A Timely Invention:

The Evolution of *The Progressive Farmer* and *Southern Living*

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Abstract

Magazines, as any medium, face cultural and economic upheavals that threaten their survival. Often, even the most successful mass market magazines outlive their usefulness if they fail to respond to trends in editorial content, advertising demands and expectations for qualified circulation. Some titles, however, have weathered these storms through adaptability. *The Progressive Farmer,* published since 1886 and still thriving, is an example of this adaptability. One of the key points in its existence was the creation of *Southern Living* within the magazine's pages in 1963, and its subsequent spin-off as a stand-alone title in 1966. The new magazine allowed the business behind both titles to retain its circulation penetration in the American South, and to offer qualified audiences to both consumer advertisers and specialized agricultural advertisers. As the trend toward niche publications escalated in the late 1960s, *The Progressive Farmer* stood ready to serve its specialized audience. Through careful timing, well-planned circulation strategies, and sound editorial and business acumen, *The Progressive Farmer*'s leadership responded to social and cultural trends, presenting a case study of evolution and survival in the magazine industry.

Introduction

"Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time." Theodore Roosevelt's words serve as an oft-repeated maxim in the memoirs of Eugene Butler, whose career with the American South's oldest magazine, *The Progressive Farmer,* spanned 75 years. *The Progressive Farmer* itself is 125 years old. While that amount of time alone is impressive, it may be timing, along with a willingness to respond to economic and social trends, that stands as the most impressive qualities in the magazine's long history.

In fact, timing and response may have meant the difference between extinction or survival for *The Progressive Farmer*. Launched in 1886 as a broadsheet amongst a bevy of other agricultural publications of the period, *The Progressive Farmer* evolved by the early twentieth century into a mass interest magazine for the agrarian South. By mid-century, as farm families began to respond to the draw of the suburbs and industrial jobs in the South, the magazine faced a change-or-suffer situation. Like many mass magazines of the period, it was outliving its usefulness as a general interest reflection of the culture.

Through access to primary sources such as letters, journals, memoirs, financial records, and magazine issues from the archives of *Progressive Farmer* and *Southern Living,* this paper will examine, in cultural and economic terms, the origin story of arguably the most successful regional magazine in publishing history and its role in the survival of its parent title. Both magazines are still in print today, thanks in no small part to the foresight and impeccable timing of the visionary leadership that created *Southern Living* in 1963 and the continued evolution of *The Progressive Farmer* in the years since.

From its launch in 1886, *The Progressive Farmer* strived to be both a beacon of serious journalism and the reflection of a lifestyle. The publication, founded in Raleigh,

North Carolina, and moved to its current home in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1921, covered the business of agriculture with a weighty, earnest approach that reflected the significance of agribusiness in the economy of the American South. Farming was also a way of life in the South—more specifically, a lifestyle—during the first seven decades of *The Progressive Farmer*'s run. While much of its audience saw it as essential to their business, it was equally reflective of the agrarian and, in turn, Southern lifestyle in the way magazines such as *LIFE* and *Look* reflected American life as a whole.[1]

Indeed, *The Progressive Farmer* found its place equally at home in the farm office, the kitchen, and on the coffee table, and its readers seemed to find it indispensible. The fervor is perhaps best exemplified by one of the magazine's own justifiably confident promotional ads in its centennial issue. A background photo depicted a pair of glasses, an issue of *The Progressive Farmer*, and the biggest bestseller in the history of publishing, the Bible. The tagline: "For the last 100 years, only one other book has been more closely read by Southern farmers."[2]

The Progressive Farmer was that rare thing in the magazine business: a dual-audience publication. At its peak circulation, 1.4 million in 1959, it crossed gender lines as easily as it crossed the line between trade magazine and consumer magazine.[3] Advertisers in the agribusiness sector—seed companies, equipment manufacturers, and the emerging agricultural chemical industry—coveted the family farmers in the audience

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[1] William H. Taft, *American Magazines for the 1980s* (New York: Hastings House, 1982), 208. Other major works offering overviews of the history and evolution of regional and American magazines include: David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America* (Cresskill, NJ: 1996), Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines Vol. IV: 1885-1905* (Cambridge, MA: 1957), John William Tebbel, *The American Magazine: A Compact History* (New York; 1969), John William Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine In America: 1740-1990* (New York: 1991), and Roland Edgar Wolseley, *Understanding Magazines* (Ames, IA: 1969).

[2] "Congratulations to *Progressive Farmer…"* advertisement, *Progressive Farmer,* February 1986, C-26.

[3] Taft, *American Magazines*, 209.

and their businesses. Consumer advertisers, from automobile manufacturers to household items, were drawn to the magazine for its audience penetration in an otherwise difficult-to-tap region and its pass-along readership.[4]

An important aspect of dual-audience success was the magazine's coverage and recognition of women on the farm. The "home" section of *The Progressive Farmer*, with its recipes, house plans, and even advice columns, captivated female readership and helped establish the magazine's footing in the lifestyle market.[5] More significantly, though, the foresight to recognize the female role on the farm would have an impact beyond the advertising and circulation success of *The Progressive Farmer*.

When the economic landscape of the South began to shift from agriculture to manufacturing, that recognition would allow the editors of *The Progressive Farmer* to both reinvent their own magazine and launch a new one, helping the legacy title survive in a shrinking farm market and propelling its offspring, *Southern Living*, to become one of the most compelling success stories in the history of the medium. Within ten years of its 1966 launch, *Southern Living* became the most profitable magazine in America,[6] and a template for all other regional magazines to emulate.[7] *The Progressive Farmer* would transition to fill a niche as a dedicated magazine for professional farmers, embodying the best aspects of trade magazines with effective, serious journalism to help Southern farmers find new ways to make and save money in their businesses.[8]

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[4] "Only Your Rexall Store," advertisement, *The Progressive Farmer*, February 1962, 81. "New Ranges," advertisement, ibid., 83. "Wish You Had Her Poise?" advertisement, ibid., February 1962, 94.
[5] Taft, *American Magazines*, 209.
[6] Paul McDougall, "The Most Profitable Magazine in the U.S.," *Forbes*, June 15, 1977, 30.
[7] Sam G. Riley, "Specialized Magazines of the South," *Journalism Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 1982): 448.
[8] C.G. Scruggs to Those Interested, letter, June 3, 1986, Progressive Farmer Archives, Birmingham, AL. Scruggs noted that the magazine's turning point in writing about farm financial management, business organization, etc., was May 1973, when the magazine first wrote about "agricultural capitalism."

