

The University of Arizona, College of Agriculture and  
the Arizona Historical Society Oral History Programs

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Department of Agricultural Communications

Kingdon: John, what did you do before you came to the University of Arizona?

Burnham: I was in Fargo, North Dakota, where I was with the North Dakota State University  
Agricultural College as Experiment Station Editor.

Kingdon: When did you come to Arizona?

Burnham: The first of July, 1956.

Kingdon: What were you hired to do?

Burnham: Also as an Experiment Station Editor, hired by Dean Harold Myers.

Kingdon: You've been in Arizona ever since?

Burnham: For nearly 40 years.

Kingdon: Who was at Ag Communications when you came here?

Burnham: The only one who was here as an editor then was Joe McClelland, the Extension Editor,  
and he had a Mrs. Mitchell (I think her name was) as his assistant, so at the start there  
were only three of us in the office.

Kingdon: What kind of things did you do in those days?

Burnham: A little bit of everything and an awful lot - research bulletins, popular bulletins, some  
photography, getting out the little magazine, Progressive Agriculture, writing the Dean's  
editorial for that publication. After a short time I became aware of the ethnic "color" of this

University in this area, and I felt there was one group we had not served and that was the people who actually did the hard, sweaty work of agriculture. Those, of course, were the Mexican Americans. I had the idea of getting out a weekly Spanish-language radio program, a short program, in which we would have Mexican music interspersed with agricultural and homemaking items that would be helpful, especially to the Mexican family and the Mexican farm worker.

Kingdon: Did you actually do the tapes?

Burnham: No, I had a Mexican-American student do the voicing. All I did was prepare the material, and we sent out that program on tapes to the Spanish language stations in Yuma, Phoenix, Tucson, Nogales and Agua Prieta. They were very well received.

Kingdon: How soon did your department grow?

Burnham: I remember that Dean Myers gradually added people. Well, I had a student helper, Harold Wylie. Joe McClelland, who, by the way, was an excellent Agricultural editor - one of the best who was ever in the business, had his helper, Mrs. Mitchell. I acquired a student helper, part time, and I think we also had one secretary. That was the total for the department.

Kingdon: That's very few people to do all the kinds of jobs you had to do. How soon did you start going out in the state?

Burnham: As soon as they would let me. Ralph Hawkins was the Experiment Station Director. He was very tight with the money and very slow to authorize any trips out into the state, so we had to more or less manufacture reasons to get out into the state. Actually, getting the feel

of the state, the different areas of the state - the north, south, west and the east - to learn about the state - that was most helpful in doing the job. We had to have a feeling for the entire state in order to be completely effective. So, although it was not recommended, I got out into the state as much as possible.

Kingdon: Where did you go? What kind of people did you meet out in the state?

Burnham: Well, I went to the Branch Experiment Stations, of course, up in the Valley in Maricopa County, and in Yuma and Safford. I learned a little bit about the soil and weather in the areas. For instance, our Safford Station was mostly a salinity test station because both the river water and the well water there were very salty, and we would try out different crops there to see their ability to withstand the stress of salinity.

In Yuma you had an entirely different climate, extremely warm, more humid - a completely different climate than any other part of the state.

Maricopa County, of course, was the agricultural county in the state. The great variety from small grains, alfalfa, livestock, to citrus - citrus itself was a completely different thing than I'd ever seen before. We had no citrus in North Dakota.

Kingdon: Who were some of the people that come to mind when you think of when you were first here?

Burnham: Well, the most colorful one was, of course, old Pickrell who was the Director of the Extension Service. He really ramrodded that outfit and ran it with a firm hand and was very effective. He chose his people carefully and kept track of them carefully. Very recently I have heard people tell how they were hired by "Old Pick", and how he would first

telephone all over the country to find their antecedents - to find out if they were either Jewish or Mexican or Catholic, some of the things he could not stand.

Kingdon: The Dean then was?

Burnham: The Dean was Harold Myers. There were some great people there, Dr. Presley in short-staple cotton and Professor Bryan in long-staple cotton. Cotton, of course, was completely new to somebody who had grown up in the midwest. There were colorful people throughout the whole college. T h e

interesting thing to me - and we'll find this in all of the great universities, I suppose -- is a man whom they say is a "great scientist but he just can't write". To me, the man who has the knowledge and cannot convey it somehow to another is like saying, "He's a great cowboy but he's afraid of horses." There were two or three like that.

