

EDITORIAL *Memories Build During Extension Career*



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I recently received a letter in the mail from the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS). The first sentence of the letter was actually a single word followed by an exclamation point — Congratulations! The objective of the letter was to inform me that I had been credited with 25 years of service to our state and that I was eligible for state retirement. Of course, I have no plans to retire any time soon, but it did make me realize how quickly my quarter-century career with the MSU Extension Service has passed and how blessed I've been to have had the opportunity to make so many good friends and good memories.

It is sort of funny how certain events or situations through the course of one's career seem to stand out as memorable. Maybe not because of their significant contributions or anything else particularly important, but they are fond memories nonetheless. My very first day on the job is one of those memories. It was Sept. 1, 1983 — a young, fresh-out-of-Mississippi-State animal science graduate's first day on the job as assistant county agent in Yazoo County. I had eagerly and quickly climbed three flights of stairs to the Extension Service office located on the top story of the county office building. Once inside the office, Mary Helon Ellis, Extension secretary, was there to greet me.

Mrs. Ellis was perhaps one of the best mentors a young Extension agent could ever hope for — in my opinion, at least. She had already been working for the organization probably 20-something years before I was hired. She knew the ropes of Extension and had already assisted the likes of Yazoo County

agents Walter White, Fred Montgomery, Buck Coates and Tim Pepper. I figured there wasn't much about an Extension agriculture program she didn't already know, and I was pretty accurate in that assessment. I'll never forget how tickled she was seeing me show up for work on my first day in my Sunday best, navy blue suit complemented with white shirt and necktie. I'm sure she figured it wouldn't be long before I would be dressed in work boots and clothing more suited for the job at hand. In that assessment, she was 100 percent accurate.

I could probably write an entire book on all the things that my coworker Tim Pepper taught me over the 4 years he and I worked side by side in Yazoo County. Pepper and I were coworkers from day one but quickly became close personal friends and cherished our luncheon outings each Thursday at the D&L Restaurant in Yazoo City. We were both very fond of Southern fried chicken, and Thursday at the D&L was "chicken day." In our minds, there was no doubt that Doris and Lil served up the best fried chicken east of the Yazoo River.

While an Extension agriculture agent faces a multitude of tasks each day, there is usually one segment of the job the agent tends to gravitate towards, depending on his own personal interests and experiences. For me, that special interest turned out to be cotton production education.

I am not exactly sure why or how that came about other than the positive influences I received from our Extension cotton specialists George Mullendore and Will McCarty and the fact that I served most of my Extension career in Sharkey County — an area noted and revered for having some of the most productive cotton-producing land in the U.S. Again, when it comes to some of those memorable times in one's career, I cannot help but to recall the end-of-season cotton crop management programs Warren County agent Terry Rector, Issaquena County agent Robert Martin and I would organize and hold at Maxwell's Restaurant in Vicksburg. For many years it was not uncommon for us to host more than 100 cotton growers at this annual, fall event.

When I moved to Vicksburg in the fall of 2005 to assume the role of Warren County Extension director, one of the members of the local board of supervisors informed me that I had "some mighty big shoes to fill." We are all familiar with that figure of speech when one is crediting the former employee with having done a great job and is urging the current employee to maintain the same exemplary work record. I could not help but to recall, however, that former Warren County Director Terry Rector's actual shoe size is 14EEE. I also recalled that once while on a trip to MSU for an in-service training, Rector used one of his shoes as a hand-thrown projectile to dispatch a mouse running across the floor of his hotel room. The impact of the hefty wingtip instantly rendered the rodent lifeless.

Congratulations! Sure, I'll accept that. But before I start collecting PERS retirement benefits, I plan on collecting a few more memories.