Literature Review

The first half of the twentieth century might be termed the golden age of the American magazine. For 50 years, through two world wars, the Great Depression, and the emergence of popular culture in the fledgling media of film, radio, and television, magazines were the vanguard of the traditional print medium.[9] Mass magazines had editorial offices spread across the country, with editors and writers both reporting to the main office and crafting content that would be placed in regional versions of mass magazines.[10]

While most historians view the media as having influence on society, Cultural historians see media as a product of their social and economic environment. Regional magazines, with their distinct content created by editors and publishers steeped in their regional culture, fit this description quite well. In the mid-twentieth century, historian Sidney Kobre argued that media history could not be understood without cultural considerations. Kobre argued that population shifts, growth, changes in labor and industry, and social reform transformed the news media and forced them to conform to new societal conditions.[11] The middle class was emerging, and even in the South, families were migrating to cities as opportunities for work emerged beyond the often-hardscrabble life of the family farmer. To serve this different market, old magazines had to change and new ones needed to emerge. It is difficult to imagine a better illustration of this concept than the birth of *Southern Living* from *The Progressive Farmer*'s lifestyle pages.

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[9] David Abrahamson, "Magazines in the Twentieth Century," In *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, ed. Margaret A. Blanchard (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 340-342.
[10] Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century,* 113.
[11] Sidney Kobre, *Modern American Journalism* (Tallahassee, FL: Institute of Media Research, 1959).

In examining magazines from an economic perspective, Theodore Peterson's *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* argued that magazines were successful only if they were able to ride the fence between editorial medium and advertising medium.[12] Certainly, *The Progressive Farmer* faced these challenges. As farming became more specialized, advertisers in agribusiness sought large-scale farmers; meanwhile, consumer advertisers wouldn't be as enthused about this specialized audience.[13]

Magazines, as any medium, face cultural and economic upheavals that threaten their survival. A.J. van Zuilen's work *The Life Cycle of Magazines* examines these upheavals with regard to mass market magazines, concluding that they outlive their usefulness and appeal over time.[14] In the late 1960s, the increasing specialization of the magazine industry was at fault. This trend, reflected in any mass medium as it comes of age, prompted van Zuilen to write that "there will be a definite ending sooner or later."

The Progressive Farmer, published since 1886 and still successful, is an example of a mass magazine that moved to specialization for survival. One of the key points in its survival was the spin-off of *Southern Living* in 1966, and the subsequent changes to the editorial focus of *The Progressive Farmer* this spin-off allowed. In the years leading up to the spin-off of *Southern Living*, *The Progressive Farmer* responded aptly to social and cultural trends, presenting a case study of evolution and survival in the magazine industry. Though the launch of the still-thriving *Southern Living* remains one of the most studied magazine stories in the genre, *The Progressive Farmer*'s story remains somewhat unrecognized.

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[12] Theodore Bernard Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 113.
[13] A.J. van Zuilen, *The Life Cycle of Magazines* (Uithoorn, The Netherlands: Graduate Press, 1977), 288.
[14] Ibid.

1950–1959: A Mass Magazine and a Mass Exodus

When *The Progressive Farmer* launched in 1886, it wasn't quite all business. Though the front page of its premiere issue was dominated by two solid agribusiness pieces,[15] page two and forward of the eight-page broadsheet contained content aimed not only squarely at the farm wife, but also leisure reading for the entire farm family as well. In fact, about one-third of the weekly's text was more "lifestyle" than "business," and its advertising reflected the same. The one-issue-young publication was already charting its course.[16]

Since its founding by Colonel L.L. Polk as a weekly agricultural newspaper, *The Progressive Farmer*'s leadership spent several decades gobbling up weaker competitors and their circulations on the way to establishing a monthly magazine with unprecedented and much-envied penetration in the American South. The acquisition of the publication in 1903 by one of its writers, Clarence Poe, who would become the venerable editor for the next fifty years, and the subsequent absorption five years later of *Southern Farm Gazette* and its owner, Dr. Tait Butler, set the stage for decades of success leading up to the mid-century mark.[17] The newly formed Progressive Farmer Company set its sights on mass circulation by acquisition. Poe and Butler determined that the cheapest way to increase circulation was to buy competitors, and they often did so at the most opportune time.[18]

Buying regional competitors also made geographic segmentation more economical, and ultimately more successful. Though geography as a means of mass

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[15] A.G. Fleming and N.H. Fleming, "Tobacco: How To Manage It," *The Progressive Farmer,* February 10, 1886, 1. C.W. Garrett, "Ensilage-Silos," ibid., 1.
[16] Agnes E. Mitchell, "When The Cows Come Home," ibid., 2. "Flashes of Fun," ibid., 7. "Household," ibid., 6. "Our Daughters Should Be Taught Housework," ibid., 3. "Things Worth Remembering," ibid., 3.
[17] Southern Progress Corporation, *A Brief History of Progressive Farmer* (Birmingham, AL: Southern Progress Corporation).
[18] Eugene Butler, "The Progressive Farmer Circulation Story," 1979, Southern Progress Corporation Archives, Birmingham, AL.

