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Hoard, William Dempster, 1836-1918

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TEACHING THE ELEMENTS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE COMMON SCHOOLS.

Address of W. D. HOARD Before The Southern Wisconsin Teachers' Association
at Racine, April 7th, 1900.

It has been repeatedly affirmed, and I think the statement is true, that 95 per cent of the native born farmer's sons and daughters of this country have never attended any other school than the Country District School. More than that, thousands upon thousands of men in all the ranks of business life, who were born on the farm have never had any other schooling than that obtained in the Little Red School House.

Hardly a man among this great host who have come from the "people's college" but will lament most bitterly three things in his school life: (1) The lack of good teachers. (2) The lack of thorough, practical training in those studies that would have prepared him best for the life that fate had in store for him. (3) His own lack of devotion to his studies while in school.

What can be done to better this state of affairs? For the first difficulty the farmers are greatly to blame. They have held the penny of expense so closely to their eye that they cannot see the thousands of dollars worth of result to their children, which lies behind it. Then the teachers are not altogether blameless. They have allowed themselves to be dominated with the idea that the great object and end of their profession, is the so called "Higher Education". They have unwittingly, perhaps, educated the youth of the land away from the farm and industrial life, by calling such education, in effect, lower education. They have forgotten the great basic truth that the deepest, most abstruse of all problems are those that confront the man who undertakes to deal with nature's laws and wrest from Nature a livelihood. The banker, the editor, the merchant and the lawyer are called upon to interpret the operation of man made laws only. The farmer and the physician must interpret the laws of God. It requires deeper intellectual insight to adequately interpret the laws of God than it does the laws of man. It has

been wittily said that the earth however, most kindly covers the mistakes in judgment of both doctor and farmer. "Blessed Earth, Mother of us all."

What an advantage it would have been to every farm boy who becomes a farmer if a little more money, a little more foresight, and a little more of what Guizot calls "The genius of common sense" had been expended in the humble school of his youth.

Aristotle said, "Teach the boy that which he can make use of when he is become a man." We are sure that would mean something practical and constructive in him and for the commonwealth in afterlife. Some teachers who are greater than Aristotle, are disgusted with the narrowness of such a mental ration, and they construct men who cannot make use of what they learned. Is this wisdom?

Dr. Priestly, in 1765, wrote these words: "The studies of youth should tend to fit them for the business of their manhood. The objects of their attention and turn of thinking in younger life should not be too remote from the destined employment of their riper years. If this be not attended too, they must necessarily be mere novices upon entering the great world; be almost unavoidably embarrassed in their conduct, and after all the time and expense bestowed upon their education, be indebted to a series of blunders for the most useful knowledge they will ever acquire."

I want to see a greater sense of responsibility in parent and teacher concerning what is taught in our country school; greater responsibility for the success of the agriculture of the state that comes out of it, and goes into it.

Amid all the profound and complex questions of animal and plant life that surround the farmer's boy, should he not find something in his own school, the only school he will ever attend, that will start him on the road to a better understanding of those prob-

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lems? And should not the farmer himself see the necessity of such primary education? Can he not see it in his own life and history? Should not the great body of teachers and all the educational forces of the day see it? Should not law makers provide for it? Of what practical use are parties, teachers, or politicians if they do not foresee and make provision for the industrial intelligence of the people?

A great portion of the young men who come to the Short Course in our Agricultural College feel keenly the neglect that has attended them in their common school education. Many of them have to post themselves in arithmetic after they get to Madison, in order to understand how to reckon the percentage of fat in the milk. What sort of teachers did these boys have who did not teach them even ordinary arithmetic? What sort of parents had they who cared so little about the common education of their children?

What sort of teacher's Associations and County Superintendents have they had in the past that they did not grapple vigorously with this great and wicked neglect of the farm boys and girls in the only school that nine-tenths of them will ever attend?

More meetings have been held in the school houses of Wisconsin to organize creameries and cheese factories than to consider what should be done to improve the education of their children. How many County Superintendents have called meetings in the school houses of their respective districts, to discuss with the farmers this important question? Such effort on their part could not fail of a harvest of better thought and judgment all around.

