

AAM Senter On The Hill 3-31-20

I would have never thought when I wrote my last column that so much would have happened. All our lives have changed and been upended leaving many to wonder what's next. We will get through this crisis by doing our part to slow down the spread and do what we need to do to support those in need. In the recently passed CARE Act, dollars were included for USDA to increase food assistance, have another round of MFP payments as well as money earmarked for cattle producers. My concern is that USDA will buy meat from JBS and other large packers which will not help family cattle producers one bit. Currently the price of boxed beef is way up but the price for cattle is way down, basically, Big Beef is stealing from family producers. AAM will keep an eye on this and keep you informed.

As the country and world shuts down, farmers and ranchers go to work every day, milking the cows, feeding the livestock and beginning the planting of this year's crops. Others are working hard growing and picking fresh vegetables, fruits and nuts to feed a nation that depends on food to live. Say a little prayer for these great Americans and thank them for what they do and that them and their families be safe. I had a debate with myself as to whether to continue my monthly history series about my AAM memories and I decided that everyone needs a break from the news that happening so on to March memories.

In March of 1978 hundreds of farmers continued to travel to Washington, D.C. to lobby Congress for new farm legislation. Everyone that had a Senator who was a member of the Senate Ag Committee was pushing them to support the Dole Flexible Parity Act. It seemed every day we were gaining new co-sponsors for the bill. The Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee was Herman Talmadge from Georgia and he had not agreed to support the bill. Georgia farmers were putting tremendous pressure on him and finally he agreed to hold a Committee Markup for Senator Dole's bill. The call went out and farmers flooded into the Senate Russel Building where the Agriculture meeting room was. Farmers filled the hallway to the point where no one could walk down the hall. We then sat down blocking the hearing room doors. We told Senator Dole, on his way in, that we would not leave and let them out until the committee Marked-Up the bill and sent it to the Senate floor. After a few hours, Senator Talmadge stuck his head out the door and you could hear him say, 'they are all still here' with that we applauded and let out a few hollers. When the day ended, the Dole Flexible Parity Act was Marked Up and sent to the Senate. By the time the bill reached the Senate Floor, April 10th, it passed by a voice vote. We were excited and high fiving Senators and a few of us even went and had a few adult beverages in their Senate Office's with them. March 1978 was a time when AAM protests spread nationwide to both cities and small towns. The fire that was lite in August 1977 was now a fire burning across the countryside and would change the lives of everyone that participated in the movement. There are countless stories from all the brave family farmers and ranchers that stood up together to support family farm agriculture and Rural America.

March 1985 America's Heartland was in crisis suffering failing family farms, bankruptcies and increasing suicides. AAM organized a Parity March and put out the call for farmers to come to Washington and thousands answered the call. We knew we had to rock the boat and get the story out to consumers so we could generate the political heat needed to get Congress to act. AAM was getting pushback from the Park Police, FBI, Secret Service, Capital Police and others refusing to give AAM a permit. So, we decided to take a different track, as AAM National Director, I was tasked with getting it done. I took a call asking all these questions and I said look, we don't care if we have a permit or not, we just want to make sure you are not surprised when we show up and wanted you to know what our plans were. There was a long silence on the phone, and I was told, we must have a meeting, I said ok but I'm too busy to attend, let me know what happens. The next call was to tell me that AAM would have full cooperation from all the different agencies. A big circus tent was set up on the mall walking distance from the Capitol so Members of Congress could come down and speak to the farmers in the evening. We set up a schedule and gave each Senator and Member of Congress a time they could speak. In Congress, the House Ag Committee and the House Oversight Committee and the Senate Ag Committee all held hearings the same day for AAM farmers to testify. AAM had people with walkie talkies to make sure every seat in all the hearing rooms, were full. Congress was working on writing emergency farm legislation to deal with the deepening farm crisis. Then on the final day of the Parity March, AAM held a press conference on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. There was a major press turnout with 14 film crews and countless print and radio outlets. At the time America was losing 364 family farmers per day. We had 364 white crosses made with the name of a farmer that had committed suicide or lost a farm to bankruptcy on the crosses. Farmers stood holding the crosses high, then following the press conference, AAMer's marched to USDA and drove those crosses in the ground on the Mall in front to make a farmer's graveyard. Then we marched to the White House and surrounded it, we had succeeded, all the National News Networks covered the March as well it made Front page in all the major newspapers. At that point we had to make the most out of the attention and turn that into congressional action. One last item, AAM's Parity March caught the attention of Willie Nelson and other entertainers, one of those was Don Henley with the Eagles who flew into Washington and marched alongside our farmers in our Parity March. If you have a story to tell, please write it and send it to me. Be safe, until next time,

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