audience segmentation is generally seen as a post-World War II phenomenon in the mass media,[19] *The Progressive Farmer* had been regionalized since 1928, publishing no less than five regional editions: The Carolinas and Virginia; Georgia, Alabama, and Florida; Texas and Oklahoma; Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana; and Kentucky and Tennessee.[20] In fact, the publication had been versioned between Mid-South and Southeast editions when it was still a weekly in the early 1900s.[21]

The early, pre-Depression decades of the twentieth century were a golden age for agriculture, especially in the American South.[22] While the Dust Bowl years and the Great Depression laid the farm community low,[23] another World War brought agriculture roaring back in the 1940s. Chemical weed and insect control became commonplace, and production per acre soared across all commodities.[24] Between 1940 and 1948, working capital on Southern farms rose from $3.5 billion to $14.3 billion.[25] For every one dollar the Southern farmer earned in 1940, he earned $3.87 in 1949.[26]

By 1950, *The Progressive Farmer* had virtually perfected the concept of mass reach combined with regional specialization. Besides the mass appeal of the magazine in the South, *The Progressive Farmer* was buoyed by the new technological advancements in farming as advertisers clamored to reach an agricultural audience flush with new

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[19] Katherine Fry, "Regional Consumer Magazines and the Ideal White Reader: Constructing and Retaining Geography as Text," In *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. David Abrahamson (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1995), 186-204.
[20] Southern Progress Corporation, *A Brief History of Progressive Farmer*.
[21] Emory Cunningham, *85 Years In Service To The South: The Story of The Progressive Farmer Company* (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1975).
[22] Del Deterling, "1910-1919: The Golden Age of Agriculture," *The Progressive Farmer,* April 2011, 12.
[23] Del Deterling, "1920-1929: Hard Times Approach," *The Progressive Farmer,* May 2011, 7. Del Deterling, "1930-1939: The Dust Bowl Depression," *The Progressive Farmer,* June 2011, 13.
[24] Del Deterling, "1940-1949: Prosperity Returns To The Farm," *The Progressive Farmer,* August 2011, 8.
[25] Paul W. Chapman, "The South Outgained The Nation," *The Progressive Farmer,* May 1950, 19.
[26] Ibid.

money.[27] The magazine survived lean times through frugality and by continuing to buy up weak or struggling publications at fire-sale prices and commandeering their subscribers.[28] By the time Poe relinquished the editorship of the magazine to Tait Butler's son, Eugene, in 1953,[29] no other farm magazine in the region had enough circulation to present competition.[30] While *Successful Farming* and *Farm Journal* battled it out for ad dollars, territory, and circulation in the Midwest and Great Plains, *The Progressive Farmer* owned the South.[31]

The broad editorial interests, regional versions, pass-along readership, and shelf life were all very attractive to advertisers.[32] In 1954, only *Seventeen* and *Better Homes & Gardens* sold more lines of advertising nationally.[33] The supremacy of *The Progressive Farmer* was especially impressive given its larger physical size and capacity for more agate lines of advertising. While many monthly magazines, including *Seventeen* and *Better Homes & Gardens,* were published near what is now considered a standard trim size of 145 to 150 agate lines, or approximately 8.5 inches by 10.5 inches, *The Progressive Farmer* trimmed out at 184 agate lines.[34] Indeed, its only real competition for ad dollars in the South was television, and media buyers saw *The Progressive Farmer*'s ability to maintain its oversize trim size as a sign of strength.[35]

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Eugene Butler, 1951, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968, Southern Progress Corporation Archives, Birmingham, AL.
[29] Clarence Poe to Board of Directors, December, 1953, Southern Progress Corporation Archives, Birmingham, AL.
[30] Butler, 1951, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[31] Butler, 1951, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968. American Agricultural Editors' Association, *Farm Magazines, Milestones & Memories* (Birmingham, AL: Progressive Farmer Books, 1996), 92.
[32] Since the mid-1930s the magazine had been producing at least five distinct regional versions, each covering two or three Southern states.
[33] Butler, 1954, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[34] Donovan Harris, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, November 10, 2011.
[35] Butler, 1953, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.

Still, all was not well in the editorial and sales offices of *The Progressive Farmer,* as the landscape its writers and salespeople covered was shifting radically. While farmers and their families profited from the high prices of their products in the 1940s and a brief price burst during the Korean War, their population was creeping into the cities.[36] Manufacturing jobs offering life-long benefits were attractive to some farmers, especially those who lacked the land to farm on a large scale. In 1940, almost 16 million people practiced agriculture in the South. A staggering 42 percent of the region's people lived on farms. By 1950, the number was down to 11 million.[37]

Further improvements in mechanization, plant and livestock genetics, and land stewardship meant that farmers who could afford the advancements could expand. In spite of fewer people making their living from the land, total acres in production rose, and the average farm size grew. In 1950, farmers, on average, worked 206 acres. Ten years later, that number would be 303 acres, a 50 percent increase.[38]

Another change for *The Progressive Farmer* was that for the first half of the twentieth century magazines had the mass audience to themselves as the lone vehicle for national advertising.[39] After 1950, magazines such as *The Progressive Farmer* were suddenly competing with television, an essentially free visual medium with enormous reach that attracted both eyeballs and ad dollars. Between 1950 and 1955, advertising revenue in television increased ten-fold, from $38 million to $406 million.[40] The decline of the mass magazine and the rise of television, along with the cultural and economic

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[36] Numan V. Bartley, "The Making of the Modern South," In *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press and The Littlefield Fund for Southern History of The University of Texas, 1995), 105-146.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Del Deterling, "1950-1959: The Great Exodus," *The Progressive Farmer,* September 2011, 7.
[39] James Aucoin, "The Media and Reform," in *The Media in America,* 8th edition, ed. Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2011), 309-324.
[40] Butler, 1956, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.

changes in its bread-and-butter region, the South, created dilemmas for *The Progressive Farmer*'s leadership on every front of the business: editorial, advertising, and circulation.[41]