To-day, the greatest opposition to the teaching of the simple elements of agriculture in our common schools comes from the teachers. I believe their opposition is based on a misapprehension of what is wanted. They are not to teach the art of agriculture, but simply the elements and terminology of its science. Is this practical? In answer I will state that hundreds of letters have come to HOARD'S DAIRYMAN from farmers, men of good brains, but who had been neglected in their youth, asking what is meant by the words we use in constructing a formula for a ration for dairy cows.

Such words as protein, carbohydrates, nutritive ratio, etc. These are terms in agricultural chemistry. There are no equivalent terms for them in our common idiom. To meet this difficulty, and that we should be understood, we were obliged to construct a glossary, and keep the same standing at the head of the department of inquiries. Many and grateful have been the letters we have received from these men for the assistance this glossary gave them. "Lead kindly light" is the prayer of all men seeking light, material as well as spiritual. If there were reasons why these men should not have been trained in a knowledge of agricultural terms in their youth, those reasons do not exist now. Simple and clear text books have been prepared which will almost teach themselves. By reason of ignorance of such terminology, many a farmer finds himself barred out of an understanding of the most valuable literature of his profession. Such knowledge might have been taught to him in his youth. It is taught to the agricultural youth of Germany and other countries.

Let me give you an instance. My hired man is a German; he is a good farmer, a close observer of soil and animals. One day, in talking about a certain piece of refractory land, he said to me, in broken English, "Das land got no humus." I was surprised to hear the word "humus" from his lips. I replied, "John, what do you know about 'humus?'" His answer was a complete sermon on the subject. "I learned dat in der schule ven I was a kind." "What is humus, John?" Then in a labored manner, struggling with a lack of language, in mingled English and German, he told me that "humus" was decayed vegetable matter. That when mixed with the mineral elements of the soil, it becomes plant food; that we must so handle the soil as to keep up its supply. Furthermore, that it kept up the supply of moisture in the soil, and he added, in his expressive way, "The plants must have water; they drink, they don't eat."

Here was a man who had been taken by his government when he was a child, in his child school, and taught the meaning of words that stood for important agricultural principles. Their

meaning had become vitalized, in him, into intelligent practice. He was not blindly stumbling along with primal forces that meant so much for him or against him. Don't you think he is altogether a better farmer for this ray of light that came to him in his youth? Is there any reason why this light shall not shine for the farm youth of Wisconsin?

Another fact: A few years ago, I was talking to a prosperous German farmer in my county, who had a family of fine boys. I asked him why he did not send them to the High School in Fort Atkinson. His answer preached another sermon on this subject.

"Your American school makes everything but farmers. I want my boys to be farmers. Your teachers lead them away from the farm. The German schools help the boys to become good farmers." I felt the rebuke, stinging as it was, and could say nothing.

It is said that the decline in farm values in New York in the last 30 years has reached the enormous sum of over a billion of dollars. What has caused it? The desertion of the farm by farmers' sons. The same fact of desertion exists in Wisconsin, but to our good fortune, as fast as an American farmer deserted the farm, an European farmer came in to take his place, and the knowledge and training he had received from his government has added millions to the wealth and progress of our state.

The office of patriotic statesmanship is to build up the state. The teacher is the broadest and truest statesman if he or she but see the truth of destiny as it lies all about them. The making of an empire is in the making of men and women. The making of intelligent farmers is the making of a grandly prosperous state. "Would the farmers welcome such teaching?" is asked by the hesitant ones. Most certainly they would. The Wisconsin Dairymen's Association is composed of some of the most enlightened and practical farmers in the state. At their recent convention in Watertown, they unanimously adopted a resolution in favor of such teaching. At numerous farm institutes held in the state in past years have such resolutions been adopted. In the Province of Ontario, such teaching is made obligatory in

all country schools and optional in all city and village schools. Do not magnify the difficulties of the question too much. Do not surround it with too much theory and elaboration. Look at it simply and directly. Teach the elements of plant life, such plants as the Wisconsin farmer has to contend for and against; explain that the three leading elements of fertility are nitrogen, phosphoric acid and potash; explain the elements of cow life, steer life, horse, sheep and swine life, plant and animal biology in its simplest form, and above all, the meaning of the terms that are used. Take advantage of the fact that these boys and girls have living objects before them all the time, and will be all the more interested in a further knowledge of what they mean to them and their fortune.

