

## AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL LAW ASSOCIATION PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS\*

*William C. Bridgforth*

It is my privilege to welcome all of you to the 26th Annual Educational Conference of the AALA. Most of you have attended AALA events before, some of you even attending all twenty-six conferences. As everyone who has previously attended knows, this is a wonderful opportunity to meet other professionals in the agricultural law area. One of the major visions of the AALA is,

[t]hat members of the legal profession and other professions serving agriculture and rural communities in every capacity are well-informed, particularly sensitive of the needs of agriculture and rural communities, well educated, skilled, and knowledgeable, and that every member of the various professions have access to the best, most advanced and most useful information and support services related to legal and other matters related to agriculture and rural communities.<sup>1</sup>

We are over 600 members strong. The information and material presented at the annual symposium that is otherwise available through membership in the AALA is essential for all of us who represent those involved in agriculture, whether it be farmers, agri-lenders, farm equipment dealers, manufacturers and sellers of seed and fertilizer and the like. This year's conference will be exciting and informative, and you will benefit greatly by attending.

Thomas Jefferson warned “[w]ere we directed from Washington when to sow, and when to reap, we should soon want bread.”<sup>2</sup> In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln founded the U.S. Department of Agriculture, calling it the “people’s department.”<sup>3</sup> In President Lincoln’s day, fifty-eight percent of the American

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\* This article is based on the Presidential Address delivered to the American Agricultural Law Association (AALA) Annual Educational Conference, held on October 7-8, 2005, in Kansas City, Missouri.

1. AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL LAW ASSOCIATION (AALA), AALA VISION STATEMENT, available at [http://www.aglaw-assn.org/pagefile/Vision\\_Mission/aala\\_vision.htm](http://www.aglaw-assn.org/pagefile/Vision_Mission/aala_vision.htm).

2. THOMAS JEFFERSON, AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1821), available at <http://www.famous-quote.net/thomas-jefferson-quotes.shtml>.

3. USDA, ABOUT USDA, WELCOME FROM THE SECRETARY, available at [http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/\\_s.7\\_0\\_A/7\\_0\\_1OB?navtype=MA&navid=ABOUT\\_USDA](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/_s.7_0_A/7_0_1OB?navtype=MA&navid=ABOUT_USDA) (last modified Feb. 2, 2005).

people were farmers, nearly all of whom lived on the farm.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, most of our communities were rural and farming was the anchor.

Farming no longer anchors most rural economies as it did in Lincoln's time. Today, a small percentage of the American population is farming and an even smaller percentage live on the farms in rural communities.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that ninety percent of all rural counties are now dominated by varying mixes of manufacturing, services, and other non-farming activities.<sup>6</sup> Some argue that commodity based farm policies no longer address the complexity of rural economics and populations.

If the 2002 Farm Bill is allowed to run its course, Congress will face many challenges drafting of the 2007 Farm Bill which will go into effect for the 2008 crop year. With President Bush pressing for payment limitation changes that can only be described as radical, change will be a part of the next Farm Bill whenever it is passed and becomes law. Even with the current Congress, Senator Grassley will begin his annual attempts to make into law the radical changes in payment limitation provisions. I am advised that Senator Grassley, having no luck in changing current law in the agricultural appropriations bill is, as we speak, working hard to attach amendments to the Finance Committee legislation. This legislation will make it more difficult for farmers to qualify for benefits and thus harder to stay in the business providing quality, affordable food and fiber to the American people.

As a result of the recent decision of the WTO, and the terrible deficit that our country faces, American agriculture has come to a fork in the road. As Yogi Berra observed, "[w]hen you get to a fork in the road, take it."<sup>7</sup> Take it we will.

We need to pay close attention to the proposals that are put forth, provide considered and thoughtful critique, and stay in close contact with the members of the Senate and House Agricultural Committees. If we do not take the time to watch, the results will not be in the best interests of the American farmer or in turn the American people. We need to have the facts and figures when we speak, and let our voices be heard. As Casey Stengel observed, "I'd always heard it couldn't be done, but sometimes it don't always work."<sup>8</sup> We will hear that there

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4. *Id.*

5. US CENSUS BUREAU, AMERICAN HOUSING SURVEY FOR THE UNITED STATES: 2003 15, available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/H150-03.pdf> (stating that only 13% of the occupants surveyed live in rural areas).

6. USDA ANN. PERFORMANCE REP. 59 (2005), available at <http://www.usda.gov/ocfo/usdarpt/pdf/par05.pdf>.

7. YOGI BERRA, THE YOGI BOOK (Workman Publishing Co., 1998).

8. ThinkExist.com, Casey Stengel Quotes, at [http://www.thinkexist.com/English/Author/x/Author\\_4786\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkexist.com/English/Author/x/Author_4786_1.htm).

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*ALA Presidential Address*

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is nothing that those representing agriculture can do to alter the tide, but we need to follow Casey's sage advice and be mindful all along the way.

I, like you, believe strongly in the importance of American agriculture. History has shown that our ability to feed and clothe our people has been the mightiest weapon in this nation's arsenal in times of war. Why do you think that our former enemies are among the highest subsidized nations on earth? We must do two things: 1) expand trade; and 2) ensure that any changes in farm legislation must be accompanied by a more level playing field with other countries. Many of these thoughts have already been discussed, and others will be covered in the remainder of the program. I would like to close with an observation of William Jennings Bryan. When asked about the importance of agriculture to America, he replied, "Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country."<sup>9</sup> Thank you for the privilege of serving as your president.

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9. William Jennings Bryan, Cross of Gold (July 9, 1896), available at <http://www.quotedb.com/speeches/cross-of-gold>.