Editorially, *The Progressive Farmer* was determined to compete with television. Besides the farm-specific content, with which no television network could compete, Clarence Poe, who was still on board as a senior editor of the magazine, encouraged Butler to upgrade the magazine's production value, using more color and photography.[42] The magazine also initially broadened its editorial scope, buying house plans from the bankrupt *Holland's* magazine and hiring its house plans editor.[43] The program was a success, and the ranch-style homes found in the magazine's house plans pages still dot the Southern landscape today. In January of 1954, *The Progressive Farmer* ran its first four-color spread, and it is no coincidence that it was an eye-catching story on Athos Menaboni, touted as the magazine's "favorite cover artist."[44] The following month, the cover of the magazine featured a small farm shop with three tractors, two of them wheeled and one of them tracked, over the headline "Modern Power and Equipment Are Remaking Dixie."[45]

The headline could not have been more true, and advertisers were taking notice. Whereas the general interest and mass appeal of *The Progressive Farmer* had been attractive to media buyers in a predominantly agrarian market, the magazine's agricultural advertisers were beginning to value specialization over generalization.

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Butler, 1954, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Romaine Smith, "An Italian Boy Who Loved Birds Became Our Favorite Cover Artist," *The Progressive Farmer,* January 1954, 36.
[45] Cover, *The Progressive Farmer,* February 1954.

Manufacturers of hardcore commercial agriculture goods, such as high-horsepower tractors, agricultural chemicals, and seed, had trouble understanding the need for general interest content in a farm magazine. Creators of consumer goods were plying their wares on television, and suddenly *The Progressive Farmer* seemed a hard sell. In 1958, the magazine suffered a revenue drop of 12.4 percent, the largest in its history. Of that lost revenue, 88 percent came in the consumer category. Still, Poe and Butler held fast.
In his memoirs, Butler recalls a 1957 sales meeting at which he quoted a 1938 letter his father, Dr. Tait Butler, had written to Clarence Poe:

> The more experience I have the more convinced I become that the advertiser must not be allowed to think he can influence editorial policies. (W)e should stand on the proposition that what is good for Southern farm people is best not only for *The Progressive Farmer* but also for those who use its advertising columns.[46]

The Progressive Farmer would continue, Butler said, to serve the entire farm family, and it would be up to salespeople to educate media buyers as such.

Oddly, even as circulation reached an all-time high of 1.4 million in 1959,[47] the magazine's mass audience was becoming something of an albatross. For advertisers and publishers who understood specialization, finding the largest audience was no longer the goal; it was about finding the right audience.[48] While *The Progressive Farmer* certainly owned the Southern farm audience, it also had a great deal of non-farm circulation. Many of these non-farm subscribers had lived on the farm at one time, but had taken their subscriptions to *The Progressive Farmer* to town with them. Still others may have still lived on the farm, but didn't practice agriculture on a large enough scale to attract advertisers. As early as 1951, editors at *The Progressive Farmer* questioned the efficacy

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[46] Butler, 1957, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[47] Butler, 1959, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[48] David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996), 70.

of keeping those loosely or indirectly connected to farming on the subscriber list. W.C. Lassetter, the editor of the Kentucky-Tennessee-West Virginia version of the magazine working from its Memphis office, suggested in a 1951 letter that the magazine recommend to readers with 40 acres or less that they try to "work up to 80 or 120 acres" to add income and production to their operations.[49] Executive Editor Alexander Nunn replied that even then the magazine could do little for farmers with less than 20 acres, and that the focus should be on farms 50 acres and up.[50]

In spite of the business dilemmas, the decade closed with good news. Along with 1959's record circulation, an accounting quirk, due to a change in tax laws from the previous year, resulted in a cash windfall for the company.[51] In 1958, Congress revised tax laws to allow publications to report subscription income as it was earned rather than as it was received. In other words, if a subscriber paid five dollars for a five-year subscription, *The Progressive Farmer* could report one dollar a year rather than five dollars in the first year. The change became effective in the 1959 fiscal year, and saved the company $1.5 million. This boon allowed The Progressive Farmer Company some financial breathing room in spite of its ad revenue losses, and set the stage for a new magazine idea to blossom. In fact, had the change in tax law not occurred, one of America's most successful magazines might never have seen publication.

1960–1966: New South, New Magazines

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[49] W.C. Lassetter to Clarence Poe, Eugene Butler, Alexander Nunn, and Sallie Hill, letter, February 26, 1951, The Progressive Farmer Archives, Birmingham, AL.
[50] Alexander Nunn to Clarence Poe, letter, February 28, 1951, The Progressive Farmer Archives, Birmingham, AL.
[51] Butler, 1959, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Code of Federal Regulations, Title 26, Volume 6, Chapter I, Part I, Income Taxes, Sec. 1.455-2*, http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2010/aprqtr/26cfr1.455-2.htm (accessed October 14, 2011).

By 1960, the farm population in the South was down to 7 million, only 15 percent of the South's total population.[52] Meanwhile, a somewhat new population segment was making inroads. In 1940, 8.5 million people lived in nonurban areas but did not farm. By 1960, that number was up to 13.5 million. They outnumbered farmers two to one.[53] For the most part, the South possessed a modern economy, as manufacturing now dwarfed agriculture.[54] The agrarian society in which *The Progressive Farmer* thrived as a mass interest magazine was all but gone.