Let the teacher, every teacher, in city, village and country, buy a text book, Bailey's, James', or Vorhees', and make a special study of the life that so richly abounds about them. Where there is a will there must be a way. The farmers may be indifferent and neglectful of these great interests in their hands, but if the teachers of the state are alive to the full meaning and scope of their grand duty, a different public sentiment will soon prevail. Our common school system all over the United States needs a general shaking up that it may more thoroughly minister to the future necessities of those it has in charge. As a people we have gone wild after so called "higher education." The common schools have been made to feed the Universities and Colleges. It is time the current should set the other way. Any system of education that neglects or impoverishes the primary fountains of knowledge among the plain people is false and hurtful to the best interests of the country.

The great object of such teaching is to arouse an *intellectual* interest and understanding in the children concerning the problems of farm life. When once such an interest is aroused, it will lead them on to larger acquisitions of knowledge. It will show both parents and children that farming is an intellectual pursuit; that it contains problems sufficient in number and extent for the exercise of the most ambitious intel-

lect and the most profound investigation. That from a business standpoint such study and knowledge is necessary to prevent expensive mistakes and insure the largest financial reward. In a word, that it will pay. It will greatly increase the number of reading, studious farmers. It will serve grandly to increase the attendance upon our agricultural schools and colleges, because the thirst for a better understanding has been implanted in the child. It will enlist the sympathy and interest of the parent in the study of such elements, and by a process of unconscious tuition enrich his understanding also. It will aid very greatly in the introduction of sound agricultural literature into thousands of farm homes.

There is a most serious lack of such reading among the farmers of our country today. A series of letters are being published in HOARD'S DAIRYMAN at the present time, concerning the patrons of creameries in Iowa, in which the facts relative to their success as dairymen, their ability to make a profitable return from their cows, and the extent to which they read dairy and farm papers, are brought out. These men are spoken of by number. The total number investigated to this date are 83, and of this number not one-half even read any farm papers. They feel but little intellectual hunger for such reading; farming to them is nothing more than a life of physical drudgery, devoid of intellectual interest, and because of such a low estimate, their profits and the accompanying rewards of life are small.

But the real reason why they are not interested in such reading is that they fail to understand it; fail to understand the necessary terms used. Such a condition of mind is entirely reasonable. Neither you, nor I, are interested in any reading or study we cannot understand. But the live question of the hour is, who or what is responsible for such a state of mind? What is true of Iowa is true in the same proportion of Wisconsin and every other state. Something must be done to arouse in the mind of the coming farmer an intellectual understanding of what it means to be a farmer. What it will mean to him in a larger expansion of financial profit, and a development of his intellect and

standing among men. What it means to the conservation of the fertility of the soil and will mean in the promotion of the future prosperity of the state and nation. What it means in the promotion of the increased comfort and beauty of the farm home and farm life. What it means to the development of his children, whether they are to become farmers or not; what it means in the formation of a broader agricultural citizenship.

All these things and many more are involved in making our common schools and their teachers of larger use to the great and always important agricultural population of the state.

But there is much in it for the teacher. When once you have made the country school of greater service to the farmer and his children, you have given him at once a larger view of the value of the country school as an element of country life. In the light and warmth of such an understanding, the teacher's profession must certainly be enhanced in public estimate.

No man, be he farmer, lawyer, editor, or teacher, ever made for himself a large place; or reaped the larger reward that comes from large service to his fellow man, or enhanced his calling in public estimate, without he obeyed the law of Surplus Effort. Of necessity to himself and his future, he must seek for opportunity to do more than he is paid for, in order that he may have an opportunity to be well paid for what he does. The growing man always puts his purpose above himself, and his motto in his calling is the same as that of the Persian Courtier to his King, "Honor be to me as I honor thee."

So I would say to the teachers of Wisconsin: Would you broaden the scope of the teacher's profession? Would you more thoroughly intellectualize and invigorate the public mind and thought? Would you bestow the greatest possible service to your state? Would you do the best you can for your day and age? Then take hold of this question of teaching the elements of Agriculture in the common schools. Be the real moving force behind it. Read and study concerning it. Make of yourselves a leaven which shall leaven the whole lump, and the result to your state in its material and intellectual development, no man can compute.