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Forensics at the Grass Roots...

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In cooperation with the adult education section of the Extension Service, Iowa State Debaters have for the past several years carried on an interesting series of debates and discussions called the Community Visits. These visits are made throughout the state, to Farm Bureau township halls, adult education classes, church clubs, high school assemblies, and service club dinners. Since the second year of the program we find that we have a core of steady customers —communities to which we are invited year after year, but each winter we add to our list and take on new visits. Trips vary in length from over one hundred miles to four or five miles. They come at night or noon as a rule. Last winter we limited the number of sessions to thirty, but even this limitation left us with one hundred and twenty participations from a Debaters personnel of about eighty.

Procedure for setting up this program is well established. In the fall the off-campus committee of Iowa State Debaters selects five or six current issues of state, national, or international interest and puts them in the form of discussion topics. These are then talked over with the Agriculture Extension Sociologists. What this really amounts to is clearing the subjects with Dr. William H. Stacy, Delta Sigma Rho '17, who is one of the mainstays of the Community Visits program. From the preceding process comes the final list of subjects, and the club immediately sets out to study these. This year's list of subjects, which is fairly representative, is as follows:

1. What should be done about national farm price supports?
2. What constitutes a good home?
3. Should educational opportunities be equalized through Federal grants?
4. What is the present status of Russian-American relations?
5. Should the Taft-Hartley Law be repealed?
6. How is E. R. P. working out?
7. What should be our attitude toward the Chinese conflict?

Frequently a subject is a follow-up on some topic of the preceding year. An example of this is our current E. R. P. subject, which has been called for in communities where speakers discussed the pro and con of the Marshall Plan a year ago. As an endorsement of the timeliness of the National Debate subject concerning Federal Aid to Education, we find that it is usually in demand in the various communities even though we make no deliberate attempt to use this activity as a training ground for intercollegiate debate.

A letter is prepared for state-wide distribution. This letter goes to the county extension directors of the state, to certain superintendents of schools, and to program directors of service clubs. The limiting factor on our mailing list is accessibility of the community. Early in the series we were forced to decline invitations to some places because of the time it would have taken to reach them. We avoid overnight trips.

The student reaction to these trips has been very interesting. They are probably our most popular form of forensic activity at Iowa State. As a matter of fact, in an ordinary season twelve or thirteen of our speakers limit their participation almost entirely to community visits. Reasons for student enthusiasm go well beyond the fact that visitors are frequently treated to wonderful country dinners. Debaters like the idea that there is much vigorous participation from the floor. There is none of the feeling of taking part in a little performance or entertainment which sometimes characterizes the appearance of "college boys" on an adult program. The setting for these meetings engenders the feeling of getting down to cases. The fact that speakers could reach out and put a hand on members of the audience at any of these meetings seems to encourage free interchange of comment. Whenever a call goes out for volunteers for one of these trips, we are forced to disappoint several speakers, but in the course of the winter all of these are taken care of.

It has been of some interest to us to discover what methods of presentation are most popular with our audiences. Originally the meetings were organized on a panel discussion basis. Our speakers, and occasionally one or two speakers from the community, formed a panel to discuss a subject for twenty minutes to a half-hour, after which participation from the audience was invited. As time went on we turned to the methods of debate. People wanted cases presented for and against the various proposals. In response to this desire for "pro" and "con" presentation, most of our meetings begin with a series of five to eight-minute speeches—two affirmative and two negative. After this the presiding officer invites audience participation. What happens after that is unpredictable but almost always interesting. Heated discussions are the rule, with citizens of the community taking sides and vigorous give and take continued until late at night. Often a vote is taken, and occasionally the minority members for the evening are not satisfied with one vote but demand another ballot. Not at all infrequently certain members of the community have been warned in advance and come with overwhelming proof in defense of their chosen side. Such speakers have been known to make things very uncomfortable for seasoned veterans of intercollegiate advocacy.

Frequently the objection has been advanced that the kind of activity of which we have been talking encourages haphazard preparation and mediocre presentation. With some topics this criticism might be justified, but debaters have discovered that if they are to discuss the topic of Farm Price Supports before a group of Iowa farmers, it would be just short of suicidal to prepare carelessly and to present the argument

ineffectively. If ever there was a tendency on the part of our speakers to take a casual attitude toward community visits, it has been beaten out of them by bitter experience. Each new year's participants are reminded of an occasion fairly early in the history of community visits when a couple of our "big city slickers", casually presenting the subject of Free Trade, found themselves surrounded by an entire audience of articulate farmers who were completely loaded on the subject. If this doesn't produce the right results, we tell them of a panel which appeared in another Farm Bureau meeting to present the case for and against the Marshall Plan, only to discover that three members of the audience had recently returned from an extended tour of inspection of Europe. As a matter of fact, most speakers would be more willing to take on intercollegiate competition under-prepared than to take a trip to the township hall at Rustic Center, Iowa, in the same condition.

By and large, Iowa State Debaters' attempt to carry forensics to the grass roots has been an instructive and beneficial experience, and we should like to hear more about the methods and experiences of other chapters along similar lines.

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