The vast agrarian society of family farmers in the South had been replaced by a highly skilled, technically proficient group of farm businessmen. Historian Paul K. Conkin said it best: "(I)n no other 20-year period were the agricultural gains quite so dramatic as they were from 1950 to 1970."[55] Even more remarkable was that the gains came from a much smaller number of farmers. In the same 20-year period, the agriculture workforce declined by half, while the total production value increased 40 percent.[56]

The Progressive Farmer's identity crisis continued on all fronts. In 1960, the magazine was down another 5 percent in ad lineage. Advertising agencies were beginning to question the magazine's broad editorial policy, putting pressure on *The Progressive Farmer* to limit its editorial to the increasingly business- and technical-oriented needs of farming. Butler "strenuously opposed" such a change, still believing "farming's dollar profit to be the means rather than the end of farm life."[57] In other words, farming was a lifestyle, not a job. In spite of this editorial focus, Butler set a goal

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[52] Bartley, "The Making of the Modern South," 123.
[53] Ibid., 119.
[54] Ibid., 146.
[55] Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down On The Farm* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 97
[56] Sally H. Clarke, *Regulation and Revolution in United States Farm Productivity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3-21.
[57] Butler, 1960, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.

in the 1960 annual report to cut general interest editorial from one-third of total editorial lineage to one-fifth, though he did not apply a timeline to the goal.[58]

In 1961, it seemed *The Progressive Farmer*'s editorial focus was expanding rather than narrowing.[59] Pages devoted to "The Progressive Home," the magazine's section for farm wives, remained essentially the same, and general interest articles still dotted the remaining pages. Butler makes the claim in his memoir that *The Progressive Farmer* pioneered the "magazine-within-a-magazine" concept with the inclusion of *Southern Fishing* in its April 1961 issue.[60] The bound-in, 32-page piece featured a smaller trim size, its own cover, and articles focused specifically on the Southern fisherman.[61] Advertisers bought it. Besides ads for lure, line, and outboard motors, the center spread featured a man in waders with his head resting on a tackle box, enjoying his Marlboro.[62] In November, editors included a 16-page "Southern Hunting" section, though it did not have its own cover or smaller trim. At the annual meeting, a southern outdoor publication was discussed as a means of diversifying the company's magazine offerings.[63]

Still, 1961 proved to be yet another disappointing year financially. Profit was poor and, in spite of the editorial diversification efforts, ad lineage was down yet again.[64] Emory Cunningham, who had joined the company in 1948 as an ad salesman, had seen the decline from the front lines, and became the magazine's advertising manager in

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[58] Ibid.
[59] *The Progressive Farmer Bound Volume, Mississippi-Arkansas-Louisiana, 1961* (Birmingham, AL: The Progressive Farmer, 1961).
[60] Butler, 1961, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[61] "Southern Fishing," *The Progressive Farmer,* April 1961, 19-50.
[62] "You get a lot to like with a Marlboro," advertisement, *The Progressive Farmer,* April 1961, 34-35.
[63] "Southern Hunting," *The Progressive Farmer,* November 1961, 47-62.
[64] Butler, 1961, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.

1960.[65] In a circulation report for the 1961 annual meeting, Cunningham insisted that *The Progressive Farmer,* if it was going to appeal to agricultural advertisers, could no longer afford to hang on to subscribers who had taken their favorite magazine with them when they left the farm for cities or suburbs.[66] Salespeople agreed, using the simple illustration that half a tractor manufacturer's advertising dollar in *The Progressive Farmer* was wasted if half or more of the audience did not have the property to warrant buying a tractor.[67] The meeting was a turning point. In addressing editors at the annual meeting, Eugene Butler effectively changed the magazine's editorial focus for the next 40 years:

> (M)aybe a busy farmer, who is primarily interested in making bigger yields and more profit, feels he has to turn too many pages to find what he wants, and that he doesn't find enough of what we call dirt farming copy to make *The Progressive Farmer* indispensible.[68]

Butler still argued for diverse editorial, however. In the 1961 annual report, he chastised salespeople for downplaying "The Progressive Home," and reiterated the magazine's mission to include the farm wife:

> We are finding that a growing number of advertisers and their agencies believe they know better than our editors what is best in a farm magazine for farm people. Some of them say a Home Department has no place in a farm magazine such as ours. … They are overlooking the big part that farm women play in decisions affecting not only the operation of the farm but the purchase of farm equipment.[69]

Butler's words may have inspired what insiders at the magazine to this day call the greatest ad schedule sale in its history, in philosophical terms if not financial ones.[70] There was perhaps no better example from an advertising standpoint of *The Progressive Farmer*'s mass appeal than its ability to draw Tampax, a feminine hygiene product, into

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[65] Alabama Academy of Honor, "Emory Cunningham," http://www.archives.alabama.gov/famous/Academy/e_cunnin.html (accessed November 11, 2011).
[66] Butler, 1961, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[67] Butler, "The Progressive Farmer Circulation Story."
[68] Ibid.
[69] Butler, 1961, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[70] Jack Odle, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, October 5, 2011.

its pages year after year. In spite of the tough sell to other consumer advertisers, *The Progressive Farmer* still carried a Tampax schedule in 1962.[71]

Still, the editorial changes in *The Progressive Farmer* were noticeable in 1962. The year saw much less general interest and more farm-centric copy. The cover illustration policy changed to focus more on the business of farming. The May 1962 issue featured on its cover a large-scale cattle corral with an accompanying story on large-scale cattle auctions.[72] The story resulted in 3,000 reader requests for corral plans, encouraging the editorial staff that the changes were welcome and warranted.[73]

But what to do with the non-farm audience that was more than happy to pay for the magazine but ultimately were of little interest to its advertisers? *Southern Living* gets its first mention as a possibility in the minutes of the December 1962 board meeting of The Progressive Farmer Company. Cunningham, now a member of the board of directors, led the discussion. His vision was to create another magazine-within-a-magazine called *Southern Living* that would be mailed as part of *The Progressive Farmer,* but only to those on the circulation list who were qualified as farmers. For the others, the 400,000 non-farm subscribers, a separate magazine was in order.[74] The *Southern Living* section in *The Progressive Farmer* would be a live laboratory for perfecting the editorial focus, and it would eventually launch as its own magazine. Editors would make the effort to move items of cultural interest out of the magazine proper and into this section.[75]

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[71] "Wish You Had Her Poise?" advertisement, *The Progressive Farmer*, February 1962, 81.
[72] Cover, *The Progressive Farmer,* May 1962. John G. McNeely, "Autions Come Of Age," *The Progressive Farmer,* May 1962, 6, 33.
[73] Butler, 1962, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[74] Butler, 1963, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[75] Eugene Butler, "We Decide To Go Ahead with *Southern Living*," 1979, Southern Progress Corporation Archives, Birmingham, AL.

