

The Country Life Movement

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By the late 19th century, immigration and industrialization had begun to fundamentally restructure American society. Even though the majority of people still lived in rural areas, it was clear that the future lay in the rapidly expanding cities. In the 1880s and 1890s, farmers expressed dissatisfaction with their declining social and economic fortunes by joining various “Populist” political movements that attempted to fight against the concentrated power of bankers, merchants, and railroad monopolies, all of whom exercised economic dominance over the millions of isolated and unorganized agricultural producers. Beginning in the 1870s, farmers also formed self-help and cooperative marketing associations such as the Grange in an attempt to improve their terms of trade with the cities.¹ Populism left a romantic legacy of protest against the forces of modernization but did not change rural America or deflect the forces arrayed against it. The Grange, on the other hand, while not immediately successful in increasing farm income, did lay the groundwork for future cooperative marketing arrangements among farmers.

The victory of Republican William McKinley over Democrat William Jennings Bryan in the election of 1896 signaled the end of Populism.² In addition, the closing of the frontier meant that fewer acres of new agricultural land were coming under cultivation. By 1898, prices for agricultural commodities began to rise, lessening economic discontent in the countryside and ushering in what was called the “golden age of agriculture,” which lasted until 1918. On the other hand, the rise in consumer prices, rural outmigration, and growing farm tenancy coupled with increasingly elusive farm ownership, and the possibility of future agricultural shortages, began to worry urbanites. For the first time in American history, they perceived a deterioration in the conditions of “country life” as a potential source of problems for the Nation as a whole. Country people were moving to the cities throughout the Western industrializing world, but it took on special significance in the United States for “this had always been a nation of farmers and farm people. Its institutions, government, traditions, even the very character of its people had been shaped in a rural environment, . . .”³ The immigration of millions of southern and eastern Europeans was troubling to the racial and ethnic sensibilities of some Americans, who feared that this foreign influx would dilute the “native stock” even further if the countryside was depopulated.

The increasing presence of many immigrant tenants was also disquieting. For example T. N. Carver, professor of political economy at Harvard University, believed the supposed lower agricultural standards of rural immigrants would drive out the higher ones of native-born Americans. The only way to prevent this was to increase productive efficiency so that “greater intelligence, greater mental alertness, more exact scientific knowledge and calculation” would prevail.⁴

Some “country-lifers” were also concerned about shortages of natural resources and became active in the new conservation movement that had begun in the late 19th century. Most prominent among them was Gifford Pinchot, founder of the U.S. Forest Service and principal organizer of Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission of 1908, the most important and influential of the many commissions of that era. In turn, Conservationism and the Country Life movement were part of the wider movement known as Progressivism that was directed primarily at reforming government and big business.

From 1900 to 1920, more Americans became aware of rural conditions and problems than at any other time in our history.⁵ Thousands of articles on rural life were published in the

popular press and scholarly journals, and many conferences were held to discuss the social and economic conditions of farm families. The first “Back-to-the Land” movement took place during these years, briefly flourishing until running out of steam in the early 1910s.⁶ Social science survey work got its start during the Country Life movement, and so many surveys were carried out that one commentator called these years the “era of the survey.” As a result, the main practitioners of survey work, members of the new discipline of rural sociology, bolstered their previously tenuous position in academia.

There was much talk during the Country Life movement. There was less action. The time was not yet ripe for ambitious government programs. Most country-lifers were relatively conservative and did not favor the creation of structured government programs, knowing that the even more conservative and independent farm population would have resisted them. In its vagueness and diversity, David Danbom has compared the Country Life movement to the ecology movement of the 1960s and 70s.⁷

Country-lifers were mainly urban academics, journalists, writers, ministers, or businessmen who, like most urbanites of that time, had grown up on farms. Some were so-called “urban agrarians” who were believers in the “agrarian myth” of the farmer as the bulwark of republican moral virtues and feared that migration to the cities would corrupt those virtues. They wanted to find ways to make country life more attractive so that farmers would not feel compelled to leave and thus would continue to provide the cities with their moral examples and their agricultural products. As William Bowers has pointed out, these country-life reformers were caught in a permanent contradiction. They wanted to resurrect a mythologized rural past, while at the same time advocating ideas that would inevitably bring urban influences into the countryside. They did not realize it at the time, but they could not have the best of both worlds.⁸ The urban agrarians probably had the least impact of the Country Life groups.