Kingdon: Did you work with them?

Burnham: I tried to, occasionally successfully, often not successfully.

Kingdon: What do you feel were the important things that you did in those first years that really helped agriculture in the state?

Burnham: I can't think of any particular thing. I had a great liking for my Spanish-American tapes - the Mexican tapes - because I felt that we were reaching a public which was not reached by any other medium. We had some of those Spanish-language radio stations speak so highly of those tapes, and that comforted me very much.

Dean Myers, of course, had no feeling for that. He disdained it. I think I was being charged \$20 a tape by the student to make the translations, put in the music, put the thing

together and have these tapes prepared for distribution. And after a few months Dean Myers, who had no feeling excepting for the Anglo big ranchers who supported the College, asked me either to pay for it myself or to drop it. So I paid that \$20 a week for those tapes myself for several weeks until I, myself, ran out of funds to do it.

I still felt that we had an obligation to all of the people of this state - any public is divided into many little publics - and if you are not serving all of them, you're not doing your job. I remember old Dean Walster up in North Dakota felt that, until a Land-Grant College did something beneficial for every acre and every human in the state, the job was not completely done.

Kingdon: This philosophy has been a ruling philosophy for you - I've known you, John. When did you come closest to doing this?

Burnham: First, I have to tell you about one little incident which is not germane -- but maybe it is. In North Dakota I was getting out a swatch of news stories every week, five to eight news stories - some of them obligatory. If somebody got an honor, we had to write a story about it even though that had no news value. There were others that were obligatory that had no great news value.

I think the classic thing, coming from 25 years of newspaper work before coming to a Land-Grant University, was the fact that in the summer in North Dakota, I would go back to the Fargo Forum newspaper, where I had been employed before, and I remember going back one June - the first thing they threw at me was my big fat envelope full of, I think, eight stories. Making that transition from the Agricultural Editor at a college to a

newspaper reporter on a newspaper, I threw away all but one of them. I cut it from about eight paragraphs down to three, which shows how your viewpoint has to adjust to the job.

Kingdon: Were you responsible for news releases here or dealing with media here in Arizona?

Burnham: Here, also. I cultivated a very close relationship with the newspapers of the state. I think that personal relationship, knowing - at least on the daily newspapers - who was handling the story that I was sending out was very important - to know them on a first-name basis. Nothing is quite equal to that personal relationship.

Kingdon: What about the faculty and staff of the College? Who do you remember knowing on a first-name basis then before things started spreading out quite as much as they are now?

Burnham: I do remember one thing that at that time the whole College was in one building. Home Economics was up on the third floor. And that was all the College amounted to -- just that one building. It was after I came here that they built the Home Economics Building and then subsequently, the Animal Science Building. The College itself has grown quite a bit.

We had very good people out at the Branch Experiment Stations and also in the Extension Offices out through the state. There's one thing about Extension that very few people realize and that is that it is one of the very few federal programs that was foisted upon its users and not requested by the users.

I still remember back in Wisconsin in the 1920's when the County Board of Supervisors would study for a long time before putting up their share of the money to hire a County Agent. He wasn't quite accepted at first. When they got oil, for instance, he got

what used to be the coal bin as his office, otherwise he got a broom closet - he was shoved off into a corner and not quite accepted. I remember back in the 1920's many farmers, probably with an eighth-grade education, would tell us, "Well, I've farmed for 20 years and I ain't gonna learn nothing from a college boy," so Extension was forced upon the user by the Department of Agriculture in Washington. The County Agent, over those first few decades, did a magnificent job in making himself and his job accepted and needed and appreciated by the people in agriculture and, of course, also in home economics.

Kingdon: Let's go back to Ag Communications. I know people were added. Who were some of these people that joined you as colleagues that you remember?

Burnham: When my helper, Harold Wylie, left to go on to graduate school, the Dean hired George Alstead and put George in charge of us, then later on, of course, we got Gordon Graham, Bob Fowler and others. The Department grew and grew.

Kingdon: What changed about the jobs you did?

