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MEMORIAL ADDRESS

W. J. Croucher, Father to the Pig Industry

By

C. P. McMeekan, Ruakura Animal Research Station, Hamilton.

All great men of the past who have been honoured by this Society for their contributions to animal production may be described as giants of the sheep and cattle world—aristocrats of the New Zealand animal scene. Today we are to pay tribute to the services of a humble man who has earned his place in these memoirs by his unswerving devotion to the welfare of his equally humble friend, the pig.

W. J. Croucher, "Bill" or "Old Bill" as he is remembered by all of you who were fortunate enough to have known him, was born in Wellington in 1871. His father came from Guernsey and his mother from Northern Ireland. By birth, at least, he was thus qualified a pig-man, even though over 40 years were to elapse before active association with the pig and the pig industry began. With his parents he moved to Sanson about 80 years ago, shortly after the settlement of the Sandon district by the Hutt small farm scheme. Educated at the local primary school, he left before completing the full course to become apprenticed to the saddlery trade. During his Sanson days he gained experience of agriculture in a pioneering community, Here, he developed the great love for the land and its people so characteristic of him and to the service of which he devoted the greater part of his later life. He would be the first to deny that life in those pioneering days was all work and no play. Unless rumour lies, Bill early became one of the gay young bloods of the district and enjoyed to the full the pleasures available. A capacity to work hard and to play hard became so woven into his philosophy that it did not desert him at any stage. Out of his apprenticeship, he worked first at Marton and then, as the owner of his own business, at Rongotea, Halcombe and Bulls. About 1911, exhibiting a degree of foresight which surely must have been unusual, he deserted saddlery for all time. To quote his own words: "I sold my business and looked around for a new way of life, the week I saw the first motor-bike in Bulls. Except for the expensive and ornate equipment ordered from me by local young aristocrats mainly for the purpose of impressing their girl-friends, saddlery provided only a bread and butter income. I could see little future for the well-dressed horse in the face of the combined competition of speed and noise."

Looking around for a new way of life, he was drawn in an unexpected direction. To fill in time he became the travelling representative of the Rangitikei "Advocate," a newspaper published at Marton with a large country circulation. This high-sounding title merely involved the responsibility of pushing a bicycle many thousands of wearisome miles, in all weathers and on all kinds of roads, to collect the annual newspaper dues. The job, however, brought one compensation. It brought him in contact with the changing scene of farming from month to month, from district to district and from farm to farm. Endowed as he was with a remarkably facile pen, a keen sense of news and an intimate appreciation of the interests of townsmen and countrymen alike, it was not long before his visit to an area produced not only the necessary wayward subscription but also a



The Late W. J. CROUCHER

stream of news pars and short articles of agricultural interest and significance. The uneducated village boy had become an agricultural journalist. His undoubted ability was soon recognised and led to an appointment to the New Zealand "Times" as its agricultural editor. For this paper he travelled the Agricultural and Pastoral Shows of the Dominion and contributed a weekly farm column. It soon led, too, to his being labelled by his friends as "Bill, the book farmer"—a label as challenging then to an essentially practical man as it is today to some agricultural research workers. The challenge could not be ignored and in 1914 at the age of 43, W. J. Croucher acquired the leasehold of 60 acres of poor land at Waitohi in the Manawatu, carrying 25 cows and two sows. The story of his many difficulties in the next six years has been told in his book "My Friend the Pig." One paragraph is worth quoting here since it provides the key to his next venture and his later intense interest in pig production. "To have restored an area or run-out land and to have made it possible for a nondescript herd of cows to produce the local record of those days of an average of 300lb. of butterfat is to have done something, however small, in the way of progress, unusual, merely because my methods were a departure from the conventional. Whatever small financial success came my way must be attributed to the income derived from the pig department. That group of ten breeding sows were steadfast friends throughout. Without special care or attention they multiplied exceedingly and enabled me to exploit with profit, a neglected branch of dairy farm husbandry. They provided the sheet anchor which kept my craft clear of the breakers of bankruptcy. Without them it is doubtful if my venture would have been otherwise than what my human friends had predicted. It follows then that I have always retained a soft spot for the procine family and its welfare. They owe me nothing."

