

## THE THIN GREEN LINE

One of the enjoyable parts of my duties as USU agricultural Extension agent is attendance at and participation in a multitude of committee meetings. That declaration may sound strange to many, but it is true. It is in those gatherings that I am able to learn from some of the best thinkers I know. Often the exchange is a bit heated as there are usually differences of opinion, but we all see things from a unique vantage point. One can get a valuable education by carefully listening to dialog in such settings.

As a society, we seem to be having increasing difficulty getting people to be actively involved with civic and professional duties. It seems most of us are about as busy as we want to be, and in many cases we are convinced we cannot make a difference anyway. If we are not careful, apathy and indifference can easily override enthusiasm and optimism. It is easy to stand on the sidelines.

I watched with interest last fall as some municipalities struggled to get sufficient candidates for political offices. In some cases there were not enough candidates to warrant a primary election and it was not uncommon to have only one candidate on the final ballot. I can understand why people resist involvement in civic and professional duties. We are rather hard on our elected officials.

I remember driving home from a planning and zoning meeting late one evening with Grant LaMar Nelson. The topics at the meeting had been significant, but attendance was rather modest. As we drove Grant reminded me that a small percentage of our population make the decisions for the majority. He suggested that all one has to do to make a difference is to attend meetings and simply listen. If one will merely do that it will not be long before decision makers will be asking your opinion. Then, in almost no time at all, you will be sitting in the chair making the decisions yourself. Democracy favors those who actively participate.

John Phipps, who farms near Chrisman, Illinois, wrote a captivating article in an issue of the Farm Journal magazine. He observed that as he attends different farm organization meetings he repeatedly sees the same familiar faces. By doing some unscientific research he estimated that only about three percent of all farmers get actively involved in agricultural organizations. First, farmers don't join farm groups readily and when they do many are content to simply be a card carrying member. Fortunately, there are always a few who get involved and provide valuable leadership for the rest of us. "By simply attending, they essentially represent all of us. Accordingly, disproportionate power is available to this 'Thin Green Line' of participants." Phipps concluded his column by writing; "Such representation-by-dereliction, regardless of the results, is a wholesale abandonment of professional accountability and self-responsibility." What is his point? Decisions are made by those who show up.

Gordon Zilles, Jon White, Craig Buttars, Darrel Gibbons, Bruce Karren, Jon Meikle and ValJay Rigby are a few examples of agricultural friends whom I know and admire as local leaders. They all own and operate successful farming operations that keep them busier than they ought to be, but I appreciate their willingness to serve and to lead. Not only have they provided valuable leadership in agricultural organizations, they have also been willing leaders in the county. Glen

Brown, Miles “Cap” Ferry, Evan Olsen, Bill Wright and Kerry Gibson are examples of personal agricultural friends who have been powerful policy makers for the state of Utah. I have often wondered how this process of involvement gets started.

Perhaps this column is inspired by my duties as a member of nominating committees for various agricultural organizations. As our respective committees consider potential candidates I am reminded again that busy people always seem to stay busy. It is easy for many to say they just don't have the time or the interest, but the price of non-involvement is costly. Good thinking comes from listening to good thinkers. Philosophies are created, priorities are established, and important decisions are made through the unique, time consuming, often frustrating process of committee meetings. Decisions are always made by those who show up.