

Cranking up and flapping off

by Ruth Buxton Sayre

The way you got things done in the early day was to find a woman who'd be a leader. . . . I was a township chairman in Virginia Township, Warren County, and they told me I had to get nine school district cooperators. So—I always tried to do what I was told to do—and I said to my husband one morning, "Well, I'm going out today and get these, these nine leaders." And I said, "You won't mind eating cold dinner, will you?"

And he said, "No."

But he didn't know how many cold dinners he was going to eat before this was over.

So I cleaned up the children—I had two babies then, one a little older than the other, but only 18 months apart—and got out in my Ford. Now those Fords in those days were not like these comfortable cars today—all glassed in with heaters and windshield wipers and so on, and starters!—because I had curtains on the car and you never could put 'em down right, they were always flapping, you know. And so then you had to crank the blame thing, too.

So I put the babies in the car and cranked up and off I went to a neighbor's house, just sure I could get a leader. There wasn't any question about it. So I went in and talked to her about it, and about the Farm Bureau and what the women were going to do.

"Oh," she said, "Mrs. Sayre, I'm—I'm just too busy. I—I couldn't do that," she said. "Well," she said, "you know, I raise an awful lot of chickens and I make a

big garden and I've got my housecleaning to do."

And she went on and on and on, until I was just all worn out thinking about all she had to do, and so I said, "Well, I'm sure I can get somebody else."

So I left, put the babies in the car, and cranked up and went on to another neighbor's. And I got over there, and so I finally got to the place where I said, "Well, won't you be one of our leaders?"

And she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre," she said, "I don't feel very well, you know, I'm not very well. I have a lot of trouble with my back and I go to the doctor's every week and I'm sure you can get someone that's better off than I am."

And by that time I was feeling sick, too. And so I said, "Well, I'm sure I can get somebody else."

So I put the babies back in the car, cranked up the car and flapped off to another neighbor's. And when I got over there . . . I was getting a little reluctant of saying anything about "Will you be a leader?" because it wasn't going to be as easy as I thought it was.

And so I finally had to come to the place where I said, "Will you be a leader?"

And she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre, I—I don't think I could do it." She said, "I know there's somebody that could do it better than I can." She said, "You know, I never had—I never went to high school and there's some people in this community who had home economics and could do a much better job than I can."

And so I started feeling sorry for her and thinking, Well, maybe there would be somebody else. So I said, "Well, no matter. I'll find somebody else."

So I put the babies back in the car, cranked up and flapped off again—and finally came to this neighbor that I thought would surely do it.

And so I get to the place where I say, "Won't you be a leader?" and she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre, I'd just love to—but I can't."

And I said, "Why can't you?"

She said, "You know John?"

I did know John. I knew that John had to have his hot biscuits at noon, and she had to be there to help with the chores and all those things, so that was impossible.

Well, the day was pretty well along by that time. The children were crying, they'd gotten dirty playing out in the yard, Raymond had been home eating his cold dinner, and so I finally gave up.

But I did get leaders after that. But it was not an easy job, because farm women were not used to doing that sort of thing in those days. They had to be, well, as you say, motivated. They had to feel that they could make a contribution. And this whole idea of developing leadership, of getting women to come out of their shells and take a part in community life, was one of the greatest contributions I think the Farm Bureau in Iowa has made to this day. ❖

(Excerpt of an interview of Ruth Buxton Sayre by Booth Wallentine, taped on October 25, 1968. Ruth Buxton Sayre Collection, SHSI-Iowa City.)