Fifty Years of Growth—The American Society of Agronomy

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I WANT to review briefly events that led to the organization of the American Society of Agronomy and mention a few of the developments and accomplishments during the first 50 years of the Society’s existence.

There was in the U. S. Department of Agriculture an Agronomic Seminar which was meeting regularly in 1907 in Washington. At one of those meetings at the Cosmos Club a discussion took place regarding the desirability and possibility of organizing a national society composed of men working in agronomy. Professor M. F. Miller states that as a result of that discussion a committee of five was appointed to explore the question of an organization of agronomists and see what could be done. The members of that committee all had illustrious careers and were well-known to every early agronomist. They were M. A. Carleton, W. J. Spillman, C. V. Piper, E. C. Chilcott, and A. D. Shamel.

Those men decided to send a letter to all the men in the country who were working in agronomy. Parts of that historic letter on the Bureau of Plant Industry letterhead and dated November 30, 1907, bear repeating here. It began with, “At the last meeting of the Agronomic Seminar of this Department the undersigned were appointed a committee to propose the formation of an American agronomic society. This committee is authorized to invite other men to serve with them on a final committee which shall call a meeting of all persons interested in agronomy at Chicago during the time of meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science this coming holiday season, for the purpose of organizing such a society. You are hereby invited to be a member of that final committee.” Among the reasons given for such a society the letter states “that although the study of field crops and their relation to soil and climate is so important and has come to be considered in recent years of more and more importance, there is no society in this country at present giving attention to this subject, except the Corn Association recently organized, which is limited in its field of action to one of the many important field crops.”

Professor Miller reported that of the 58 men who replied to this letter, nearly all the technical agronomists approved the idea of calling such a meeting. Some who were associated with administrative aspects of agronomy were skeptical.

The organizational meeting was called. On December 31, 1907, 43 men gathered in the Botany building of the University of Chicago. Dr. Carleton was chosen temporary chairman and Dr. T. L. Lyon temporary secretary. There was an informal discussion on the desirability of forming an agronomic society, its nature, functions, objectives, and character of its meetings. A committee was appointed, Carleton, chairman, H. P. Armsby, C. G. Hopkins, C. V. Piper and T. L. Lyon, to be present at the meeting and to be elected permanent officers and to present their recommendations at the next meeting.

This committee recommended the organization of the American Society of Agronomy” and stated its object to be “The increase and dissemination of knowledge of soils and crops and the conditions affecting them. The following officers were recommended. Charter members were elected by the first meeting as those joining the Society and paying dues by January 1, 1908. Active members were defined as persons engaged in teaching agronomy, or in scientific investigation of some branch of agronomy. Provision was made for the formation of local sections of the Society of 10 or more members with the approval of the Executive Committee. A constitution with by-laws containing those and other provisions was presented and was adopted at the first meeting.

So the American Society of Agronomy was born. What was done in Chicago that day was the fulfillment of the desires of many men, and the culmination of concentrated thought and careful planning. It is an excellent example of the fact that great things begin in the hearts of men.

Now may I direct your attention to the development of this young organization through a thrilling and difficult half century. Only a few points will be presented that afternoon. Now may I direct your attention to the development of this young organization through a thrilling and difficult half century. Only a few points will be presented that afternoon.

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