Just how *Southern Living* would look, feel, and read was quite the matter of contention.[76] Butler saw an extension of the advocacy tradition of *The Progressive Farmer,* which had a long history of standing up for issues facing the Southern farmer, including political lobbying and plant and livestock disease eradication. *Southern Living* could help explain Southern agriculture to the world.[77] The well-traveled Cunningham, however, knew how poorly the rest of the country viewed the South, particularly with regard to the civil rights turbulence.[78] National magazines were dismissive of the South, even insulting, which resulted in poor penetration. *The Progressive Farmer* had benefited from that poor penetration for decades, and Cunningham felt a vibrant, general-interest magazine presenting a positive image of the South and its people would be a hit with audiences and advertisers alike.[79] The magazine would be a success, if for no other reason, because the South now lacked a mass magazine.

Based on the makeup of the first *Southern Living* section in October 1963, Cunningham's vision won out. Behind a magazine-within-a-magazine cover depicting an autumnal feast[80] was an ad for Kellogg's Special K cereal, followed by a recipe column with cereals as the main ingredient.[81] This was followed by sewing patterns, tips on adopting a baby, cute pictures of baby farm animals, the requisite house plan, and even a

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[76] John Logue and Gary McCalla, *Life at Southern Living: A Sort of Memoir* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 5.
[77] Jack Odle, interview by author.
[78] Though *The Progressive Farmer* often addressed racial divides, particularly with regard to farm labor, *Southern Living* from its launch was often accused of being "whitewashed." For more on the treatment of ethnic groups in *Southern Living* and the decision to keep the magazine upbeat and positive, see John White, "Safe to Have on Your Coffee Table: Southern Living Reconsidered," *Alabama Review* 47 (1994): 185-209.
[79] Douglas Martin, "Emory O. Cunningham, Publisher, Dies at 78," *New York Times*, January 28, 2000.
[80] "Southern Living" cover, *The Progressive Farmer,* October 1963, 61.
[81] "The Special K Breakfast That Fits So Many Modern Diets," advertisement, Ibid., 62. "Cereals Fit Into Any Meal Plan," Ibid., 63

piece of fiction.[82] Though the editorial content was disorganized and all over the map focus-wise, it was certainly not advocacy-driven.

Though it was not an official go-ahead, the board in 1963 gave its tacit approval to move forward with a launch plan for *Southern Living*. That summer, *The Progressive Farmer*'s circulation team sent a survey to 2,400 non-farm subscribers, which yielded a 45 percent response rate. Of those that responded, 60 percent preferred to continue receiving *The Progressive Farmer*, 40 percent were willing to transfer to *Southern Living*, and "quite a number" wanted to receive both.[83] Late in 1963, a letter went out to subscribers:

> If you or anyone in your immediate family are farming or engaged in buying, selling or processing farm products, we want you to continue to get *The Progressive Farmer*—bigger and better than ever. But, if no one in your immediate family is farming or has one of the above-named farming connections, we feel confident you will prefer our new *Southern Living* Magazine.[84]

Subscribers to *The Progressive Farmer* who changed magazines would finish out their paid-up or promised subscription in issues of *Southern Living*. Finally, Vernon Miller, the editor of the Georgia-Alabama-Florida version of *The Progressive Farmer*, made the split clear in his editorial in the issue of *The Progressive Farmer* that officially announced the launch of the separate magazine. The short blurb on the last page of the issue mentioned the "sister" magazine's first issue, and effectively segregated the audiences. "No, we can't send you both," Miller wrote emphatically.[85]

In February 1964, the board made the decision to reduce *The Progressive Farmer*'s circulation from 1.4 million to 1.25 million. With a healthy number of

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[82] "Patterns," Ibid., 67. "So You Want To Adopt A Baby," Ibid., 69. "Favorite Baby Farm Animals," Ibid., 72C. "House Plan," Ibid., 74. "Fiction: Trial By Wind," Ibid., 86.
[83] Butler, "The Progressive Farmer Circulation Story."
[84] Butler, "We Decide To Go Ahead with *Southern Living*."
[85] Vernon Miller, "Editor's Note," *The Progressive Farmer*, February 1966, 184.

subscribers on the books who were willing to transfer to the new magazine, the company as a whole still had the audience to deliver to advertisers, whether consumer or agricultural. From 1965 on, the goal was to stop increasing circulation for *The Progressive Farmer*, improve the quality of the circulation held, and reduce it slowly over time to cover mostly working farm families.[86]

In February of 1966, the first issue of *Southern Living* was sent to 252,000 subscribers, 140,000 of which were transfers from *The Progressive Farmer.* In the August board meeting that year, Cunningham reported that advertising sales were going well, both for *Southern Living* and *The Progressive Farmer*. For certain, advertisers liked the trend toward specialization in *The Progressive Farmer*. However, as with any launch, *Southern Living*'s editorial focus was still a bit shaky and disorganized, which didn't help the new magazine overcome consumer advertisers' worries about this new, modern publication that was born of an old farm magazine.[87]

Eugene Butler's inaugural editor's essay in the first issue did not seem to reflect Cunningham's vision, either. Butler still held concerns about the divide between the family farm and city folk, or for that matter, between the family farm and the rest of the world. "By reason of its close association with *The Progressive Farmer*," Butler wrote, "[*Southern Living*] is ideally suited to promote better understanding between urban and rural people … often at odds through lack of understanding,"[88] In his memoir of the magazine's early days, Gary McCalla, a later editor of *Southern Living*, would call this divide imaginary, an "unknown feud."[89]

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[86] Butler, "The Progressive Farmer Circulation Story."
[87] Logue and McCalla, *Life at Southern Living,* 55.
[88] Eugene Butler, "Editor's Letter," *Southern Living,* February 1966, 6.
[89] Logue and McCalla, *Life at Southern Living,* 56

The editorial content, even in the scattershot first issue of *Southern Living*, did not do much to bridge any divides, imaginary or otherwise. Fifteen pages of travel information followed Butler's essay, setting the light, lifestyle tone of the magazine.[90] The inside back cover advertisement was a full-color ad for feminine hygiene products; the days of the Tampax ad in *The Progressive Farmer* were over.