Burnham: I think we started doing television. I know that I was doing television in agriculture here before KUAT was established. Harold Wylie and I would go with George Brechan<sup>1</sup> who was then in charge of the radio bureau at the University before there was TV. We would go up to Phoenix on a Saturday and we had an hour on Saturday afternoon on KGBK, the ABC station in Phoenix. That was an additional job which I took on - did poorly

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<sup>1</sup>Editor's Note: Frank Bereca was the first General Manager of KUAT TV, and no one at KUAT's station had any recollection of a George Brechan, though the editor was uncertain of the correct spelling of his surname.

because I just didn't have the time for it.

I was doing popular bulletins, research bulletins, research publications, photography, the little magazine, the Spanish language program. Then the Dean was eager to have us get into television, so I would select somebody with a topic which seemed usable and would make up a list of maybe a half-a-dozen questions, rehearse with him for maybe five or ten minutes during the week. Then we would go to Phoenix, drive up there on a Saturday afternoon, and I would try to space those questions out so we could cover a whole half hour, or fill in.

Of course, every once in a while - I remember old Wally Fuller in Soils got a cold and couldn't talk. I asked him one question and he said, "Yes", I asked him another question and he said, "Nope", I asked him the third question and he said, "I don't know", and in three minutes I'd gone through my six questions so I had to fill, by myself, for the next 50 minutes with one break for a commercial in between.

Kingdon: In those days you just sat on two chairs in front of the camera and . . .

Burnham: That's what it was. I tried to make up some visuals of some sort or other but they were pretty rudimentary, whatever they were. Luckily there was a very good ball game on each of the other two stations and we could make some very bad mistakes without word getting back to the Dean's Office.

Kingdon: Did you eventually do television in Tucson?

Burnham: Not with Ag Communications. I did later with the elderly, we did a whole series for Senior Citizens.

Kingdon: All right. When did your duties change from Agriculture to Senior Citizens? How did that happen?

Burnham: When I became 70 - that was 1974 - I had no desire to quit, but 70 is the obligatory age at which one quits. I went to Swede Johnson, who was Vice President at that time, and my Dean who was Dean Stairs - Gerry Stairs - and sold them on the idea that the senior citizen was a new public coming to Arizona.

We were getting an in-migration of older people from colder climates. If a Land-grant University was to serve all the people, it should also serve senior citizens who had their own special needs, desires and problems. So I stayed on for the next ten years as a sort of an Extension Specialist in Aging - I suppose you could call it that. That included meeting with senior groups throughout the state, talking to groups from Holbrook to Yuma, from Kingman to Douglas, and also writing a weekly newsletter for the elderly which went to the elderly organizations, the area agencies on aging, and also to the media throughout the state. Incidentally it was copied and used in at least three other states.

Kingdon: I remember that column very well. What kind of topics did you use in it?

Burnham: The trauma of retirement and, from my own experience, retirement was as traumatic as the death of your mother. Because the keystone of all your life is the job - where you live, where you work, what you do, who you work with - everything else is based on the keystone of the job. When you take away that keystone, the whole thing collapses as a terribly traumatic experience. That was one topic. There were others, of course. Several on different phases of health and on activities for the elderly, social, health, various activities

. . .

Kingdon: Let's go back a little bit into your years covering Agriculture. How often did you get out in the state?

Burnham: As often as possible, but that was not very frequent. It was depressing that I could learn things from our own people out in the state - the Extension Agents and the Experiment Station people - that I would not learn staying on campus. As a learning tool, the most important thing of all was to talk to the people out in the state and to see the state - it's tremendously varied state. You can get a sunstroke in Yuma and you're look at a snow-capped mountain in Flagstaff. It's a wonderful state.

Kingdon: How do you think the philosophy of the College has changed, if it has changed, since you've come. You've seen it since 1956 - that's pretty close to 40 years. If you look at the overall picture, what kind of changes - good or bad?

Burnham: I feel very bad because I feel that the last step of research, getting research in a form and to the people who can use it, is being neglected. I think there's no value to research until you get it into the hands of people who can use it - in a form they can use. I feel now that perhaps, because of fiscal limitations, the emphasis is on getting grants and working on grant projects within the college and the last step, getting the information to the people, has been neglected.

