

RURAL LIFE¹

There are no two public questions of more vital importance to the future of this country than the problem of Conservation and the problem of the betterment of country life. Moreover, these two problems are really interdependent, for neither of them can be successfully solved save on condition that there is at least a measurable success in the effort to solve the other. In any great country the prime physical asset—the physical asset more valuable than any other—is the fertility of the soil. All our industrial and commercial welfare, all our material development of every kind, depends in the last resort upon our preserving and increasing the fertility of the soil. This, of course, means the conservation of the soil as the great natural resource; and equally, of course, it furthermore implies the development of country life, for there cannot be a permanent improvement of the soil if the life of those who live on it, and make their living out of it, is suffered to starve and languish, to become stunted and weazened and inferior to the type of life lived elsewhere. We are now trying to preserve, not for exploitation by individuals, but for the permanent benefit of the whole people, the waters and the forests, and we are doing this primarily as a means of adding to the fertility of the soil; although in each case there is a great secondary use both of the water and of the forests for commercial and industrial purposes. In the same way it is essential for the farmers themselves to try to broaden the life of the man who lives in the open country; to make it more attractive; to give it every adjunct and aid to development which has been given to the life of the man of the cities. Therefore the conservation and rural life policies are really two sides of the same policy; and down at bottom this policy rests upon the fundamental law that neither man nor nation can prosper unless, in dealing with the present, thought is steadily taken for the future.

In one sense this problem with which we have to deal is very, very old. When-

ever civilizations have hitherto sprung up they have always tended to go through certain stages and then to fall. No nation can develop a real civilization without cities. Up to a certain point the city movement is thoroughly healthy; yet it is a strange and lamentable fact that always hitherto after this point has been reached the city has tended to develop at the expense of the country by draining the country of what is best in it, and making an insignificant return for this best. In consequence, in the past, every civilization in its later stages has tended really to witness those conditions under which "the cities prosper and the men decay." There are ugly signs that these tendencies are at work in this nation of ours. But very fortunately we see now what never before was seen in any civilization—an aroused and alert public interest in the problem, a recognition of its gravity and a desire to attempt its solution.

The problem does not consist merely in the growth of the city. Such a growth in itself is a good thing and not a bad thing for the country. The problem consists in the growth of the city at the expense of the country; and, even where this is not the case, in so great an equality of growth in power and interest as to make the city more attractive than the country, and therefore apt to drain the country of the people who ought to live therein.

The human side of the rural life problem is to make the career of the farmer and the career of the farm laborer as attractive and as remunerative as corresponding careers in the city. Now, I am well aware that the farmer must himself take the lead in bringing this about. A century and a quarter ago the wise English farmer, Arthur Young, wrote of the efforts to improve French wool: "A cultivator at the head of a sheep farm of 3,000 or 4,000 acres would in a few years do more for their wools than all the academicians and philosophers will effect in ten centuries." It is absurd to think that any man who has studied the subject only theoretically is fit to direct those who practically work at the matter. But I wish to insist to you here—to you practical men, who own and work your farms—that it is an equally pernicious absurdity

¹ This article forms the basis of an address which Mr. Roosevelt made on Tuesday of this week before a union meeting of the Granges of Herkimer and Oneida Counties at Otica, New York.—THE EDITORS.

for the practical man to refuse to benefit by the work of the student. The English farmer I have quoted, Young, was a practical farmer, but he was also a scientific farmer. One reason why the great business men of to-day—the great industrial leaders—have gone ahead, while the farmer has tended to sag behind the others, is that they are far more willing, and indeed eager, to profit by expert and technical knowledge—the knowledge that can come only as a result of the highest education. From railways to factories no great industrial concern can nowadays be carried on save by the aid of a swarm of men who have received a high technical education in chemistry, in engineering, in electricity, in one or more of scores of special subjects. The big business man, the big railway man, does not ask college-trained experts to tell him how to run his business; but he does ask numbers of them each to give him expert advice and aid on some one point indispensable to his business. He finds this man usually in some graduate of a technical school or college in which he has been trained for his life work.

In just the same way the farmers should benefit by the advice of the technical men who have been trained in phases of the very work the farmer does. I am not now speaking of the man who has had an ordinary general training, whether in school or college. While there should undoubtedly be such a training as a foundation (the extent differing according to the kind of work each boy intends to do as a man), it is nevertheless true that our educational system should more and more be turned in the direction of educating men towards, and not away from, the farm and the shop. During the last half-century we have begun to develop a system of agricultural education at once practical and scientific, and we must go on developing it. But, after developing it, it must be used. The rich man who spends a fortune upon a fancy farm, with entire indifference to cost, does not do much good to farming; but, on the other hand, just as little is done by the working farmer who stolidly refuses to profit by the knowledge of the day; who treats any effort at improvement as absurd on its face, refuses to countenance what he regards as new-fangled ideas and contrivances, and jeers

at all "book farming." I wish I could take representatives of this type of farmer down to Long Island, where I live, to have them see what has been done, not as philanthropy but as a plain business proposition, by men connected with the Long Island Railroad, who believe it pays to encourage the development of farms along the line of that railway. They have put practical men in charge of experimental farms, cultivating them intensively, and using the best modern methods, not only in raising crops, but in securing the best market for the crops when raised. The growth has been astounding, and land only fifty miles from New York, which during our entire National lifetime has been treated as worthless, has within the last three or four years been proved to possess a really high value.