Some social scientists, however, were more urban-oriented and did not hold such nostalgic notions. Instead they were concerned about the putative effects of rural “degeneration” on the Nation and its food supply, as seen most glaringly in notorious stories about inbred, mentally defective families such as the Jukes and the Kallikaks.⁹ In order to counteract what they thought was the growing insularity, narrowness, and anarchy of rural life, they spent much of their time contemplating ways to rehabilitate institutions such as the country school, country church, and local county government so that they would more closely resemble urban models. Although they had different values, urban agrarians and social scientists could cooperate because both saw the need for institutional reform -- for the urban agrarians as a way to preserve idealized rural institutions and values suffering under the stress of economic change and for social scientists as the solution to rural degeneration.¹⁰

A third group of country-lifers, however, was more economically hard-minded, eschewing talk of traditional rural values and institutional reform for exhortations that farmers must act like businessmen. They were especially represented in the extension movement, which, beginning at the turn of the century, sought to convert farmers to “scientific agriculture” through practical demonstration and education. In the long run, they probably had the biggest impact because, of all the groups, they were most in tune with the economic changes transforming agriculture at the turn of the century. The cities wanted a cheap, reliable, and abundant supply of food. Industrial agriculture was the best way to produce it.

For nearly 20 years, these groups of country-lifers attempted to collaborate, each paying

respect to the ideas of the others in their journals and meetings, but eventually the differences became too great. In 1919, the urban agrarians constituted the National Country Life Association. A year later, the business-oriented faction came together as the American Farm Bureau Federation, representing the political and economic interests of wealthier and more technologically progressive farmers.

Results and Accomplishments

Country-lifers were most concerned about the state of country schools (the major target of the Country Life Commission established by President Roosevelt in 1908) and churches, two institutions that loomed large in rural society because there were so few others. According to country lifers, the little one-room country schoolhouse was inefficient and should be consolidated with other such schools. The curriculum needed to evolve from an exclusive emphasis on “the three Rs” to include course work that incorporated nature study, agriculture, and home economics. In addition, three R courses were to be modified to mirror country life.

The problem with country churches, according to country-lifers, was that they were small, sectarian, obsessed with doctrinal disputes, and consumed by fire-and-brimstone theology. Churches needed to be enlisted into the campaign to make rural life more attractive and agriculture more productive by preaching the “social gospel” and becoming larger and interdenominational.

The attempt to reform rural churches was entirely unsuccessful. Rural people were devoted to their own churches and resented urban attempts to change them. Since forms of worship were matters of private conscience and economics, pressure to change them was unavailing. According to one Manhattan, KS minister, “To feed the flaming passion for big crops is not the task of the country church, and if it stoops to this it will ultimately become the farmer’s worst enemy.”¹¹

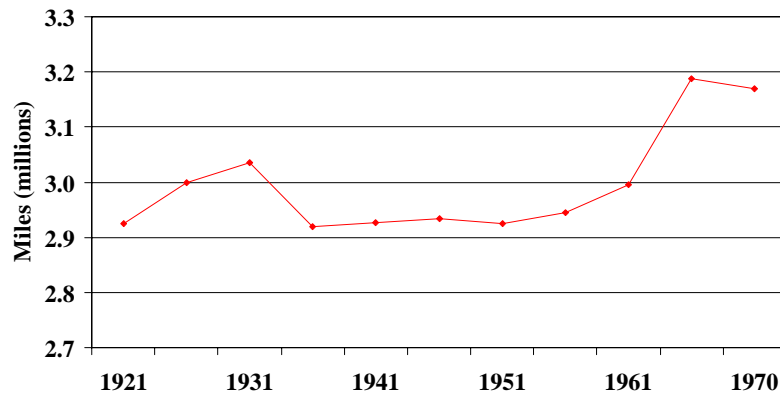
The effort to reform the country school was also resisted. Most farmers were attached to their local schools and did not want their children to have to travel longer distances. They were also suspicious of curriculum changes. Unlike the country-lifers, many farmers correctly saw that their children’s futures would be in the cities, and they wanted them to be equipped to deal with the urban environment through a knowledge of the three Rs. School consolidation, however, proceeded, albeit gradually, because rural depopulation and outmigration made it inevitable, but it was not until the late 1940s that many little one-room country schools finally disappeared.¹²

