

Farewell to Notes

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The great composer Johannes Brahms once remarked: “It is not difficult to compose; but it is incredibly difficult to let the superfluous notes drop under the table” (as quoted in Musgrave and Pascall 1987, p. 138). Here at the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, the challenges of composing each issue remain, but the “Notes” have become superfluous, at least in their paper version.

The “Notes,” as those who lurk in these back pages of JEP know well, announce forthcoming conferences, calls for papers, awards, and the like. However, the Internet has made it obsolete to deliver such information on paper in a quarterly journal. “News and Notes” from the American Economic Association is at <http://www.aeaweb.org/news.php>; outside announcements are on the “Bulletin Board” website at <http://www.aeaweb.org/bulletinboard.php>; and for a complete list of economics conferences by field area, see <http://www.aeaweb.org/RFE/conferences.php>.

But as we say farewell to the print version of the “Notes,” a moment of remembrance seems appropriate. The first issue of the *American Economic Review*, published in 1911, found it worthwhile to devote 13 out of 219 total pages to “Notes.” The first “Notes” (freely available online at <http://www.jstor.org>) was a mixed bag. It started with news on the growth of AEA membership, followed with an announcement more than a page long about the opening of a Bureau of Railway Economics in Washington, DC. The US Bureau of Labor announced a number of jobs for “trained economists.” There was progress on the formation of Economic Clubs in various cities under the guidance of the National Economic League, and the Tulane Society of Economics continued to hold monthly meetings.

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The first “Notes” included mentions of conferences that had already happened: a New York State Conference on Taxation that included many government officials and a few economists; the first National Conference on Vocational Guidance; the Fourth Annual Convention of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education; the eleventh annual meeting of the National Civic Federation; and James Mackaye who had given eight lectures on the “Philosophy of Socialism,” including his plan for the transition from capitalism to socialism. There were mentions of conferences still coming: the Thirtieth Annual conference of the American Federation of Labor; the Universal Races Congress, where “one session will be devoted to special problems in inter-racial economics”; a second conference in Chicago on the Teaching of Economics.

There were updates on a number of research efforts: the formation of a Bureau of Social Research in Providence, Rhode Island; the work of the Research Department by the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union of Boston; the work of the New York Commission on Employer’s Liability and Causes of Industrial Accidents, Unemployment, and Lack of Farm Labor; and the efforts of the American Association for Labor Legislation to prohibit the use of phosphorus in the manufacture of matches.

The inaugural “Notes” included soon-to-be-published books: including *The Principles of Economics* from Frank Taussig; *The Navigable Rhine* by Edwin J. Clapp; the *Principles of Industrial Management* by J. C. Duncan; and a number of others. Library acquisitions were included. The New York State Library had received the Rensselaerswyck manuscripts, all 200 volumes and 25,000 papers, covering 200 years of the Dutch colony in what had become New York. Harry Wagner donated to Yale University Library 7,000 items from his collection of writing on the history of precious metals and currency. Mr. Simons, no first name given but former editor of the *Daily Socialist*, had donated his collection of books and 1,200 pamphlets to the University of Chicago library. The Hart, Schaffner, and Marx prizes for 1910 were announced, and Clapp’s *The Navigable Rhine* won first prize of \$600.

It included several pages of news about professors changing jobs or going on leave. For example, Richard T. Ely, after whom the annual Ely lecture would be named, was taking a leave from Wisconsin to study land problems in Germany and England. Harrison S. Smalley was leaving the University of Michigan to become Associate Professor of Economics in Leland Stanford Junior University. “Professor W. Z. Ripley of Harvard will be absent during the second half of the current academic year; a part of his vacation will be spent in Egypt.”

This array of notes made considerable sense for a small organization, seeking to point out opportunities for its members at a time when the mechanisms for spreading specialized news were the postal service, the telegraph, and word-of-mouth. In 1911, the American Economic Association had 2,190 members, which was already a big jump from the 572 members the AEA had in 1893, when reliable membership data are first available (Siegfried 1998).

When the first issue of the JEP was published in 1987, we argued that the “Notes” should leave the AER and reside instead in the new journal. We wanted the “Notes” in

JEP, because we all knew (then) that the “Notes” mattered. It was a way of showing that the new journal was here to stay and (potentially) attracting some readers. The descriptions of already-occurred conferences and soon-to-be-published books had already been dropped from the “Notes” years before. The Fall 1987 issue of JEP included seven pages of notes; about two-thirds were announcements of conferences, calls for papers, and announcements of grants and awards, while the rest was deaths, retirements, promotions, and appointments.

Over time, fewer people sent news about promotions and appointments, so we closed down those categories. Frankly, we were grateful not to be sent this kind of news. AEA membership had risen from 4,154 members in 1945 to 17,835 members in 1968, and was above 20,000 members by 1987 (Siegfried 1998). If every institution sent their promotions, leaves, and appointments, it would have created pages of dull lists. Only a smattering of retirements and deaths were reported to JEP, and so we eventually stopped publishing them, too. More recently, those with conferences or calls for papers have become steadily less likely to send them to JEP. Our 1987 belief that it matters to print the “Notes” in the paper pages of JEP probably hasn’t been true for years.

Admittedly, the ending of the “Notes” section as printed within the covers of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* doesn’t rank with some of the other great endings, like the revelation of what *Citizen Kane* meant by “Rosebud”; or “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown”; or “Oh, Auntie Em, there’s no place like home!” But in its own small way, the end of the paper version of the “Notes” after its run of 103 years is one more sign of the remarkable changes in information and communication technology that surround us—and thus worth remarking.

References

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