The farmer, however, must not only make his land pay, but he must make country life interesting for himself and for his wife and his sons and daughters. Our people as a whole should realize the infinite possibilities of life in the country, and every effort should be made to make these possibilities more possible. From the beginning of time it has been the man raised in the country—and usually the man born in the country—who has been most apt to render the services which every nation most needs. Turning to the list of American statesmen, it is extraordinary to see how large a proportion started as farm boys. But it is rather sad to see that in recent years most of these same boys have ended their lives as men living in cities.

It often happens that the good conditions of the past can be regained, not by going back, but by going forward. We cannot re-create what is dead; we cannot stop the march of events; but we can direct this march, and out of the new conditions develop something better than the past knew. Henry Clay was a farmer who lived all his life in the country; Washington was a farmer who lived and died in the country; and we of this Nation ought to make it our business to see that the conditions are made such that farm life in the future shall not only develop men of the stamp of Washington and Henry Clay, but shall be so attractive that these men may continue as farmers;

for remember that Washington and Henry Clay were successful farmers. I hope that things will so shape themselves that the farmer can have a great career and yet end his life as a farmer; so that the city man will look forward to living in the country rather than the country man to living in the city.

Farmers should learn how to combine effectively, as has been done in industry. I heartily believe in farmers' organizations; and we should all welcome every step taken towards an increasing co-operation among farmers. The importance of such movements cannot be overestimated; and through such intelligent joint action it will be possible to improve the market just as much as the farm.

Country life should be as attractive as city life, and the country people should insist upon having their full representation when it comes to dealing with all great public questions. In other words, country folks should demand that they work on equal terms with city folks in all such matters. They should have their share in the memberships of commissions and councils; in short, of all the organized bodies for laying plans for great enterprises affecting all the people. I am glad to see on such bodies the names that represent financial interests, but those interests should not have the right-of-way, and in all enterprises and movements in which the social condition of the country is involved, the agricultural country—the open country—should be as well represented as the city. The man of the open country is apt to have certain qualities which the city man has lost. These qualities offset those which the city man has and he himself has not. The two should be put on equal terms, and the country talent be given the same opportunity as the city talent to express itself and to contribute to the welfare of the world in which we live.

The country church should be made a true social center, alive to every need of the community, standing for a broad individual outlook and development, taking the lead in work and in recreation, caring more for conduct than for dogma, more for ethical, spiritual, practical betterment than for merely formal piety. The country fair offers far greater possibilities for

continuous and healthy usefulness than it at present affords. The country school should be made a vital center for economic, social, and educational co-operation; it is naturally fitted to be such a center for those engaged in commercial farming, and still more for those engaged in domestic farming, for those who live on and by the small farms they themselves own. The problem of the farm is really the problem of the family that lives on the farm. On all these questions there is need of intelligent study, such as marks the books of Professor Bailey, of Cornell, and of Sir Horace Plunkett's book on the "Rural Life Problems of the United States."

One feature of the problem should be recognized by the farmer at once, and an effort made to deal with it. It is our duty and our business to consider the farm laborer exactly as we consider the farmer. No country life can be satisfactory when the owners of farms tend, for whatever reason, to go away to live in cities instead of working their farms; and, moreover, it cannot be really satisfactory when the labor system is so managed that there is for part of the year a demand for labor which cannot be met, and during another part of the year no demand for labor at all, so that the farmers tend to rely on migratory laborers who come out to work in the country with no permanent interest in it and with no prospect of steady employment. It is exceedingly difficult to make a good citizen out of a man who cannot count upon some steadiness and continuity in the work which means to him his livelihood. Economic conditions on the farm—in variety and kind of crop-growing, especially as distributed in time, and in housing for the men—must be so shaped as to render it possible for the man who labors for the farmer to be steadily employed under conditions which foster his self-respect and tend for his development.

Above all, the conditions of farm life must always be shaped with a view to the welfare of the farmer's wife and the farm laborer's wife, quite as much as to the welfare of the farmer and the farm laborer. To have the woman a mere drudge is at least as bad as to have the man a mere drudge. It is every whit as important to

introduce new machines to economize her labor within the house, as it is to introduce machinery to increase the effectiveness of his labor outside the house. I have not the slightest sympathy with any movement which looks to excusing men and women for the non-performance of duty and fixes attention only on rights and not on duties. The woman who shirks her duty as housewife, as mother, is a contemptible creature; just as the corresponding man is a contemptible creature. But the welfare of the woman is even more important than the welfare of the man; for the mother is the real Atlas, who bears aloft in her strong and tender arms the destiny of the world. She deserves honor and consideration such as no man should receive. She forfeits all claim to this honor and consideration if she shirks her duties. But the average American woman does not shirk them; and it is a matter of the highest obligation for us to see that they are performed under conditions which make for her welfare and happiness and for the welfare and happiness of the children she brings into the world.

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