

have leave—will travel

Ruth Beale

- Can a small town Extension home economist make it on the international scene?
- Will administration grant leave time for travel/study?
- Are there ways to finance a travel/study leave?
- Can ideas gleaned in international travel be useful to a county home economist?

Yes. All these questions were answered affirmatively for me in 1976. I completed a three-month travel/study in Europe and the United States.

Ideas for a travel/study can come from anywhere. A simple statement triggered my plan. "Europeans use 1/3 as much energy as Americans." Does that mean Europeans have a greatly curtailed lifestyle? Can American families cut their consumption of energy? What "trade-offs" are Americans willing to make? Does the Extension home economist have a role in helping families reevaluate their lifestyle? Perhaps the answers could be found in other cultures—other countries.

Wheels in Motion

An important facet of the plan is organization. The first step was to get approval from my administrative group. In my case, they were exceedingly helpful and supportive. They gave the process a boost each step of the way.

And, indeed, it was a process! Applications and letters flowed between Europe and "Small Town, U.S.A." for months. The complete gestation period—from the first application until the plane lifted off for Europe—was nine months.

The International Agriculture Center

The Netherlands was chosen as a focus because this small country is the most heavily populated area of the world. Land use is closely controlled by government and living space is very limited. But the Dutch people do a splendid job of conserving their resources. They've highly refined the art of sharing limited space and energy. They're in many ways decades ahead of the United States.

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As the plan developed, many people gave me valuable suggestions. A program director from another state suggested contacting the International Agriculture Center. There—in the Netherlands—100 people from 40 developed and developing countries gather each summer. They exchange experiences, share ideas—while living and traveling together. They study the solutions that the Dutch people have found in dealing with their limited space and shortage of material resources.

Ideas! Ideas!

The United States has made some steps in the direction of energy conservation. So, another idea came from a Michigan specialist. "Why not contact other states in this country? See what Extension programs are presently underway on energy conservation."

Good! A way to tie it all together. This called for more letters to state program leaders, specialists, and field staff in other states. The result was a three-month travel/study plan: two months in Europe and one month in the U.S.A

Financial Support

While letters and applications were flowing back and forth—reality struck. The cost! Three months of travel can put a great strain on the family budget. A trip through the library gave me the following sources of information on grants:

- Grants for Graduate Study Abroad.
- American Students and Teachers Abroad.
- A Selected List of Major Fellowship Opportunities and Aids to Advanced Education for United States Citizens.

A short resume of my plan was sent to agencies that support travel/study. All were interested in the plan and some granted financial aid.

Finally, all arrangements fell into place. After much planning and preparation, I left the daily tasks of Extension in the hands of my competent co-workers. The three months that followed were a rich panorama of the ways in which people live. Their attitudes and feelings provided models for American life. I became aware that there are creative alternatives to using larger and larger amounts of our scarce energy sources.

Back to Reality

The exciting part of this travel/study experience is just now unfolding. Back on the job, I've found families eager to learn ways of conserving natural resources. As utilities rise in cost, families have less discretionary income. They're beginning to question their present lifestyle. They're redefining their goals.

Extension home economists are in a unique position to help this happen. Working with families and with community leaders, we can effect change. We can help families realign their coping processes. We can develop programs that will help families improve their quality of life while reducing their use of natural resources.

My travel/study experience was professional improvement at its best. The contacts with people and ideas were such that I shall never be the same person. Truly—this is an experience that each person should strive to have. Its effect on the development of the person and on future Extension programs is nearly unlimited. The time and effort involved were well spent.

