“The Rest of the Story” was a daily radio program originally hosted by Paul Harvey in the 1970s through the 1990s. Mr. Harvey would tell a story about some forgotten fact or person then conclude the story by revealing an interesting fact that had been held back; such as the true identity of the person ([click here for an example](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytbQ1PnCUio)). Mr. Harvey would conclude his broadcast by saying “And now you know the rest of the story.” The Friday Footnote this week is “the rest of the story” concerning the fight in the 1930s about having girls in the FFA.

The fact that Massachusetts had girls in the FFA was first discovered in the summer of 1933 when the Essex Chapter entry in the National Chapter Contest listed five girls as members. This discovery prompted the National FFA President at the time, Vernon Howell, to write to the Massachusetts state advisor, Rufus Stimson, the following (Letters, p. 3, 6/16/1933):

“It is impossible …to accept the entry of the Essex Chapter…since you have indicated you have five girls who are members…I am greatly surprised that girls have been allowed membership….No girl student in vocational agriculture will be allowed active membership…unless Massachusetts complies with…the constitution drastic action…will be necessary.”

Simson responded to Mr. Howell with a four page letter (Letters, p. 4-8, 7/12/1933 ). The key points made by Stimson were:

In applying for a national FFA charter, Massachusetts used the first FFA constitution as a guide which did not restrict membership to just males. However, the national FFA changed the constitution to exclude females and was not willing to accept the Massachusetts constitution as it was. So the state constitution was revised but still stated that membership in the state association was for both boys and girls. However, a clause was added to the state constitution that only males would be proposed for national office, honors or contest. The belief was that a state should have some say in how it operated as a state. As far as Stimson knew, this revision in the state constitution was acceptable to the National FFA since a charter was then awarded to Massachusetts. Stimson had never been told anything differently.

When the Essex application was submitted for the national chapter contest (along with two other chapters in Massachusetts), Stimson had asked W. A. Ross the National FFA Executive Secretary to treat as erased the names of the five girls from Essex. If this was not acceptable, Stimson then was willing to withdraw the application even though Stimson thought it was not really fair to the 195 boy members of such an outstanding chapter.

Stimson concluded the letter to President Howell by stating that allowing girls as members was ”fair play and sound vocational education policy” (Letters, p. 6). He pointed out that 4-H, which used public funds, had both boys and girls. Stimson further stated “You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by permitting us to continue membership in the National FFA.” It was also stated “We are willing to accept your slap on the wrist for the error [listing girls as members in the chapter contest]. You need have no fear of ever being disturbed again by a similar offering from our state.”

Stimson closed the letter by pleading for a “modest degree of self-determination” or to “put through a constitutional amendment that will permit it” (Letters, p. 7).

Apparently Stimson shared his letter with others in the state because he received a letter dated July 17, 1933 (Letters, p. 13) from F. E. Heald, the head teacher trainer supporting his stance, Heald reinforced what Stimson said “The charter for the Massachusetts Association was granted after the State reservations regarding membership had been fully explained and with the proviso that sex, race or creed could not be required as a credential for local membership in this state.” Heald goes on to say “This illustrates an inherent weakness in the whole plan. Mr. Howell and his associates had no part in the earlier understanding three years ago. Today they are officious and full of power.” Then Heald says because of the benefits to the members he hoped this would blow over; otherwise he would say “Withdraw at once.”

Howell was not very receptive to Stimson’s letter. His response (Letters, p. 7, 8/1/1933) to Stimson included such phrases as “I say again…” and “This is a boys organization” and “I will take the matter up again with the executive committee…and will advise you immediately regarding having “girl students upon your state roll.” FFA Executive Secretary Ross sent a letter (Letters, p. 7, 8/9/1933) to FFA President Howell stating the letter to Stimson was good and “The only thing we can do is to put this matter up to the boys and let them settle in at the national convention.”

The delegates at the 1933 convention, after learning that Massachusetts had girls as members of the FFA, voted to give Massachusetts three months to conform to the national constitution or be suspended. Apparently Stimson was not at the 1933 convention and learned of the decision in a letter from Bobby Jones, the new FFA President dated November 26, 1933 (I don’t have a copy of that letter but Stimson’s response gives an idea of what was in the letter) .

Stimson’s response to President Jones was somewhat terse (Letters, p. 23, 12/28/1933). Stimson’s first volley was that the Jones letter needed to be corrected because the decision in Kansas City was not unanimous as Jones stated because the Massachusetts delegate had voted against it. Then the zinger – Stimson pointed out that the National Advisory Council for the FFA had not approved of this action, thus the decision was not official.

