

telling the story

BY TROY SMITH

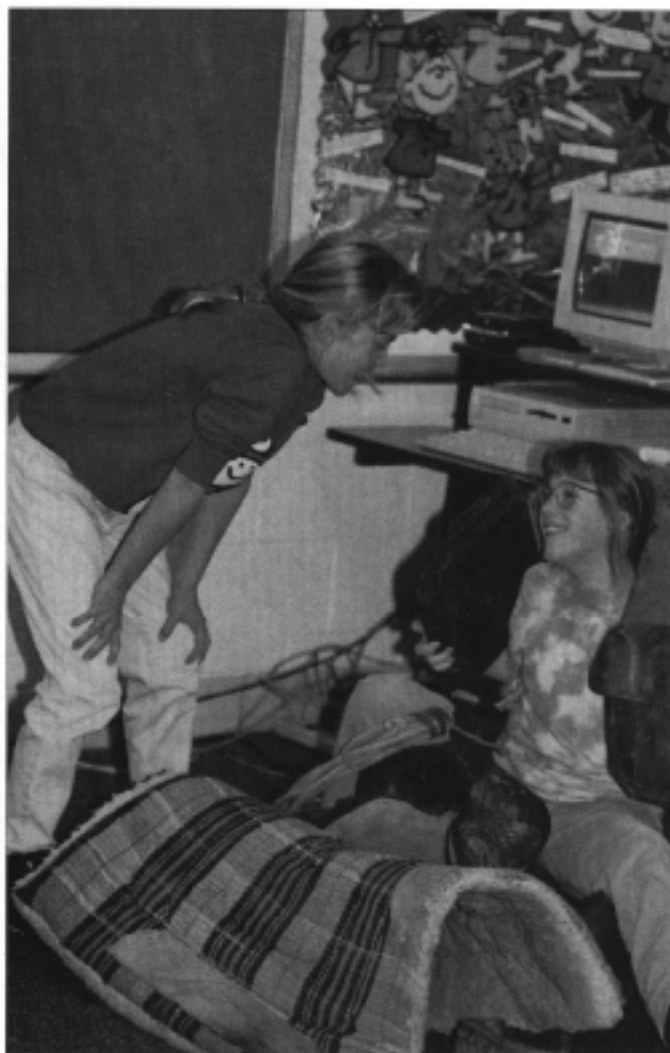
There was a time when a journey over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house brought city dwellers back to their agricultural roots. It really wasn't that long ago that a majority of Americans had at least one close relative on a farm or ranch.

Today, however, with little more than 2% of our population involved in production agriculture, the average American is five generations away from the land. Those severed ties to agriculture mean urban children grow up with little understanding of how food and a myriad of other products are produced and processed.

Agricultural literacy means understanding the interdependence between all consumers and agriculture. And one of the best ways to share agriculture's story with young consumers is through "show and tell."

That's what National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) members did during the American Royal Livestock Show in Kansas City. The effort was part of the Royal's "World of Agriculture" exhibit toured by more than 17,000 metro-area school children. Through NJAA's live-animal demonstrations, the children were shown how cattle are readied for exhibition and told about how cattle are raised and cared for on the farm and ranch.

"The demonstrations sparked



In a hands-on demonstration, fourth graders learn about tools of the cowboy's trade.

lots of questions from the audience," says American Angus Association Junior Activities Director James Fisher. "It reinforced my belief that we don't do enough to help educate people outside of agriculture about our industry."

Sharing that belief is Angus breeder Tim Nollette, Nenzel, Neb., who wears two hats. In

addition to ranching, Nollette is a science teacher. He wears both hats at once serving as state and national spokesman for the Young Farmers/Ranchers Education Association. With 15,000 members nationally, the group's mission is to develop agricultural leadership and hone members' abilities to articulate agriculture's story. Members

take their own "show and tell" programs to fourth-grade classrooms in cities where the association's annual meetings are held.

"From animal rights and environmental extremists, agriculture is repeatedly attacked," says Nollette. "The only way to battle that — if you are a minority — is to convince the majority that agriculture is good and that the people involved in it do good things."

To spread the good word, Nollette brings his cowboy gear — saddle, ropes and other tools of the trade — along with comparison photographs showing how proper range management benefits the environment. He explains how cattle depend on ranchers for care and how ranchers depend on the sale of their cattle for money to support their own families. Nollette tries to leave children with the message that farmers and ranchers are just like other people, but their jobs are to turn crops and livestock into the food, clothes and other products that people need every day.

