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Conserving the Best in Rural Communities

Rural Youth and Rural Life

Extension Service of College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Conserving the best in Rural Communities

Summary Report of the Fifth Wisconsin Country Life Conference

What is best in rural life and how may it be preserved were accepted as challenges by three hundred young people meeting in the fifth annual Wisconsin Collegiate Rural Life Conference at Eau Claire State Teachers College, May 15, 1937. Attention was centered on the theme, "Conservation and Rural Life.

The program was opened with a panel discussion directed toward the question of what to conserve in rural life. Succeeding a forum, which developed from the panel, were small group discussions and special learning by doing numbers consisting of demonstrations and actual participation in handicrafts and hobby interests.

The main address of the conference was given by W. C. Coffey, University of Minnesota, who spoke on "Youth Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow". Others included "A Collegiate Rural Life Club's Service to Its Immediate Community" by E. L. Kirkpatrick, University of Wisconsin; and "Conference Comments" by G. P. Deyoe, Platteville State Teachers College. Added features were a puppet show, vocal musical numbers, folk dancing and the actual use of game equipment.

The ideas which are presented in the following report represent a resume of what took place at the conference. Broadly, they include the main points which were brought forth through the different means of treating the topic. That is, the panel forum, small group discussions, special interest activities, and the main address.

* Nineteen institutions were represented by delegates from Eau Claire, LaCrosse, Milwaukee, Oshkosh, Platteville, River Falls, Stevens Point, Superior, and Whitewater State Teachers Colleges; Dunn and Racine-Kenosha Country Normal Schools; Black River Falls, Chippewa Falls, and Stanley High School Training Departments; Stout Institute; and Northland and Ripon Colleges.

This report was prepared by Charles A. Hornback, Eau Claire, G. P. Deyoe, Platteville, and E. L. Kirkpatrick, Madison, primarily from reports made by student delegates. It embodies also the comments presented by Mr. Deyoe.
The panel and open forum immediately following it raised the question of what should be done to preserve and maintain the best physical, economic, and social values necessary for wholesome rural living. Attention was turned first to the natural resources of soil, forests, water, and wild life, with a recognition that soil is perhaps the greatest one of them and that if we continue to deplete it at the present rate, the future of society will be jeopardized. Conservation does not imply mere setting aside, but wiser use, and in the past wisdom has not been evident in many of our practices connected with these natural resources. Relative to better use of land, it was thought advisable for the government to further the withdrawal of all that is submarginal from crop production and direct it to other purposes. Owing to the lack of coordination in state and local laws relative to forestry, wild life, and soil conservation, opinion pointed toward the need for greater activity on the part of the Federal government.

Important considerations on the economic and social aspects of rural life problems included the desirability of legislation to check the rise of farm tenancy and the enactment of certain measures to make it unnecessary for the farmer to sell on an unprotected market while he buys on a protected one. In general, the tariff was regarded as not helpful to the farmer. An awakened interest in devising and creating fairer or more just laws of taxation was urged to relieve the over burdensome load of the farmer, caused by the prevailing general property tax system, which fails to reach equally all forms of wealth. Part of the responsibility of the farmer's present plight is due to himself. There is an obvious lack of cooperation in farm organizations, resulting in insufficient power and prestige to bargain and maintain the rightful position of agriculture with other industries.

Small Group Discussions

Following the open forum, members of the conference reassembled into smaller groups to treat different aspects of conservation and rural life. In separate sessions they discussed land and its best uses, jobs and relief, handicrafts and hobbies, rural art and nature study, music, folk games and drama, home and family and neighborliness and community spirit.
Land and Its Best Uses. It was recognized that both positive and negative forces operate in the matter of land utilization. Recent governmental attempts at zoning have been economically and socially beneficial to the nation as a whole as well as directly useful to farmers in the zoned sections. Citations of specific individual benefits, substantiated with the display of maps for several counties in the state showing proper zoning, were evidences of good results from this project.

On the negative side, one of the greatest obstacles to wise land utilization seems to be lack of education. The average farmer does not know how to conserve his soil and his present day methods of working it are inadequate. He needs more information on how to prevent erosion through proper methods of contour strip-farming, terracing, construction of dams, pasturing, and forestry. While giving due credit to what certain agencies have already done and what they have tried to do along this line, the group favored a more comprehensive and effective rural adult educational program.