Changes in economic practices and rural infrastructure were more easily accomplished. Social isolation was lessened with the start of limited rural free delivery of mail in 1896, sparing farmers a long and sometimes arduous trek to town.¹³ They could stay in closer touch with the world and receive news about the economic and market conditions that affected their lives. At first, town merchants objected to rural free delivery, fearing a loss of business if farmers came to town less frequently. But its popularity with farmers overwhelmed any opposition, and in 1902 it became permanent. Ten years later, Congress approved general parcel post delivery for rural areas, which introduced farmers to many more urban conveniences. Again, local businesses objected. By the early 1920s the radio became one of the most valued of these conveniences. In the words of Will Rogers, “The only thing that can make us give up our radio is poverty. The old radio is the last thing moved out of the house when the sheriff comes in.”¹⁴

Closely intertwined with postal delivery was the “good roads” movement. Rural roads had been deteriorating in the late 19th century and urban devotees of the new sport of bicycling

were among the first to notice and call for improvements. When rural free delivery was initiated farmers also realized they had an interest in roads and began to support local efforts to improve and construct them. Not all farmers, however, were enthusiastic about spending money on roads because they thought they might benefit urban travelers more than themselves. However, they were popular with most farmers. In 1916, Congress provided funds under the Federal Highway Act to establish post roads.¹⁵ Ironically, although roads and mail delivery improved rural life, they also made available the attractions of city life and thus accelerated the exodus that country-lifers were trying to prevent (fig. 3).

Figure 3--Miles of Rural Roads, 1921-1970



Source: Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dept of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 1975.

Also 1916, the Federal Farm Loan Act provided for the establishment of 12 Federal land banks and a system of joint-stock land banks. Congress appropriated the original capital for the banks with the proviso that farmers organize their own local associations. As farmers obtained long-term mortgage loans from the land banks, they were to invest 5 percent of their loans in the capital stock of their local associations, which, in turn, would invest them in the capital of the Federal land banks. Gradually, these funds would replace government-owned capital. Private interests were to capitalize the joint-stock land banks, operating on a profit basis for their stockholders.

These land banks made it possible for farmers throughout the country to obtain loans for as long as 20 to 40 years and, in many cases, eliminated the need for high interest rates and renewal fees every 3 to 5 years. Thus began a fundamental realignment of farm mortgage lending because other lenders followed suit in order to compete with the land banks.¹⁶

The country-lifers' most important achievement was the extension movement, culminating in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 that created the Extension Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Since then, this unique partnership among counties, States, and the Federal Government has been the principal way in which agronomists, agricultural researchers, economists, home economists, and others have communicated with rural people.

The first extension work began in 1899 when George Washington Carver of Tuskegee Institute proposed using a mule-driven wagon to carry machinery, seeds, dairy equipment, and the like around to black farmers.^{xvii} In 1902, Seaman A. Knapp was appointed as a USDA special agent in the South and also began to practice extension. Two years later, Federal funds became available for his use in connection with the damage caused to cotton crops by the Mexican boll weevil. His method of seeking cooperation of the State and local organizations, working with and through farmers, and using demonstration fields to illustrate selection and improved production methods proved very successful. He favored the use of farmers to instruct other farmers. Meanwhile, W. J. Spillman, an agronomist operating in the North and West, was working on problems of farm management. He preferred to use college-trained men organized by district, who worked in close conjunction with the state agricultural colleges and experiment stations. In 1911, Knapp and Spillman's work was consolidated in USDA's Office of Farm Management.^{xviii}

After passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, extension work expanded considerably. However, many farmers did not accept the extension agents, suspecting them of promoting the consumption interests of the cities over their own welfare and of being in league with the seed and equipment companies. World War I dispelled these notions. In 1917, more than 1,600 emergency demonstration agents were hired and were given wartime authority to mobilize labor in rural districts and distribute seed loans, thus making farmers more dependent on them. Working through so-called "farm bureaus," composed primarily of successful and productive farmers, the agents became an integral part of rural life during the war years.^{xix} In the 1920s, the Extension Service cemented its close ties with the American Farm Bureau Federation and its members.

After the war, agricultural prices fell and urban Americans became less concerned about the prospect of agricultural shortages. Rural concerns receded and the Country Life movement dissipated. Agriculture went into a permanent semi-depression. Farmers increasingly sought relief in cooperative marketing schemes and associations. USDA expanded its technical and informational capabilities. Nothing, however, was able to raise prices or increase agricultural income.

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