Nollette and his family also participate as pen pals in the Nebraska Agriculture in the Classroom (AITC) program. That involves year-long correspondence with children in an urban classroom, sending letters and pictures describing life on the ranch.

"We sent pictures showing different activities throughout the seasons — feeding in winter,

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calving, moving to new pasture and treating sick animals. We sent pictures of my own kids doing their chores. And the letters that came back were full of questions. They don't know what we do or how we do it, so there's a real need to communicate our message — in rural towns too. Even there, many families are not involved in production agriculture, so we can't assume they understand."

Nollette's pen-pal experience was coordinated by Nebraska AITC Director Ellen Hellerich. AITC programs exist in all 50 states, and Hellerich says all receive funding through nonprofit foundations similar to the Nebraska Foundation for Agricultural Awareness.

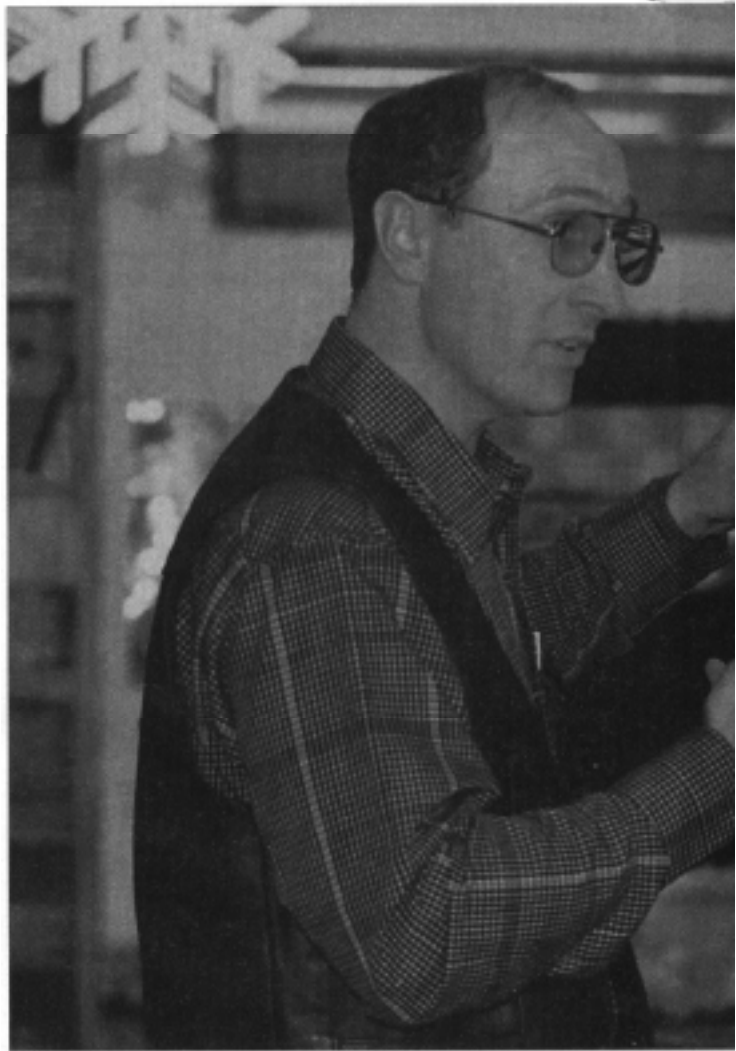
Nebraska's AITC program was launched in 1982, a year after then U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary John Block and agricultural industry leaders recommended the concept of a nationwide effort promoting agricultural literacy. A national office in Washington, D.C. helps with networking and publishes lists of available resources, but state AITC programs receive no federal funding, nor are there federal mandates for program content.

"Each state develops its own program adapted to state or local school district curriculums," explains Hellerich. "Funding through a foundation allows individuals as well as businesses and organizations to make tax-deductible donations. The Foundation includes representation from various farm groups, commodity organizations and agribusinesses, but also from educational groups. We have to have that mix because this is all about providing truly educational programs."

As in many states, a major thrust of Nebraska's AITC is continuing education for

teachers. Hellerich works with school administrators to explain how agriculture can be a vehicle to carry lessons in the basic subjects like math, science and social studies. Teachers learn how through AITC summer workshops, which include classroom instruction and time spent developing curricular projects. They also tour farms and ranches for close encounters with the production side of agriculture. Producers and agency personnel cover conservation and environmental issues, while visits to agribusinesses offer insight into the processing and distribution of agricultural products.