Southern Living had basically shared a staff with *The Progressive Farmer* since its magazine-within-a-magazine launch in October 1963, but the company now had a new staff in place for the new magazine.[91] Though it launched with the tagline "An edition of *The Progressive Farmer,*" even that had disappeared completely from its pages by August 1966, replaced by "The magazine of the modern South."[92] While 1966 continued the sharp decline of consumer advertising in farm publications, *Southern Living* landed five automobile accounts.[93] In 1967, Emory Cunningham was named publisher of both *The Progressive Farmer* and *Southern Living*. In a letter sent to key advertisers with complimentary copies of the October 1967 issue, Eugene Butler trumpeted the new magazine's success: "Our hats are off to this outstanding group of salesmen who moved *Southern Living* into the number one position among all consumer magazines in advertising revenue increase for the first half of 1967."[94]

Between the launch of the special section in *The Progressive Farmer* in 1963 and the completion of the first full volume of *Southern Living* at the beginning of 1968, the venture lost The Progressive Farmer Company a total of $1.7 million, much of which was

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[90] *Southern Living,* February 1966.
[91] Butler, 1965, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[92] Masthead, *Southern Living,* August 1966, 8.
[93] Butler, 1966, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[94] Eugene Butler to Advertisers, letter, October 1967, Southern Progress Corporation Archives, Birmingham, AL.

absorbed by the cash reserve brought about by the tax law changes in 1958. "I am convinced," said Butler in his written memoir, "that we would not have been able to establish *Southern Living* had it not been for our large liquid reserve that enabled us to withstand the heavy losses of *Southern Living*'s first few years."[95] *Southern Living* was launched, paid for, and set on the road to profitability without the company borrowing a single dollar.[96]

The Progressive Farmer After *Southern Living*

Timing really was everything. Between the launch of *Southern Living* and the unveiling of a new-look *Progressive Farmer* in January 1973, the company's leadership was free to make the needed changes to both the editorial and circulation legs of its business that gave the all-important third leg, advertising, what it needed to reach a qualified audience of commercial farmers.

In 1967, Earl Butz, who was dean of the agriculture school at Purdue and would soon be the nation's Secretary of Agriculture, predicted unprecedented growth in agriculture over the next decade. By the time Secretary Butz made the rallying cry to American farmers in 1972 to "get big or get out" and "plant fencerow to fencerow, boys,"[97] *Progressive Farmer*, which had dropped the old-fashioned "The" before the name with its first issue in 1973, was perfectly positioned to serve the business needs of

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[95] Butler, 1959, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[96] Butler, 1968, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968. Other works offering insight into the subsequent success of *Southern Living* include: Logue and McCalla, *Life at Southern Living*, Lauder, "The Southern Living Solution: How *The Progressive Farmer* Launched a Magazine and a Legacy," McDougall, "The Most Profitable Magazine in the U.S.," Riley, *Magazines of the American South,* Martin, "Emory O. Cunningham, Publisher, Dies at 78," and White, "Safe to Have on Your Coffee Table: Southern Living Reconsidered."
[97] Jim Phillips, "Turning the Century: Earl L. Butz," *Progressive Farmer,* February 2000, 36.

farmers. "The number one ag magazine should keep making money," wrote Butler in his memoir in 1969. "That is now *Progressive Farmer*'s position."[98]

Progressive Farmer unveiled its new, standard trim size in January 1973, and also solidified its position as a magazine specialized for the farming business. Southeast editor Vernon Miller introduced the new-look *Progressive Farmer* as being "action-edited," providing businessmen with specific action items throughout the magazine that would increase profitability.[99] The opening advertisement in the issue featured a testimonial from a 10,000-acre farmer.[100] Years later, Charlie Scruggs, who had edited the Texas version of the magazine and also served for a time as editor-in-chief, would look back on the May 1973 issue as a more delineated turning point. Spurred by the market-oriented 1973 Farm Bill and strong export demand, the issue focused on agricultural capitalism, and advised farmers to become as strong in financial management as they were in crop and livestock management.[101]

In 1967, The Progressive Farmer Company computerized its circulation records, allowing for endless slicing and dicing of the audience based on where they lived and what they grew.[102] Early attempts to take advantage of this new, specialized approach to circulation included a special section on cotton and soybeans in the January 1968 issue[103] and a specialized editorial for hog farmers in the January 1969 issue.[104]

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[98] Butler, 1968, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[99] Vernon Miller, "We'd Like To Mention," *Progressive Farmer*, January 1973, 9.
[100] "Firestone—We'll Prove It To You," advertisement, *Progressive Farmer*, January 1973, 4-5.
[101] C.G. Scruggs to Those Interested, letter, June 3, 1986.
[102] Butler, 1968, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968. Butler, "The Progressive Farmer Circulation Story."
[103] "Cotton-Soybean Profit Special," *The Progressive Farmer,* January 1968, 1a-36a.
[104] "Cotton-Soybean Profit Special," *The Progressive Farmer,* January 1969, 1a-50a. "Pork Profit Guide," *The Progressive Farmer,* January 1969, P1-P16.

