

VERNON DALE WICKIZER  
1904–1982  
In Memoriam

Vernon D. Wickizer, Professor Emeritus in the Food Research Institute, died at Stanford, California, on February 8, 1982 at the age of 77. Ill health had forced Professor Wickizer to retire from active duty in 1963, and he was largely confined to his campus residence during the last ten years of his life. He is survived by his wife, Kay.

Wick was an early migrant to California from his birthplace in Indiana and graduated from South Pasadena, California, High School in 1921. He won appointment to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, but resigned his commission two years after graduation to enroll in Stanford's Graduate School of Business. After being awarded the degree of M.B.A. in 1929 he served variously as Instructor in Business Organization in the Graduate School of Business and as Research Associate in the Food Research Institute. He left Stanford in 1933 for Mannings, Inc. where he worked successively as research, personnel, and marketing director.

In the winter of 1938, Wickizer joined the staff of the Food Research Institute as Associate Economist, becoming Economist and Professor in 1945.

Wick's research at the Institute was primarily concerned with the economics of tropical agriculture. It began when he assumed responsibility for a study of the rice economy of Monsoon Asia that grew out of earlier studies of Asian agriculture initiated by Carl Alsberg and primarily focused on China and Japan. Wickizer's study undertook to provide information about the eastern rice economy comparable to that generated about the western wheat economy by the staff of the Food Research Institute during an earlier period. The resulting book, published in 1941, was the first comprehensive study of rice production, commerce, and consumption in those Asian countries where 95 percent of the world's rice was produced and consumed. Wickizer was assisted by Merrill K. Bennett, but the book was largely his own work and rested to a considerable degree on an extended trip he had made to the Orient in 1939–40. Wickizer also published, in 1948, a briefer review of *Rice in the Western Hemisphere: Wartime Development and Postwar Problems*.

*The Rice Economy of Monsoon Asia* provides a baseline study of one of the world's two principal foodstuffs on the eve of World War II, and more important, before new methods of plant improvement inspired the Green Revolution. The book was completed after the outbreak of world war in Europe, but the tone is moderately optimistic: "Of the general methods for expanding the rice output of Monsoon Asia, that of increasing rice yields per unit of land cultivation seems to hold great promise," and "It might be relatively easy to develop varieties that are heavy-yielding." At the same time the authors spoke

of the importance of other characteristics of the cereal too often overlooked by plant breeders—taste, texture, form, and storability, and of the farming systems where rice was grown. They also recognized the potential importance of fertilizers. Wickizer and Bennett had before them the example of Japan, but the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines and the construction of “miracle rice” were more than two decades in the future. *The Rice Economy of Monsoon Asia* was published in Japanese in 1958, and it is still required reading for all serious students of the world rice economy.

Wickizer next turned to consideration of marketing control schemes for two major internationally traded tropical agricultural commodities—coffee and tea. *The World Coffee Economy, with Special Reference to Control Schemes* was published in 1943, and *Tea Under International Regulation* in 1944.

Large unsold stocks of staple agricultural commodities constituted an impressive feature of the Great Depression of the interwar years and stimulated national and international efforts at control. Problems of international commerce were intensified by the outbreak of war, and it was widely anticipated, as proved correct, that international regulation would become a prominent feature of international trade after the war.

Unprecedented national and international efforts to cope with massive distortions of demand and disruptions of supplies of food and agricultural products during World War II provided unique raw material for examination of the effectiveness and the consequences of such government intervention in the orderly conduct of commerce. To record these activities, and to initiate analysis of them, the Food Research Institute, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, commissioned a set of commodity and national studies of food, agriculture, and World War II. The first book to appear in this series, in 1951, was Wickizer’s *Coffee, Tea, and Cocoa: An Economic and Political Analysis*. In addition to documenting war and postwar changes in production, trade, and consumption, this book provided also a baseline study of the international economy of these major tropical beverage crops like that Wickizer’s first book had provided for the world rice economy.

Wickizer’s knowledge of tropical agricultural economies, and particularly of what were then called “plantation crops,” led him to consideration of the economic causes and consequences of plantation as opposed to small-farm production for export. In 1948 he initiated a course and seminar about Agriculture in Tropical Economies, perhaps the first on this subject in an American university, and at about the same time he began to collect material for a general book, “Plantation Agriculture.” It was never completed, but parts were published as articles in scholarly journals. The most influential was “The Smallholder in Tropical Export Crop Production,” *Food Research Institute Studies*, 1960. It explored technical as well as economic factors influencing the relative competitive position of small farmers and large farmers in growing and marketing the six tropical crops most important in world trade, and selected minor crops. Of these he found only two—black tea and sisal—to be ill-suited technically for production on small farms; tea because leaves must be processed immediately after plucking in plants that enjoy great economies of scale, and sisal for somewhat similar reasons. For other major tropicals he concluded that supportive processing, marketing, and cultivation services need not be

under the ownership of the growers, and that the small farmers' "role in commercial agriculture in the tropics will gradually gain in stature."

Wickizer returned to coffee control schemes in his last published article, "International Collaboration in the World Coffee Market" (1964) in which he concluded, "Past experience with such arrangements is not encouraging, and those who believe that 'This time it will be different' must bear the burden of proof."

Wickizer was one of the first economists to look at agricultural problems in the tropics. He made useful contributions to understanding the economics of four major tropical crops, one of them the second most important world food crop after wheat, to understanding commodity regulation, and to recognition of the actual and potential importance of small farms in agriculture. Wherever he probed he shed light.

Wick was a congenial and stimulating companion, stubborn in pursuit of accuracy in reporting and rigor in analysis, and impatient of received doctrine and dogma. He brought to his research the rare ability to combine broad knowledge of the world and a sense of social and physical environment in which economic activities go on with keen analytical skills.