

Mississippi Farm Research is Different

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Abstract

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Mississippi Farm Research is Different

GLENN C. RUTLEDGE

MISSISSIPPI FARM RESEARCH may well be the last of the agricultural research periodicals using newsprint. Perhaps that is why the editor of *ACE* asked me to write this bit about it. In complying with his request, I am aware that some editor may claim "my magazine is bigger, better, and certainly prettier than yours." And he may wave a blue ribbon as supporting evidence.

We approach the problem of reporting with the assumption that most of our research is designed to produce knowledge needed now by Mississippi agriculture. Results of this type of research may be converted into dollars in the state's economy within a season if given prompt, clear, and wide distribution.

As long as readers buy newspapers as a source of authentic and timely information, we do not believe they expect all free public information (tax paid) to be in four colors on enamel stock. We have no quarrel with the prestige approach; in fact, we use it on special publications. But for regular distribution of general information to large audiences we find the newsprint method works for us and fits our budget.

Mississippi Farm Research is unique in respects other than paper. Among the nation's land grant college research periodicals, it ranks with the highest in circulation and with the lowest in per unit cost. It delivers its agricultural research reports monthly, while most of its contemporary publications appear quarterly.

Whether all these characteristics — frequent publication, low cost, and high circulation — are advantages can be debated. Certainly they are not unmixed blessings. But it is obvious that the Mississippi Experiment Station, in this periodical, has an open channel of communication to the people of our state — wider and flowing faster than most of the others.

Specifically, *Mississippi Farm Research*, a 12- x 18-inch tabloid, is published by the Experiment Station. It goes directly to 31,250 Mississippians, by name and individual address. In addition, county agents and vo-ag teachers receive 10 copies each, sent out a few days early to protect these University related groups with advance information. Branch experiment stations get 25 copies, except the large Delta Station, which receives about 40 copies. Local staff members get them through a distribution box and we have some standing orders for classroom copies in the College of Agriculture. All this together brings the total monthly distribution in the state to about 36,000 copies, or an average of 440 copies per county.

From a circulation standpoint, each of our four neighboring states — Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas — are about like another county for us. These four states get nearly half of all the papers that leave Mississippi. This is to be expected. Memphis is half full of folks with roots in Mississippi. The Delta areas of Arkansas and Louisiana get cotton information from our Delta Station, just as we get rice information from them. And, of course, some border people cross state lines going from their farms to the post office.

The remainder of the nation receives 1,160 papers. These go to a few farmers but mostly to libraries, commercial interests, professors, and perhaps a few graduate students. Commercial people seem in the majority in this group. Why else would so many go to Chicago?

Foreign countries get 370 copies — mostly libraries, scholars, government workers, and some commercial people. Although small, the foreign mailing list includes 65 nations. Canada with 31 copies gets the most, followed by Brazil 30, India 29, England 21, Australia 20, Argentina 16, Mexico 16, Germany 12, and on down to single copies in some of the countries.

We have one “paid” subscriber. A reader in Western Australia complained “surface mail” was too slow; he wanted his copy “posted air mail.” His check for \$7.80 comes in regularly to cover each year’s postage.

All told, we print 41,000 copies on top grade newsprint and 1,500 on book paper (for libraries) — at a cost of about 2 cents each. Additional thousands, when the press is running, cost a cent apiece. We can add a name to the mailing list for 12 cents per year.

We extend this economy a step further. Most of the proofs set for *Farm Research* are used again in reprints which become our bulletins and information sheets. But long before these are ready for distribution, the information they contain has been placed in thousands of homes and offices through *Farm Research*. The reprints are for the record, for libraries, or for the next year.

In the Experiment Station, agricultural research is our business. It is not primarily philosophy, nor extension, nor even education — although it is related to all of this. The Director's postage-free mailing permit under which *Farm Research* moves is restricted to distribution of research results, and that is all we put in *Mississippi Farm Research*. Staff members submit annual schedules through departmental channels, listing research reports they expect to produce. The seasonal value of information is stressed so that a farmer may know, for instance, how a variety performed in a given year before planting time the next year.

We keep in mind the people on our mailing list and try to present the information in a manner most useful to the largest number of them. "Try" is probably about as close as we come to this objective, because the audience ranges from agriculture students in Mississippi high schools to research scientists thousands of miles away.

Readers who write us expressing thanks for the paper, often include such comments as "useful information," "practical," "timely," "best of its type," and sometimes even "superior." This differs considerably from what an occasional dealer says about the paper and its editor when we show his product finishing last in a test.

In summary, speed and economy are not hallmarks of research itself, nor should they be. But, when useful findings are established, a built-in urgency presses the good reporter to move the information out. The time and cost of moving author's manuscript to reader's mailbox can be materially reduced by use of a newspaper, which requires neither stapling nor trimming after it rolls off a high speed press. And that's the story of *Mississippi Farm Research*.