

# Getting Down To the Point

*The delegates were in a mood for rampant analysis*

by Richard J. Margolis

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times: best, because we were together again -- some 2000 of us -- defining, deliberating, drawing strength from one another for the ongoing struggle; and worst, because as we voiced our hopes and made our plans down there in the unlikely catacombs of the Shoreham Americana, outside in rural America -- in places like Tulare, California and Peru, Vermont and Hazard, Kentucky -- a kingdom was still being lost, and few in Washington who mattered seemed to be paying close attention.

Jimmy Carter sent his regrets, claiming a prior engagement (a Cabinet meeting); and some of his top aides also begged off. The "urban crisis," that old nemesis of half a dozen recent presidents, was filling the newspaper columns again and haunting the Oval Room. This was not the year for a rural initiative.

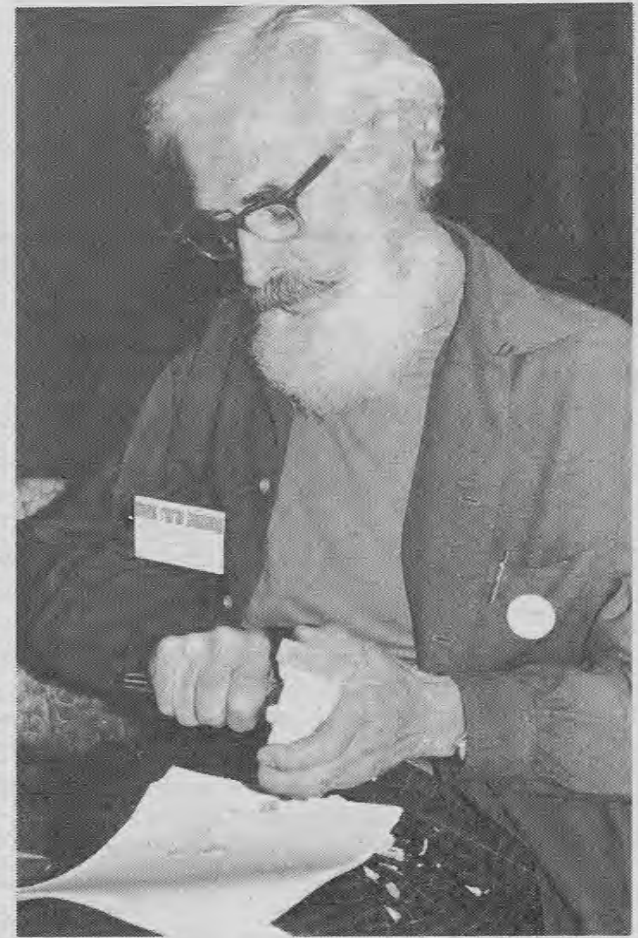
Still, lest we seem ungrateful, let us note some of the administration voices that *were* heard: There was Bob Bergland, secretary of agriculture; and Graciela Olivarez, director of the Community Services Administration; and Alex Mercure, assistant secretary of agriculture for rural development. There were also some old, appealing wines in new, federal bottles, like Gordon Cavanaugh, the new head of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), and Karen Noble Hanson, the

in 1919 a few dozen advocates met in Baltimore in what turned out to be the first national Country Life Conference. The goal of government, they declared in Baltimore, "is human welfare and not merely the possibilities of more profit." Their declaration is ours now; we inherited it in 1975 when we met at the First National Conference on Rural America.

This latest conference, the third in our young history, seemed vastly different in mood from the first -- less strident, more hard-nosed and business-like. At the first, remarked a delegate, "everyone was off in the corner being indignant." This time, everyone was at the sessions taking notes. "Is it only Tuesday?" one delegate mused. "I feel as if I've been in a week-long cram course."

We were getting closer to the point it seemed. Facts were more diligently pursued than opinions; rhetoric yielded to exegesis. True, many delegates bought buttons or t-shirts that sported such slogans as "I'm for Rural America" and "Metropollyanna Is a Menace;" but many more spent their money on studies and reports -- papers that explored questions pertaining to land, energy, agriculture, welfare, housing, health, education.

