

Profile ■ by Gerald F. Vaughn

George S. Wehrwein

The Economist's Approach To Ecology

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the passing of George S. Wehrwein (1883–1945), president of the American Farm Economic Association in 1942, and it is especially appropriate to reflect on his views and many outstanding contributions to agricultural and resource economics. Interestingly, in a long and productive career, Wehrwein's finest contribution may have been one for which he is least known; he was advisor on land economics to the great ecologist Aldo Leopold. His mutually beneficial association with Leopold and related work provide sound guidance to us even in 1995, as economists continue to grapple with America's vexing environmental issues and choices.

Leopold's writings, especially *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), shape much of the philosophy of the modern environmental movement. He and Wehrwein were faculty colleagues at the University of Wisconsin from 1933, when Leopold was appointed professor of game (later wildlife) management in the department of agricultural economics, until Wehrwein's death. Wehrwein was notably helpful to him regarding "the economics of land reform, soil erosion, and rural taxation," according to Leopold biographer Curt Meine. Reflecting the Wehrwein influence, Leopold's writings contain the caution: "Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land, or of economic land-use."

Wehrwein observed that the conser-

vation movement of this century's first two decades had less impact than was desired. In a 1936 article he asked why, and answers: "Because the fundamentals of economics, the framework of our institutions, and the legal aspects of conservation were largely neglected or ignored and because the professional 'wolf-criers' had deadened the nerves of the public by their overemphasis and distortion of facts."

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Wehrwein seems to have had a leveling influence on Leopold. However, theirs was a reciprocal influence, and Wehrwein became one of the earliest and most eminent economists to join forces with the ecologists. Writing in 1938, Wehrwein illustrates the public interest in private land by quoting Leopold, who wrote: "The land owner whose boundaries happen to include an eagle's nest, or a heron rookery, or a patch of lady's-slippers, or a remnant

of prairie sod, or an historical oak, or a string of Indian mounds—such a land owner is the custodian of a public interest, to an equal or sometimes greater degree than one growing a forest, or one fighting a gully." A year later, Wehrwein writes:

Adam Smith stated the consoling doctrine that, in the main, whenever each person pursues his own self-interest he is automatically also acting in the best interests of society as a whole. The natural corollary follows that any restraint on the action of individuals not only is bad for the individual but also for society and the state. Whatever may have been the validity of this philosophy in commerce and industry it fails when applied to the conservational utilization of natural resources.

In the 1930s Wehrwein collaborated with Leopold, political scientist John M. Gaus, and other like-minded faculty from various departments to offer a unique though short-lived interdisciplinary program in rural regional planning, which unfortunately began a generation before the need for it was widely recognized. In the early 1960s I was fortunate to work for three years under the supervision and tutelage of a product of that program, Hugh A. Johnson, who wrote his master's thesis under Wehrwein and became an outstanding land economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Wehrwein encouraged him to follow the rural regional planning program, and the courses Johnson took in geography, city planning, rural sociology, horticulture, wild-

life management, political science, economics and agricultural economics, English, and journalism combined to give him broad coverage and skills as a generalist in land economics problem-solving and writing.

Wehrwein was born and reared in Wisconsin. He graduated from teachers' college in 1908, taught high school as a young man, and was already thirty years old when he received his bachelor's degree in agricultural economics from the University of Wisconsin in 1913.

After employment by the University of Texas, State of Washington, and Pennsylvania State University, in 1919 Wehrwein resumed studies at the University of Wisconsin. He received his master's degree in 1920 and doctorate in 1922, with a dissertation titled "Land Ownership and Tenure in the United States." Land economics was a major theme of Richard T. Ely's economics program at Wisconsin (*CHOICES* Third Quarter 1994). This theme was aggressively carried forward by Henry C. Taylor and Benjamin H. Hibbard (first and second chairpersons of the agricultural economics department) and by Wehrwein who originally worked with them as a student and later as a research associate and faculty member.

When Wehrwein started work in 1922 as a research associate in Ely's Institute for Research in Land Economics and Public Utilities, land economics was largely an amorphous body of untested theories with uncertain implications for public policy. Wehrwein's initial work focused on investigations into large landholdings, farm tenancy, and public land policies. Land economics was moving from theory to application and testing.