When the farm was sold at the height of the land boom of the 20's, W.J. was too shrewd to pay more than twice his own estimate of its productive value, the price it brought at auction. At a loose end once more, the book farmer was not to be enticed into buying any of the many farming properties then available at fictitious values despite his firm intention to remain by the land. To quote again: "A special providence kept me clear of these temptations and in the end sent along another proposition which was acceptable. I found myself in the possession of a commercial piggery, 19 acres of land and a nice little mortgage. For good or ill, I, and all belonging to me, was committed to this new expression of confidence in the ability of the pig to see me through. Others who professed to know something of the ways of pigs and those associated with these "dirty, depraved animals" declared that I had allied myself with a business that was far beyond the pale of respectability. I had descended to the very bottom of the social ladder and while my friends did not quite disown me. I was made to feel that a very bad lapse had been made. I wondered then and am still wondering why any distinction should be made in the prestige of the various species of farm animals. Yet, how many sheep kings, cattle barons and their satellites despise the pig? Speak as you find. His Royal Highness, the friend of the poor, will do me because I have proved to my own satisfaction at least that he is a gentleman worthy of respect, faithful to all who give him a fair chance to show his merits. Like any other self-respecting person he responds to kindness and a due recognition of his requirement which, being freely given, is generously repaid."

From this moment early in 1920 there began the association with the pig industry which proved so fruitful to us. If Croucher had run into a few difficulties in farming a handful of pigs on his dairy farm, he entered a treacherous morass of troubles on his 350-ton buttermilk piggery. The story is again vividly told in his book. Here it is sufficient to emphasise that by the time ill-health forced him into

“PUNKET
BILL”



retirement some ten years later, Bill had not only converted his business from an extremely shaky and hazardous venture, to a sound and profitable one but he had also laid the foundations of the New Zealand buttermilk pig-fattening industry. The disposal of wastes had already become a major problem of the rapidly growing butter factories of the Dominion. Stream pollution was a growing headache to local authorities. The use of the by-product in pig fattening on a large scale was fraught with so many unsolved difficulties, nutritional, pathological, environmental and economic in origin, that the buttermilk piggery was a most dangerous enterprise. Bill helped to change all this. He lived to see the day when the successful fattening of over 100,000 pigs a year on buttermilk not only converted a troublesome by-product of dairying to economic wealth but, through the stabilising effect on the store pig market of "buttermilk pig-buyers", became a factor of major value to all pig producers.

Ill-health took Croucher to retirement in Palmerston North early in the 30's. Retirement, however, for a man with such a vigorous mind was a complete misnomer for then began the most productive period of his life. With time to think, his philosophy came to full maturity. Energies previously devoted to the need to provide his daily bread were henceforth directed to new channels, with a concept of service to his fellowmen as the dominant motive. By this time he had won many friends and the respect of all who came in contact with him for his sane attitude to life and his wisdom. The next 17 years found his mana increasing many-fold. His unflinching, old-world courtesy, his sound advice freely given to all in search of help, his commonsense outlook on all things spiritual and material, and his unbounded confidence in the future of mankind in general and his country in particular brought to his fireside young and old, rich and poor, great and small, townsmen and countrymen alike. It was little wonder that, despite severe physical limitations, the respect he had earned on the practical side of pig husbandry together with his deep personal interest, soon drew him into active co-operation with groups working for the welfare of his beloved pigs. The Manawatu-Orua branch of the New Zealand Pig Breeders' Association benefited from his wise counsel. The local A. & P. Associations co-opted him and progressive moves under his leadership soon placed the Manawatu and Feilding organisations in the forefront of the pig world at both spring and winter shows. His ideas and methods gave a lead to the rest of the Dominion in the progressive improvement of pigs through this medium. Without his aid, the Manawatu-Orua Pig Recording and Development Club could not have become the force that it did in national pig affairs. From his mind and work developed the concept of a national organisation to look after "Dennis", a concept which eventually bore fruit in the formation of the National Pig Industry Council. Throughout this time, from an able pen and a brilliant mind flowed a stream of authoritative articles on all aspects of pig and dairy production aimed primarily at the education of all on matters affecting national efficiency and welfare. During the early war years he was one of a committee of three appointed by the Government to advise on the special production problems arising and to act as a connecting link between the Government and the producer so that United Kingdom requirements could be met.