We were there, it seemed, not so much to inveigh against The System (though we didn't stint on complaints) as to explain it satisfactorily to ourselves. We didn't want to operate in the dark. And friends went out of their way to enlighten us. James Abourezk, the bold senator from South



Agricultural Movement (AAM) why farmers intended to strike, elicited much sympathy but misgivings. The delegates' questions were sharp and sophisticated: How would a strike stop the middlemen from grabbing most of the farm profits? What were farmers doing to cut down on the use of petrochemicals? Could the speakers

There was Bob Berglund, secretary of agriculture, and Graciela Olivarez, director of the Community Services Administration; and Alex Mercure, assistant secretary of agriculture for rural development. There were also some old, appealing wines in new, federal bottles, like Gordon Cavanaugh, the new head of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), and Karen Noble Hanson, the recently appointed FmHA state director in New York. These and others by their presence gave us hope that a faint rural glow might be rising in the east, in the vicinity of Pennsylvania Avenue. Only time would tell whether it was an authentic sunrise or another false dawn. In any case, Earl Butz was gone.

They were an old story, those hopes and frustrations, going back at least to the days of Teddy Roosevelt and his Country Life Commission, which in a 1910 report lamented "the . . . handicap of the farmer as against the established business systems and interests . . ." The rural American, noted the Commission in a plea that keeps echoing, "has problems the government should understand."

But the Congress back then didn't understand; it refused to set aside a single dime for distribution of the Commission's report. Nonetheless, the stirrings for rural equity grew more pronounced, and

**W**e were there, it seemed, not so much to inveigh against The System (though we didn't stint on complaints) as to explain it satisfactorily to ourselves. We didn't want to operate in the dark. And friends went out of their way to enlighten us. James Abourezk, the bold senator from South Dakota, and Barry Commoner, our amiable guru of ecology, spelled out the connections between energy shortages and the small-farm crisis; Leon Keyserling, chief author of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, gave us a short course in economics, calling for full employment as the only lasting solution to rural poverty; Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont spoke on health, Rep. John Breckenridge of Kentucky, on housing; and a modest-mannered Canadian, Edgar Kaeding, explained how as a provincial minister of agriculture he has been able to fend off those who want "the farmlands of Saskatchewan to become little more than miles of mechanized factories producing food for the food chains."

By and large, we listened carefully, drawing our own conclusions and connections. At times we seemed skeptical, even meditative; we did not rush to the ramparts. A special meeting called to hear first-hand from representatives of the American

Agricultural Movement (AAM) why farmers intended to strike, elicited much sympathy but misgivings. The delegates' questions were sharp and sophisticated: How would a strike stop the middlemen from grabbing most of the farm profits? What were farmers doing to cut down on the use of petrochemicals? Could the speakers reconcile their belief in free enterprise with their call for government subsidies?

As for ourselves, the delegates, we did not come to start a new movement but to build on the one already begun. The Health Conference participants decided by a vote of 98-to-one to form a Rural Health Council -- not a separate organization but an affiliate of Rural America, one that would take its place beside the Rural Housing Alliance. Later, the new group issued a lengthy policy statement calling for drastic curtailment of the fee-for-service medical system and for massive federal subsidies of rural health care. "Nowhere in the United States," declared the Council, "is the need for an improved health system more pressing, and nowhere is it less adequate than in rural America."

The Rural Health Council was an idea whose time had come. Not so, apparently, a Rural Education Council, an idea suggested by leaders at an education session but rejected by participants. People were attentive but cautious; they were as yet unprepared to join hands.

In general, then, we dug deeper into the issues this year than ever before. We explored the way things were and the way they might be if we could mobilize the country's conscience as well as our own skills and energies; we turned a hopeful eye toward the administration, but an eye trained by experience to see no more than was actually there; and we learned to know one another in ways that went beyond the mere nametags we wore on our lapels.

The opportunities we glimpsed last month -- the fresh understandings, the old challenges -- have already become part of the 1978 agenda, in Washington, certainly, and perhaps more urgently in rural America, where much of the hard work must be done. With luck we'll meet again next year -- wiser, stronger and ready to begin anew.