In 1922 Ely, Mary L. Shine, and Wehrwein published a three-volume mimeographed work titled *Outlines of Land Economics*, the first textbook in land economics. Volume I dealt with *Characteristics and Classification of Land*; Vol. II, *Costs and Income in Land Utilization*; and Vol. III, *Land Policies*.

Outlines of Land Economics was a tremendous advance over previous literature in the field, but years later Ely

recalled criticism of these state-of-the-art volumes: "We were criticized because in our early mimeographed volumes of the *Outlines of Land Economics* we stated certain conclusions. It was said that we should have waited until we had finished our researches and then given our conclusions. If this had been done, no conclusions or generalizations would ever have been reached, because researches must be continuous and never-ending."

Recognizing Wehrwein's obvious teaching skills, Ely quickly arranged for him to teach courses in land economics, both introductory and advanced. Wehrwein was appointed associate professor of economics in 1924. The following year, when Ely retired and relocated himself and his institute to North-

western University, he asked Wehrwein to accompany him as professor of economics. Wehrwein returned to the University of Wisconsin as professor of agricultural economics in 1928.

Wehrwein became the leading teacher of land economics in American universities during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. C.W. Loomer estimates that more than 1,400 students enrolled in Wehrwein's land economics courses over the years (this may not include courses taught at Northwestern).

Wehrwein developed and undertook a highly normative approach to land economics research. In 1939 he writes:

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theme of discussion among economists. Economists cannot solve the problem. They can only explore human behavior, especially as conditioned by economic factors, with the hope of directing proper lines of conduct... The economist is equipped or should be equipped to set up a balance sheet of costs and income connected with the utilization or conservation of a given resource to guide the owner or the state in making decisions.

Practicing what he preached, Wehrwein was the nation's foremost authority on rural land use planning and zoning in the 1930s and 40s. He served on the Land Committee of the National Resources Planning Board. He was instrumental in the rural zoning movement in Wisconsin. Within six years after the first Wisconsin county adopted a rural zoning ordinance in 1933 another twenty-four counties followed suit, effectively preventing agricultural and year-round residential settlement of over 5,300,000 acres of submarginal land (one-seventh of the state). The rural zoning concept soon spread to many other states, and within thirty years more than 400 counties in thirty-three states had adopted zoning ordinances. Wehrwein served on the Wisconsin State Planning Board for many years and at the time of his death was serving as vice president of the American Society of Planning Officials.

Wehrwein's research interests encompassed not only land tenure, but also land use in the rural-urban fringe, rural planning and zoning, isolated settlement, forest taxation, soil and water conservation, recreational land use, and public land management. Many of

his studies were pioneering approaches to land economics research. His seminal article on "The Rural-Urban Fringe" in the July 1942 issue of *Economic Geography* provided the theoretical framework for the numerous researchers worldwide who

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continue to address the problems of urban expansion into rural areas.

Wehrwein's approach was institutional, which he combined with a necessary understanding of technical factors bearing on each research problem. In 1941 Wehrwein writes, "The land economist must not only consider human institutions but also have some understanding of biotic, ecological re-

lationships and the impact of man on his environment in so far as these affect the relationship of man to man in the efforts of men to live collectively."

A prolific author, Wehrwein is perhaps best remembered for the textbook *Land Economics*, which he coauthored with Ely. Originally printed in mimeographed versions for student use beginning in the late 1920s, this classic was published as a book by Macmillan in 1940 and reprinted by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1964. He studied extensively, and at the time of his death was preparing to write a volume about the land economy of biblical times.

Kind and gentle, unimpressive in appearance yet universally respected as a person and scholar, Wehrwein died on January 10, 1945. In an obituary written for the *American Economic Review*, Leonard A. Salter, Jr., gave tribute. "Professor Wehrwein was both a great intellect and a rare personality. An assiduous investigator, he was in orderly possession of a vast store of information pertaining to the relations among men arising out of their common interest in the land."

In less than a quarter-century after receiving his PhD, Wehrwein had elaborately built upon the Ely foundation of thought. Zealous in his real-world application and testing of land economics theory, Wehrwein produced a higher tradition of land economics research conducted in the public interest. ■

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