When the FFA was established, the governance of the organization had not been carefully thought out (Tenney, A. W., 1977). A Board of Trustees had been established and was comprised of the six national FFA officers and two adults (the elected national advisor and elected secretary-treasurer). Questions were raised about the legality of having a Board of Trustees comprised primarily of minors. Would there actions be legal (or tempered with wisdom)?

It was then decided that a National Advisory Council should be created to “approve” the actions of the delegates and Board of Trustees. A bylaw to the national constitution was added at the 1930 convention creating a National Advisory Council. The bylaw stated “The Advisory Council shall possess the power of approval at all times of the actions of the Board of Trustees and delegates to the National Congress.” Accordingly, an advisory council comprised of four state supervisors from the four administrative regions and the chief of the Ag Ed Service in the Federal Board for Vocational Education was established in 1931.

Stimson was correct in his statement that just because the delegates had passed a motion it was not binding until approved by the National Advisory Committee. Stimson further mentioned they had not made a public issue of having girls as members and was not trying to dictate what should happen nationally or in other states. Stimson concluded by stating “All we have asked has been the right to control our State and local F. F. A. affairs in such a way as to be in accord with the Constitution of our Commonwealth” (Letters, p. 23, 12/28/1933).

W. J. Weaver, state supervisor in New York, was a member of the FFA Advisory Council and was supportive of the Massachusetts position. In a letter to Stimson (Letters, p. 15, 11/28/1933) he revealed that he had proposed a constitutional change to the FFA constitution supporting the rights of states to determine their internal affairs. He was not successful, but at least a seed had been planted.

In a letter dated December 18, 1933 to C. H. Lane , the national FFA advisor, Weaver asked that the members of the Advisory Council be asked to veto the actions of the delegates at the 1933 convention. Lane did send out letters to the Advisory Council members asking for their opinion. They voted 3-1 to suspend Massachusetts (see the Letters, p. 18-22, 25-26, 29).

The next person to join the fray was Massachusetts State Director of Vocational Education, R. O Small. He sent a letter to the National FFA Advisor Lane (Letters, p. 27, 12/30/1933) and said that “Travel to Boston on the F.F. A. issue would be a waste of time and money (Lane had suggested doing so in a letter to Stimson dated Dec. 28, 1933). Small told Lane to pass the Weaver amendment and stop the “unsound membership restriction.” Furthermore, Director Small said “I shall not approve expenditure of public funds for the support of any program in Massachusetts which draws a line against race, religion, color or sex…”

After learning the other members of the Advisory Council would not veto the actions of the delegates at the last convention Weaver again wrote Lane (Letters, p. 31, 1/13/1934) and implored him to employ any legitimate way to stay action on the motion to suspend Massachusetts. Weaver indicated his request was not a personal matter (it should be noted that New York did have some girls as members of the FFA) but was based on his responsibility as a member of the Advisory committee to see that FFA policies put into action are sound.

Weaver then proposed a new amendment to be placed before the 1934 convention allowing states “where no line of race, religion or sex can legally be drawn” to be allowed membership in the national FFA with the understanding only males could compete at the national level. Weaver concluded his letter by urging Lane to “find a way to hold definite action” on Massachusetts and to “give your support of this proposition” at the next FFA convention.

Lane responded to Weaver (Letters, p. 36, 2/15/1934) and said he would do what he could about staying the suspension and recommended that Weaver’s amendment be discussed at the regional conferences to be held in the spring.

On February 27, 1934 Lane (Letters, p. 38-41) wrote each member of the Advisory Council and suggested that action regarding Massachusetts be put on hold until the next convention. Lane said he had talked with many state leaders and “everyone seems to be of the opinion that we should not go too hastily in the elimination of any State from the national organization.”

Lane then wrote the National FFA President, Bobby Jones, and informed him that the Advisory Council unanimously voted to stay final action on the suspension of Massachusetts (Letters, p. 43, 3/21/1934). On the same day, Lane wrote Stimson informing him of this decision (Letters, p. 44, 3/21/1934).

At the regional meetings of state leaders held in the spring and summer of 1934 the Massachusetts situation was discussed along with the Weaver amendment. The North Atlantic region agreed with the Weaver amendment (Letters, p. 45-46) and passed a resolution supporting amending the constitution to allow states to have female members. The Southern region was also in agreement but the other two regions were not (Letters, p. 55).

In a memo (Letters, p. 47-48) to the Massachusetts teachers of agriculture in October of 1934, Stimson shared the proposed constitutional amendment but acknowledged the 1934 national FFA Advisory Council was split 2-2 on the change and that Mr. J. A. Linke , the NEW acting chief of Agricultural Education Service would ultimately be the deciding vote. Lane has been reassigned, and now there was a new player in the game. Stimson stated that Mr. Linke wanted to come to Massachusetts in December to investigate the situation for himself.