Throughout all this period, an outstanding characteristic was his intense interest in the welfare of younger men. He was apt to call this "curbing the impetuosity of youth" but in practice the association was always more stimulating than restrictive. Through his effect upon them, he probably exerted his greatest force upon the industry he lived and loved to serve. M. J. Scott, W. M. Riddett, B. E. Keiller, W. M. Davison, G. M. Whitelock, P. G. Stevens, M. M. Cooper, E. P. Neilson, C. E. Eglinton, J. C. Marsden, H. E. Fieldhouse, C. P. McMeekan, H. E. Johnstone, and D. M. Smith—all recognised leaders in

New Zealand pig affairs—owe an immeasurable debt to him for his stimulating council and kindly criticism. This debt, one and all have freely acknowledged.

It was during this period that Croucher first came into personal contact with the scientific side of animal production. So great was his capacity for understanding the scientific attitude and so effective his efforts to complete the education of the individual scientific workers fortunate enough to come under his spell that he earned the wholesome respect of this highly critical group. For a man of such limited official education whose first personal acquaintanceship with science began at the age of 60, such understanding is rare. This ability to understand and to keep his mind young was, I believe, one of his greatest strengths. As a diversion at this point, a quotation from his writings on this subject may not be out of place since in it is a lesson which might profitably be learned by many of us. In speaking of the composition of the committee of his beloved Pig Recording Club, he said:

"We had a proper balance between the professional and the lay mind. Each section was helpful to the other. The man whose knowledge has been gained from book study with little actual experience or contact in putting ideas into practice as a payable proposition is too frequently apt to float around the ether without purpose. On the other side is the layman who does things a certain way because they have always been done that way. He invariably wants to be assured by the scientist that the adoption of a new method will pay. Very often he can show that it will not. By free exchange of ideas the one is brought down to earth and the other is uplifted from the rut of custom. My learned friends pretend to have a deep-rooted objection to the word 'practical' as used by doubting Tommies such as me. I am unrepentant. It makes them spark up and say things very emphatically and in a way that a benighted heathen likes to hear the language spoken. When the 'professor' reminds me I am a contrary old so-and-so then I know my argument is getting somewhere."

For one as close to him as I was—and our relationship was akin to that of father and son as well as that of teacher and pupil—it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to be as critically impartial in assessing the worth of his contributions as is normally expected by this Society. The task is made no easier by the fact that his force was always exerted from behind the scenes. His innate modesty, his horror of official positions and of bureaucrats made him the "back-room boy" of the pig industry during its most critical and formative period. From discussions with pig industry leaders, however, I am confident that my final remarks carry their wholehearted endorsement.

Croucher's contributions to pig production can be summarised under six main heads:—

Firstly, Marketing: When Bill first engaged in commercial production by far the greatest hazard to be faced was the violent ups-and-downs in the price of pigs. These fluctuations, so punishing to the producers, were claimed to be inevitable, so long had they existed and so frequently were they organised. Croucher believed the pig to be the plaything of bacon curers, local butchers and meat exporters. In fact, his favourite description of those days was that "the cleanest thing about the pig industry was the pig". After being nearly broken financially by this situation, Croucher decided on his part, to break the vicious ring operating, by using the principle of co-operative producer marketing. The success of his methods was outstanding. Pig-keeping in the Manawatu was quickly placed upon a stable price basis. The lessons learned did not go unnoticed by progressive Waikato farmers who carried the basic ideas to the stage which led eventually to the development of the New Zealand Co-operative Pig Marketing Association—an organisation which brought the same

stability to pig prices on a national basis that Croucher originally brought to them in his own small district.