I think there is one thing which is very bad and that is - I am told this and I believe it to be true - there are many cases within our University, (and it is not limited only to this University) where a large corporation will give a grant to a research worker in the

university. The research worker will do the work he is asked to do. He will not give that information to the general public, which is the responsibility of the University, but solely to the corporation which furnished him that grant. He hopes they will give him another and larger grant.

He may make a brief summary to fulfill the legal obligation of giving that information to the public, but in too many cases, our research workers are workers only for corporations or large organizations and the information which they produce does not go as required by the Land-Grant Act to the full public. I think we're short-changing the public today in that matter.

Kingdon: Following along that question - the changes you've seen in Ag Communications in the coverage - indeed how has Ag Communications changed from the days when there were two of you, and that was it?

Burnham: Well, it grew until there were a dozen of us all doing very useful work, but I understand now that there's not even a Department of Agricultural Communications any more. There are two or three, a small nucleus, housed in another Department.

The College or the University, one or both, have discounted the value of Agricultural Communications and I think that's an awful thing. It's like learning about food and preparing a meal and then not serving it to the people who want to eat it. We're not serving the people who can use this information with information which we are expected by law to serve to them. The farmer, the rancher, the home-maker, the man who has an orange grove or is growing cantaloupe or lettuce out in the Yuma Valley - I think we're

neglecting them.

Kingdon: When you look back over those years, who stands tall or short?

Burnham: The one who stands tallest, of course, was Richard A. Harvill who was President of the University. I felt he was the best president the University has had (in my time, of course). Harvill got out to our Branch Experiment Stations, he got out to our Extension Offices - if any member of the faculty walked across the campus and Harvill was around, he called him by name, he knew us all by name. I have known of his going to our Yuma Experiment Station and turning to one of the secretaries and asking about her younger sister at the university and how she's doing and what college, etc.

He knew the people, he knew the antecedents of all the people, all of the ranchers throughout the state, as well as on campus. I don't think that situation has continued since Harvill left. Unless you have a feeling for people, you aren't doing the job.

One thing that we've failed to realize as we should is how important our people out in the state are to their communities. I think especially of Frank Pritchard over at Yuma, Bill Fitzgibbon up at the Valley, and Fred Turner over at Safford. In each case they and their families were part of the community. We, back here on the campus, cannot easily realize how important farm people in the various counties and the various Branch Experiment Stations are, in their own communities. We are extending the University to those communities.

One thing that Dean Myers especially wanted was a course in Agricultural Journalism, and for a year or so I had a small group of students who presumably were

going to graduate and be County Extension Agents. I think I had about a dozen of them who sat around the table with me, and we never did establish a course in Agricultural Journalism, but I finally convinced the Dean that what was best was to have a joint major in Agriculture and Journalism. But that first year with those dozen students, most of them farm boys and most of them planning to go into County Agent work, was very enjoyable. Although it was one more job, and I was already doing more than a full job.

I remember one thing that I tried to teach them was when you get on your job, don't go directly to your office. Get out first into the town and county and meet the people you are going to serve - meet the farm machinery man, meet the banker, meet the agricultural teacher of the high school, meet the Superintendent of Schools and meet the guy who sells seeds and farm chemicals, etc. Once you get tied down to the office, you'll find you never have time to get out and make those contacts - so make those contacts first.

I remember reiterating that time after time and there was one kid who looked out the window and didn't seem to pay much attention, so one time I came in, turned to him and said, "The County Agent in Graham County was shot hunting deer yesterday - you're going to pack up and go to Graham County tomorrow morning to be the new County Agent. What's the first thing you do - you're going over to Safford - what are you going to do?" "Well" he said, "I'd go into the Safford Cafe and drink a cup of coffee." I said, "What?" He said, "I'm going to go into the Safford Cafe right there on Main Street and have myself a cup of coffee."

I asked, "Have you forgotten what I said about meeting the banker, the farm machinery man, the Superintendent of Schools and all the other key people in the community first?" "Yeah," he said, "I know about that." He continued, "Every damn one of them is going to come in and have a cup of coffee before the day is over and isn't it better to meet them over a cup of coffee than to bother them at work?" That kid got an "A".