

Frank DeWitt Alexander

November 16, 1903 — November 20, 1983

Frank DeWitt Alexander, professor of cooperative extension and of rural sociology, spent the last thirteen years of his professional career at Cornell. He was brought to Cornell in 1956 as an associate professor to be head of the Office of Extension Studies, a newly created unit within the College of Agriculture and a part of the Office of the Director of Extension. He was promoted to professor in 1961. On June 30, 1969, he retired from Cornell and moved to Evansville, Indiana, where Mrs. Alexander had family ties.

Professor Alexander was a native of Nashville, Tennessee. He graduated from Peabody College in Nashville in 1927 with a Bachelor of Science degree and received a Master of Arts degree from Peabody in 1929. He earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree with a major in sociology in 1935 at Vanderbilt University. A summary in printed form of Frank's doctoral dissertation, "Owners and Tenants of Small Farms in the Life of a Selected Community: A Cultural Analysis," may be found in Mann Library. This work is marked by the meticulous attention to detail and by the insightful observation of social reality that typically characterized Professor Alexander's research.

Frank's professional career was almost equally divided between research and teaching in an academic setting and research in federal government agencies. Prior to coming to Cornell he held academic appointments at Peabody College as an instructor (1927-32), at Vanderbilt University as an instructor (1933-35), at Kansas University as an assistant professor (1935), and at Clemson College as an associate professor (1939-41). He served as a social science researcher with the Tennessee Valley Authority, initially during 1936-39 and again from 1949, until he came to Cornell in 1956. He was on the staff of the Natural Resources Planning Board, located in Atlanta, Georgia, during 1941-43. From 1943 until 1949 Frank was a social science analyst in what was then the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, working on a regional basis at different times in Atlanta and in St. Paul, Minnesota. While on sabbatic leave in Jamaica in 1962-63, Professor Alexander was a research evaluation consultant in the Division of Economics and Statistics for the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands.

Professor Alexander became a national leader in the evaluation of the informal educational programs conducted by cooperative extension. Initially, at Cornell, he had leadership responsibility for studies concerned with the activities of the extension service in adult and 4-H agriculture. Later this responsibility was extended to all extension research in the New York Extension Service. The studies were designed to serve the extension director

and his immediate staff, extension specialists in the two colleges (Agriculture and Home Economics), and the agent and specialist field staff. A major responsibility during the early years was a Kellogg Foundation-funded five-year evaluation of a newly inaugurated Farm and Home Management Program. Skillful application of social science research techniques was exemplified in the printed summary report on the farm management phase of the program, issued as Extension Study no. 1 in 1962. Under Frank's leadership the Office of Extension studies produced more than one hundred reports. Nearly all of these were distributed in mimeographed form for decision making, program planning, and informational purposes to key audiences within cooperative extension in New York State. Consistent with his great concern that the findings and implications of evaluation studies enter the lifeblood of the agency whose activities had been studied, Frank prepared a comprehensive self-evaluation of the activities of the Office of Extension Studies covering the entire period of his tenure; this report, *Office of Extension Studies, New York Cooperative Extension: A Case Study*, offers a rare example of historical documentation and critical self-analysis for an operating unit within a university.

Because of his technical knowledge and his objective approach, Frank became known as a helpful counselor for college and field staff in cooperative extension on issues of evaluation, organization, and other matters. On occasion he offered a graduate course in evaluation research.

Any statement about Frank Alexander's professional career would be incomplete if it failed to note that his research while on the staff of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics inadvertently involved him in a raging political controversy, an involvement and a controversy that has been permanently recorded in the scholarly literature on agrarian politics. Frank had been assigned to prepare a reconnaissance report on rural life in Coahoma County, Mississippi, one of seventy-one counties carefully selected by his agency to represent major type-of-farming areas across the United States. Coahoma County was a cotton-growing plantation area, whose population had been predominantly black for a century. Frank's preliminary report on his survey in the county, prepared in March 1944, followed the outline used for each of the seventy-one county reports. The content for the Coahoma report, however, reflected Frank's observations and conclusions that black-white relations and the plantation system were dominant features of the county's culture. One of the few copies of the report circulated for critical review and marked "for administrative use" fell into unfriendly hands. The report provided further ammunition for those already strongly opposing some activities of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, namely, a number of southern congressmen and the American Farm Bureau Federation. Frank was blocked by influential agricultural leaders in Mississippi from returning to the state to participate in a cooperative project with the Mississippi Agricultural

Experiment Station. By summer 1946 the political furor had led to prohibition by Congress of the bureau's conducting any further "cultural" surveys, the closure of the bureau's regional offices, a demotion of the agency within the Department of Agriculture, and the resignation—in frustration—of the bureau's chief. The preliminary Coahoma County report contributed greatly to raising large and continuing issues about the politically acceptable role of social scientists in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Professor Alexander was a member of the Rural Sociological Society, serving as chairman of its program committee for the 1958 annual meeting. He was also a member of the American Sociological Association, Phi Delta Kappa, Kappa Delta Pi, and Epsilon Sigma Phi. While living in Ithaca, he was an active member of the Congregational Church.

Frank will be remembered by his friends and colleagues as a kind and gentle man with great integrity. Death came on November 20, 1983, after prolonged hospitalization, of Parkinson's disease, in Evansville, Indiana. He is survived by his wife, May, and by three nieces and one nephew.

George J. Broadwell, James E. Lawrence, Olaf F. Larson