Secondly, the Buttermilk Pig Industry: I have already stressed his special work in this field. It is true that milk drying has made it unnecessary to use the pig any longer to cash buttermilk. For 30 years, however, Croucher's example and advice to hundreds of buttermilk factories throughout the country added millions to New Zealand's export income.

Thirdly, Pig Improvement through Shows: Through his active work with Agricultural and Pastoral Shows, Croucher was undoubtedly responsible for the first progressive step toward the improvement of pig carcase quality by the institution of classes involving a productive history of the animals exhibited. Eventually Croucher's classes at Manawatu involved a complete history from birth to bacon of all pigs exhibited. It was an inspiration to the young animal husbandmen of the early 30's to find Bill at his exhibit at the Show, with 100 entries of cured bacon, litter records of the sows responsible, a growth rate record for each pig and a carcase score based on measurement and not on mere eye judgment. This was at a time when such ideas were just finding their way into the scientific literature of British agriculture. The example and the lessons learned had a profound influence on concepts of pig quality throughout the Dominion. Croucher's attitude to the job is well illustrated by a remark in a letter commenting on a move by certain influential parties to automatically award expensive imported pigs with the Certificate of Performance of the National Pig Council without the need of official testing to prove their ability. He wrote: "I can leave it to your imagination to visualise the reception these people got from me and from others who regard 'performance' and not 'an expensive family tree' as the crucial test of value." One is tempted to add that had Croucher's work in this direction been continued on a national scale, the pig industry to-day would be in a much sounder position than it is.

Fourthly, Grading: Croucher will always be remembered as a pioneer exponent of pig grading as a key factor to efficient production and marketing. He was always a realist. No one was more conscious that no effective progress could be made in carcase type unless the producer was paid to produce a superior article. He believed that grading with a premium for quality was the key to pig stock improvement. No one took such a leading part, no one spoke and wrote with such sincerity and authority and no one fought so hard over 20 years to put these principles into practice. No one has been so critical of the failure of the powers that be to apply to pigs the technique that had built the reputation of New Zealand fat lambs. While he believed that he failed in his endeavours—and he regarded the grading system under which the industry has operated for so long as a farce—it is of more than passing interest to note that the fight he started and led is still on. It is certain that when success is finally achieved by producers the name of Croucher will not be forgotten as one of the chief architects of victory.

Fifthly, Pig Recording: No assessment of Croucher's work can avoid reference to his association with the Pig Recording Club movement. Following the pattern set by the East-Anglia Pig Recording Club, Waikato farmers under the initial leadership of C. M. Hume of herd testing fame and the enthusiastic energy of H. M. Pearson, successfully organised a similar club in 1928. This Club provided the first factual information on litter production and on fattening performance on separated milk and whey under field conditions in New Zealand. An abortive attempt soon after this by Massey Agricultural College to emulate the example, killed progress in pig instruction and development work in the surrounding district for some years. The formation of the Manawatu-Orua Pig Recording and Development Club in 1933 under Croucher's leadership in the field as Pig Recording

Officer changed the picture completely. In the five years before the Club was embraced by the National Council in 1938 it put up a notable performance. Apart from handling its instructional functions, Bill was responsible for making it possible to produce the Bulletin published by D.S.I.R. in 1938 entitled "Recent Research in Pig Keeping". Embracing a survey of pig production achievements, this study established standards of pig production in terms of output per cow, per sow and per 100lbs. of butterfat, comparable with the standards of efficiency in butterfat production which had played such a big part in the development of dairy farming. It provided a measure of the the economy of meal supplementing—a key factor in efficient and economic production of pigs on dairy by-products. It analysed the factors associated with efficient weaner production as a basis to sound instructional work. It recorded the performance of store pigs during the critical winter period on a variety of practical diets. It provided a factual measure of the carcass quality of the average New Zealand baconer pig. D. M. Smith has described it as the only available starting point for his subsequent pig researches at Ruakura. With characteristic modesty and only under pressure, Croucher agreed to his name being appended as a co-author of only one paper in this work, though without him, his painstaking attention to detail and his diplomatic bludgeoning of farmer co-operation, none of the several studies would have been possible. As Secretary of the Club, I served with Riddett, Denize, McEllwaine, Stevens, Whitelock, Davison, Keiller, Lovelock, Thurston, and Neilson on the committees of this organisation. Bill was given a free hand. We were the new chums—he the expert. Never once did we regret the complete delegation of authority to him. His service at this time, so valuable then and later, can be evaluated better when one remembers it was given by a sick man at a cost to his physical well-being for which he had to pay at a later date.