Frank Lathrop, an agricultural education research specialist for the Agricultural Education Service, attempted to bring closure to the Massachusetts Situation. After attending the Western Regional Conference he wrote a memo to J. A. Linke (Letters, p. 57-58, 6/4/1935) expressing concern about the lack of understanding of the Massachusetts situation and misinformation (such as girls could compete in national contests) at the conference. Lathrop stated “The sentiment of the group ran strong against the Massachusetts state supervisor.”

Lathrop was in favor of the recent compromise provision that allowed girls to be state members but not compete at the national level. Lathrop wrote “There are two arguments in favor of accepting this agreement as a solution to the problem. The first is that it will eliminate girls from contests and permit 600 boys to retain membership in the F.F.A. The second arguments is that this solution will avoid raising what seems to me a very serious question, i. e. whether the constitution of the F.F.A. should discriminate between sexes. The expulsion of Massachusetts would raise the question whether an organization which functions as a part of the public school … may make a membership discrimination between sexes.” Lathrop then raised the question would it be OK to have an English club or a science club in high schools excluding girls from membership.

Lathrop concludes his letter by stating that if his reasoning is sound “we need to do some missionary work with those persons who are to decide this matter…”

Now back to Massachusetts. At the state FFA convention in March of 1936 a resolution was passed reaffirming the stance of the Massachusetts FFA Association (Letters, p. 66-67, 4/26/1936). The resolution said they had acted in good faith and “We are unable to comply with the ruling discriminating against female membership even if we found it otherwise desirable, because it is contrary to the constitutional provisions of Massachusetts governing the use of public funds in public education...” The resolution also stated that Massachusetts would decline to forward dues or surrender their charter. This resolution was sent to the national leadership of the FFA and the state FFA advisors in other states. It looks like the line was drawn in the sand.

After finally receiving a copy of the 1936 FFA Convention proceedings (the national leadership was notoriously slow in sending out the convention proceedings, Letters, p. 56) the State Vocational Director Small sent a memo to Stimson (Letters, p. 70-71, 8/19/1937) with a copy going to Linke. A motion passed at the 1936 national FFA convention called for getting a ruling from the Massachusetts Attorney General. Small took great umbrage at this notion. He said “it would be ridiculous for us to ask the Attorney General a question to which the answer is so elementary and patent…We would not only be ridiculous, but we would be unwise. We would precipitate trouble for all concerned.” Small quoted provision of Article 46 in the state constitution which supported the Massachusetts position and said there was a whole line of opinions, court cases and court decision that upheld this provision of the constitution. Small was concerned that if the FFA foolishly pursued their line of action, and if other state and national legislators learned of this, it might imperil the whole system of vocational education.

In response to the Small memo, Linke sent a letter to Stimson (Letters, p. 72-73, no date) and agreed that the Massachusetts Attorney General should not be consulted. Linke further stated that he had “inherited this whole controversy” from Lane and was making “an honest effort to solve this problem”. Linke admonished Stimson for making public his side of the story and said this handicapped efforts to find a solution. Linke also said there was a plan to be brought to the Advisory Council and Board of Trustees at the next convention in Kansas City.

The final document in my file was a memo sent by Stimson on August 25, 1937 (Letters, p. 75-77) addressed to “Those Responsible for Sound Vocational Agricultural Education and Future Farmers of America Policy and Procedure.” The subject line was “Revision of the National F. F. A. Constitution with Reference to Membership”. Stimson reviewed the history of the Massachusetts situation and stated that the current stance of the national FFA was “indefensible” given that fact that public funds were supporting the enterprise. He encouraged the adoption of a provision “in the national F.F. A. Constitution now in process of revision” that would allow states like Massachusetts to have girls as members at the state level.

And now the rest of the story – a change in the FFA constitution and bylaws was passed at the 1937 FFA convention that allowed states with legal provisions against discrimination to retain membership in the National FFA provided that girls did not compete in national contests. After a long and determined battle, Stimson and Massachusetts won the battle. But the real winners were the girls of Massachusetts who wanted to be members of the FFA.

Stimson retired four months after the 1937 National FFA Convention. Since Stimson had a degree in divinity perhaps his favorite Bible verse was 2 Timothy 4:7 – I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

The Friday Footnote for next week is The Age of Aquarius - the 1960s and Girls in the FFA

**Acknowledgment:**

The work and effort of Frankie Farbotko, agricultural teacher at Cape Fear High School in Fayetteville, NC was invaluable in preparing this Friday Footnote. Some years ago Frankie contacted the FFA archivist at the IUPUI library and requested copies of letters between Rufus Stimson and others regarding the Massachusetts situation. While I had some of the letters in my files, Mr. Farbotko gathered many more from the FFA Archives and they were indispensable in piecing together this Footnote.

**References:**

Letters about the Massachusetts Situation (A compilation of letters from the National FFA Archives)

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