The goal, adds Hellerich, is to send teachers back to their classrooms with a better understanding of the industry and armed with innovative ideas about how agriculture and natural resources information can be incorporated into creative lessons for teaching the required subjects.



California farmers talk about plants and farming practices with urban students in San Francisco, Calif.



Nebraska Angus breeder Tim Nollette participates in the Ag in the Classroom Pen Pal Program and carries the agricultural message through show-and-tell presentations in elementary classrooms. Here, Nollette explains how cattlemen's range management practices benefit the environment.

Teacher Larry Fethkenher appreciates the fact that the workshops count for college credit and that AITC resource materials fit curriculum objectives at Omaha's Benson West Elementary School.

"My inner-city students look forward to Ag in the Classroom days," tells Fethkenher. "They like learning about livestock and crops and we incorporate that with the basics. In math, we'll calculate weights of livestock, how much feed they might eat and return on a farmer's investment. We have guest speakers come in — like a pork producer, a soybean grower and a dairy farmer. And we correspond with our farm family pen pals. The pictures and videos that family has sent, along with an end-of-the-year field trip to their farm, really brings the agricultural concepts to reality. The children are more aware that not a day goes by that agriculture doesn't impact their lives."

California's long running

AITC program, began in 1980, with agricultural field trips for elementary teachers in the San Francisco area. It grew into a kindergarten- 12th grade program administered by the California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom. Director Mark Linder says the

programs annual budget has grown from \$30,000 to \$1.2 million.

"Our goal is to budget one dollar per year for each of the state's 6 million students," says Linder. "That's not much to invest to help our future voters understand how important agriculture is to their lives. Soon enough, they will be helping make decisions about land and water use."

California also conducts teacher training during the summer and, like Nebraska and several other states, a student teacher program targets individuals about to enter the teaching profession. Its purpose is to share agriculture's message with student teachers and to inform them about inexpensive and free agricultural resources for the classroom. Linder says response from universities has been gratifying, with many professors requesting that the program be presented to all student teacher classes.

Another California project is the "Imagine this..." writing contest. The competition creates public awareness by encouraging elementary students to share, in story, what they have learned about agriculture. Winning entries are illustrated and animated by high school students for incorporation into a video.

Distribution of quality

educational resource materials is the goal of all AITC programs, and the Colorado Foundation for Agriculture has found success in its *Colorado Reader*. Patterned after the familiar *Weekly Reader*, Colorado's AITC teaching tool is available to elementary teachers upon request, along with accompanying teachers' guides and colorful posters.

A new issue of *Colorado Reader* is published every month, except December, with each issue centering on a different theme, such as animal production, specific crops, conservation and the environment. Lessons about Colorado agriculture are

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Teachers may receive graduate credit for participation in Ag in the Classroom summer workshops like this one near Scottsbluff, Neb. Here, the teachers learn about differences in range plants, but trips also include visits to facilities where agricultural products are researched, processed and marketed.

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included along with fun experiments, math quizzes and word puzzles involving the concepts covered in that issue. And now, according to program

Consequences, another resource to help students understand the dilemmas facing agriculture today.” AITC coordinators across the

in my secondary school science classes when I give examples of good stewardship and ecologically responsible behavior towards the

That response from an enlightened teacher should tell the agricultural community that its urban neighbors are interested in agriculture’s story.

The average American is five generations away from the land.

director Bette Blinde, new high-tech teaching tools are being added to the list of AITC resources.

“Available in the spring will be an interactive CD ROM to help students learn about the challenges facing modern agriculture while they practice computer skill,” explains Blinde. “And we’re on the internet with Choices and

country report that a majority of educators are very receptive to the programs and materials offered. When information is presented factually, most are willing to learn more about agriculture. And when they are exposed to creative teaching materials, they are anxious to share the world of agriculture with their students.

“Agriculture will now be used

environment,” says Diana Barnhart of San Luis Obispo County, Calif. “My farm visit was full of crops and birds, spiders, bees and healthy waterways. I expected more negative trade-offs. I always found the ag community to be rather closed. Now I think they are just close to each other and too tired at the end of the day to seek out the rest of us.”

Agricultural literacy programs are helping to tell it.

For more information or the address of your state’s agricultural literacy program, contact: Ag in the Classroom, Room 4307, South Bldg., U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250-0991.

