

Henry Perly Rusk, 1884–1954: A Brief Biography¹

Alvin L. Neumann

University of Illinois, Urbana 61801



Henry Perly Rusk was born on a farm near Rantoul, Illinois, on July 19, 1884, and died January 12, 1954, after an illustrious career in agriculture. At an early age he moved to Indiana with his parents and attended Valparaiso University, where he received a bachelor of science degree in agriculture in 1904. He then enrolled in agriculture at the University of Missouri, where he was one of the six founders of Farm House fraternity and later served as its national president. After graduating with B.S. and M.S. degrees he joined the faculty at Missouri at age 24 and

supervised the cattle feeding research. In 1910 he joined the staff at the University of Illinois. Again he directed beef cattle research and taught the beef cattle husbandry course for many years. During his first year there he organized the Illinois Cattle Feeders Day, which became an annual event. In 1911 he married the former Edith E. Hartley and they had two daughters, Elizabeth and Martha (who later became Mrs. George Huff, Jr.). In 1921 he was made head of the Animal Husbandry (now Animal Sciences) department, a position he held until 1939. At that time he was appointed dean of the College of Agriculture, an appointment that lasted until he retired in 1952, having served the College for 42 years.

After leaving academe, Rusk's horizons broadened considerably and he was soon recognized as one of the nation's foremost leaders in the effort to improve the living standards of the American farm family. He was equally interested in the molding of government policies as they affected all citizens. He regarded it as the high point of his career when he was named chairman of the agricultural task force of President Herbert Hoover's Commission on Government Reorganization. The reduction of agencies and offices in the Department of Agriculture from 20 to 6 in 1953 led to another important assignment: the reorganization of federal lending policies. His view of the role of government in regard to agricultural policy led to many speaking engagements, in which he seldom failed to call for a reduction of federal farm controls.

He gained a national reputation as a cattle judge, having judged at major state fairs, the American Royal, and the International Livestock Show and Exposition. He served as president of the American Society of Animal Science in 1925–26. Among the additional plaudits he received were: honorary degrees from Illinois Wesleyan, Purdue, and the University of Missouri; membership in Sigma XI, Alpha Zeta, and Gamma Sigma Delta professional and scientific organizations, and Alpha Gamma Rho and Farm House social fraternities. He was an active member of the Methodist church and Rotary International, in Urbana.

In 1947 his portrait was hung in the Saddle and Sirloin Club in Chicago. In making the presentation speech, A. W. Weaver, then president of the American Society of Animal Science, said:

¹Photo courtesy of University of Illinois Archive.
Received April 10, 1997.
Accepted April 12, 1997.

Dean Rusk will be remembered as one of the strong men of the University of Illinois—even stronger than his old briar pipe, which he puffed much of the time. He has pulled on his boots and tramped over much of the farm land in every part of Illinois and can call hundreds of real dirt farmers by their first names, and he wields a quiet influence in many other places, to the benefit of the state and the university.

The dean came back to his desk in the fall, after a 6-month leave because of illness. Upon his retirement he received a letter from former President Herbert Hoover which read: “The Task Force Study on Agriculture, prepared under your chairmanship, was a model of constructiveness. The impact of this study upon the structure and management of the Department of Agriculture has already been noted. It will bear a harvest of increasing dividends in the future.”