General farm magazines were already getting a push from specialized, "vertical" publications aimed at specific groups of farmers. The first of these, *National Hog Farmer*, had launched in 1956 and caused a great stir in the agricultural journalism community. *National Hog Farmer* adopted a controlled circulation policy, meaning the magazine would be sent free of charge to every hog farmer that could be found, and the business would rely on advertisers who would be willing to pay top dollar for such a specialized audience. This introduced a unique problem editorially, however. Usually, these hyper-vertical publications found themselves having to cover a region or even the entire country with just two or three full-time editors.[105]

This was not the case for *Progressive Farmer.* With established field offices all over the South and a network of freelancers and experts reporting from remote locations, editorial coverage was unrivaled. With circulation poised to qualify the magazine's audience demographically, *Progressive Farmer* could offer many of the same advantages to advertisers as the vertical publications, and still collect paid circulation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the circulation department became so sophisticated that, through selective binding at printing facilities, farmers across the road from one another might receive completely different versions of *Progressive Farmer* based on any number of demographic categories.[106] The Progressive Farmer Company, renamed Southern Progress Corporation in 1981 to acknowledge *Southern Living*, was sold to Time Inc. in 1984.[107] Though its new owners published such popular titles as *People, Sports Illustrated,* and *LIFE*, *Progressive Farmer* commanded the highest CPM (cost per thousand) for advertising of any Time Inc. title for many years, thanks to its sophisticated

[105] American Agricultural Editors' Association, *Farm Magazines, Milestones & Memories,* 75.
[106] Donovan Harris, interview with author.
[107] Southern Progress Corporation, *A Brief History of Progressive Farmer*.

circulation segmenting.[108] By the turn of the century, the magazine routinely produced more than a thousand different versions of any one monthly issue.[109]

Besides its foray into vertical publishing, *Progressive Farmer* continued to expand into other areas of the country with regional coverage. Almost immediately after the decision to launch *Southern Living*, Arizona and New Mexico got their own versions of *The Progressive Farmer*.[110] Coverage of the Southwest fit nicely with the magazine's editorial dominance in the South, but the Midwest was tougher to crack. For decades, *The Progressive Farmer* and *Successful Farming* had a gentleman's agreement to remain on their own turf. Both owned their respective regions—the South and Midwest—in all three legs of the magazine business: editorial coverage, advertising, and circulation. However, in the late 1970s, *Successful Farming* made a circulation push into the South, and *Progressive Farmer* responded. Jack Odle, then a relatively new hire in the Dallas office, was charged with launching a Midwest version of *Progressive Farmer*.[111] Premiering in 1981, it was little more than a newsletter, but it laid the foundation for evolution into a full regional version of the magazine that was published throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[112] Odle became editor-in-chief of all versions of the magazine in 1990, and is still publisher of the magazine.[113]

Though its Midwest competitors dropped their coverage of farm homes in the late 1960s, *Progressive Farmer* continued to publish a homes section, though at a drastically

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[108] Donovan Harris, interview with author.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Southern Progress Corporation, *A Brief History of Progressive Farmer*. *The Progressive Farmer,* January 1965.
[111] Jack Odle, interview with author.
[112] *Progressive Farmer Soybeans/Corn Midwest,* January 1981.
[113] Jack Odle, interview with author.

reduced page count, for the next 40 years.[114] There would even be a brief swing into heavy rural lifestyle content early in the twenty-first century, as agribusinesses consolidated and advertising dollars became tight in the industry. For a four-year period between 2003 and 2007, the magazine began to resemble something of its traditional, mass-market self pre-*Southern Living*, publishing cover articles on the best places to live in rural America and even adapting the *Southern Living* "idea house" model to the farmstead.[115] Again responding to social and economic trends, the magazine looked to re-establish itself as an authority on rural living, as USDA demographers and social scientists had been tracking a decade-long rebound in population in rural counties.[116] With a 500 percent increase in the growth rate of the rural exurb population and a new demand for rural real estate, advertisers took notice of the trend, and of the magazine's editorial response to it.[117] Consumer advertising appeared in the magazine again, as well as advertisers geared to hobby farmers and the "new ruralist," as the magazine's sales staff dubbed the growing market. As a nod to the past, a "The" was even added back to the official nameplate of the magazine during this period.[118]

The Progressive Farmer **Today**

The change was short-lived. When Time Inc. agreed to sell the magazine in 2007 to Data Transmission Network (DTN), a farm business-oriented service that provides up-to-the-minute market and weather information, the magazine finally had a partner to establish a toehold with the elusive Midwestern commercial farm audience.[119] Again, the

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[114] Butler, 1968, The Progressive Farmer Company History, 1951-1968.
[115] "The Best Places To Live In Rural America," *The Progressive Farmer,* February 2005, 17-33. "Welcome To Our Home," *The Progressive Farmer,* November 2003, 14-40.
[116] Kenneth M. Johnson, "The Rural Rebound," *Reports on America* 1, no. 3 (1999): 1-21.
[117] "The New Ruralism Trend," Fact sheet, The Progressive Farmer Archives, Birmingham, AL.
[118] Cover, *The Progressive Farmer,* January 2005.
[119] Jack Odle, interview with author.

timing was perfect. In the summer of 2008, as analysts predicted corn prices to hit record highs at the same time the rural real estate bubble burst, *The Progressive Farmer* was there to serve.[120] The magazine's editor, for the first time in its history, is now based in the Midwest, and the now all-business magazine survives and thrives.[121]

Agricultural historians have said *The Progressive Farmer* was "born fighting."[122] In truth, it has never stopped. Advantageous timing and adaptability are essential for any media entity, along with leadership that is able to recognize the potential for new life cycles. Though the launch of *Southern Living* proved key to the success of *The Progressive Farmer*'s subsequent specialization, recognition of economic and cultural trends, and the willingness to respond, remain keys to its success, and survival.

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[120] Darin Newsome, "Is $10 Corn Coming?" *The Progressive Farmer,* August 2008, 40.
[121] Jack Odle, "A Change At The Top," *The Progressive Farmer,* September 2010, 6.
[122] C.G. Scruggs and Smith W. Moseley, "The Role of Agricultural Journalism in Building The Rural South," *Agricultural History* 53, no. 1 (1979): 22-29.

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