Sixthly, the National Pig Industry Council: Here, we come to the highlight of Croucher's career. While many may claim credit for the National Pig Industry Council as it now exists, I alone know how and where this organisation had its birth. Croucher was never associated officially with the N.P.I.C. Earlier, I described him as a back-room boy. In this special connection no description is more apt. The concept of a Dominion-wide organisation to cater for the welfare of pig production in terms of instruction, investigation and research had its origin in the mind of Plunket Bill. He had long argued with his friends that if the cow required a Dairy Board, and the fat lamb a Meat Board, then the neglected pig needed such assistance even more. Opportunity came when the Royal Commission on Dairying in 1936 sought evidence upon pig production relative to dairy farming as information essential to the structure of a guaranteed price for dairy produce. The analysis of the position in the name of the Manawatu-Orua Pig Recording and Development Club was made by Croucher. It was dictated to me as Club Secretary at his fireside and was virtually adopted in toto by the Commission in its final report and was the basis of its recommendations. A key recommendation was the formulation and application of a national pig development policy and organisation as essential to the successful development and stability of pig raising. Acceptance of his ideas by such an authoritative body encouraged Croucher to crystallise the generalisations involved by drawing up plans for a National Pig Industry Council. The main features of the scheme as finally adopted by Government, trade and producer organisations were likewise dictated round Bill's fireside. Through this plan, the pig producer became the first farmer to pay for his instructional and research services. Before this objective was attained, a great deal of lobbying had to be done and here again Croucher played a dominant part. His flair for reconciling the views of conflicting interests and parties "over a cup of tea or during the lunch-hour" was a major factor responsible for the final adoption of the programme. The organisation came into effective being in

1938. Croucher refused to take any official position though he frequently appeared round the Council table in an advisory capacity. He was still a "backroom boy", but his standing at that time is no better illustrated than by a transcript of the then Director-General of Agriculture's statement at the inaugural meeting after he had announced the appointment of M. J. Scott as the first superintendent of the industry. Looking across at Scott, Mr. Cockayne said: "Mr. Scott, there are men all over the country who can help you and I want you to spend the next few months getting amongst them and from them to select your own advisors. There is old Bill Croucher sitting over there. There is no man I know who can give you better all-round information and he has no axe to grind. Are you deaf to-day, Bill? I notice you are pretty dumb."

It is true that Bill was disappointed at the performance of the National Pig Industry Council. He was never happy with the assumption of control at the top by the Department of Agriculture, a situation which he never contemplated and vigorously fought but with which he had to acquiesce so that the main scheme would not fall down. He was critical of the early preoccupation of the Council with export marketing and price wrangles, a function which was far divorced from his original conception of its duties—instruction, investigation and research. He was sorry for the Superintendent of the pig industry who, though a personal and admired friend, he described as a Swiss admiral. Though certainly disappointed during the first ten years, Bill never lost faith that one day the organisation would grow to maturity and assume the responsibility for which it was created. I am sure that recent developments would have carried his endorsement, though I am equally certain that he would not yet consider the organisation as "adult".

At this point we have come to the end of the road. The National Pig Industry Council, now known as the National Council of Pig Producers, was the culmination of Croucher's efforts. We can pay no greater tribute to him than to wish this organisation the kind of success he himself desired so much for it.

W. J. Croucher died in 1947 in his 77th year. He retained his mental vigour and active interest in pig affairs to the end. I was privileged to be at his bedside a few hours before he passed away. He was reluctant to go because "there is still so much to do". He was confident, however, that the younger men left behind would complete the task. Although he did not believe in a personal after-life, his last words to me were, and they came with a twinkle in his eye, "It will be fun, Mac, to see if there is a job for me over there."