroom program, which is administered by Cornell University, and to double the number of certified agricultural educators from 240 to 480.

Cuomo also has proposed a state-of-the-art test kitchen and food science lab at the New York FFA Oswegatchie Educational Center in Lewis County.

"This test kitchen will offer instruction in food safety, basic food preparation and food processing to more than 6,000 annual visitors, including both students and veterans from nearby Fort Drum," according to the news release.

"Agriculture education is so much more than dairy farming," Chafee said. "Today, here in New York we have breweries, wineries — and that's agriculture. There's marketing, food processing. There are so many jobs that are ag-related. I've heard from 20 to 25 percent of jobs are ag-related."

He said Waterville will have ag classes for all seventh-graders and will offer animal and plant science classes, food and natural resources classes along with an introduction to ag business class.

And to think, all of this began 100 years ago with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act.

"We want to offer as much as we can," said Chafee in Waterville. "There's a resurgence in studying agriculture and a renewed interest from kids. It's cool to be in ag again."

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Smith-Hughes Act, the New York Association of FFA and New York Association of Agricultural Educators hosted a dinner Feb. 6 at the Albany Hilton Hotel.

Speaking at the dinner were state FFA President Camille Ledoux of Beaver River schools, Lewis County; National FFA Eastern Region Vice President Ashley Willits of Copenhagen, Lewis County; state Agriculture and Markets Commissioner Richard Ball; and other dignitaries.

There also was a conference day for FFA members Feb. 7 in Albany.

Smith-Hughes Act

Adopted in 1917, the law provided federal aid to the states for the purpose of promoting pre-collegiate vocational education in agricultural and industrial trades and in home economics. The law helped to expand vocational courses and enrollment.

Its adoption led, years later, to the creation of FFA. The National FFA Organization was chartered in 1928.