Music, Folk Games, and Drama. On this sub-topic answers were sought to the following questions: Should folk songs, games and dances be revived and reinstated in American country life? Are people sufficiently interested in them to want them brought back? Have such forms of recreation any bearing on developing friendly international relationships?

In answer to the first question it was pointed out that this was one means whereby certain major needs of all people may be realized. Such needs include the opportunity for creative expression, fellowship in friendly human groups, a proud awareness of belonging or a satisfied feeling of being at home in the universe, and the opportunity of sharing the best heritages of the race.

The second question was also answered in the affirmative. There is a desire to have folk games and dancing brought back as evidenced by "Our American people clamoring to attend the famous folk festivals in our larger cities." Children and youth take readily to this kind of recreation when it is introduced as physical education in the grades, high schools, and colleges. Parents enjoy taking part in such activities at P. T. A. programs, festivals, and picnics, under good management and wise leadership permitting participation without embarrassment. The group agreed that before all could enjoy themselves to the fullest extent two requisites must be met, namely, adequately trained leadership and suitable halls and playgrounds. Provision for these would tend to meet the present day needs for wholesome recreation.
A better understanding of and participation in games and dances enjoyed by people of other lands, would, in the opinion of many, create a more sympathetic and friendly feeling among all people.

Increased attention to these as well as other forms of recreation is needed if rural life is to appeal as it should to young people. Actual participation in creative activities will make rural life increasingly attractive. The need to soft pedal highly competitive forms of recreation was emphasized.

Neighborhood and Community Spirit. Neighborhood, which involves cooperation in work and recreation, is primarily the rural teacher's responsibility. She should, in a diplomatic way, "start things going" in a community, and arrange worthwhile programs in which every individual can participate during the year. She may well promote or organize a community club if none is already functioning.

In response to the question, "What has happened to the community spirit of former times?" it has been pointed out that it slackened with the growth of individualism, and that there is a pressing need for greater civic training among rural people. Such training should include a sympathetic understanding of one's neighbors and an appreciation of the values of good community spirit, in addition to (a) ability to earn one's own livelihood, (b) knowledge of daily affairs and the happenings of the world, and (c) honesty in dealing with others. Various present day clubs, for both old and young, have been organized for this purpose and are realizing their objectives. There was an awareness of inefficacy in some clubs owing to the lack of properly selected aims and well trained leadership. Each community or neighborhood has its own particular characteristics, some of which are tending toward disintegration, and it is up to each local group to sponsor the type of organization most needed to preserve and utilize them. Neighborhood and community spirit are worthy of conservation and expansion.

Home and Family. The import of this discussion indicated that young people have utmost faith and confidence in the present day farm family. They believe that it is still the most basic socializing institution of modern times, replete with opportunities and productive of situations necessary for complete human development. Traits characterizing the farm family include opportunities for individual training in health, religion, cooperation, and respect for others through family counselling, a wholesome environment, and common interests.

Contrary to the opinions of some, the group saw no general conflict between parents and children thus causing migration of youth to the city. Young people leave the farm mainly because of what the city appears to offer in contrast to opportunities in the country.
Marked improvement in the farm home was regarded possible by making available to country people the benefits of technology. Relatively few farm houses have modern conveniences. The so-called technological unemployment was referred to as an absurdity as long as various goods and services of industry are needed by rural as well as urban people. Improved health facilities, in part through various types of group medicine, were enumerated as a possible force for better home and family life.

Handicrafts and Hobbies. Since conditions have made it possible for the farmer to produce his living in a much shorter time than formerly, he has more opportunity for leisure, permitting him to follow his "natural bent" in whatever lines he wishes. Unable to arrive at a formal definition of a hobby, the group was satisfied with the thought that it is something that an individual naturally prefers to do.

Some of the representatives mentioned their own particular choices such as railroad modeling, photography, poetry, and assembling recipes. It was felt that hobbies often come to one in close connection with regular work or interest. Too few rural people have hobbies, however, due to narrow and limited educational experiences. Wider contact of rural people through adult extension programs in the form of recreation and study, would stimulate interest in and promote hobbies. The schools were held largely responsible for not discovering the natural interests of the child and encouraging his innate tendencies to more creative uses of spare time.

Attention was called to other possible values from improved educational opportunities for rural people. Some of the important problems given consideration in this connection were increased size of school units, enriched curricula, improved guidance, and greater emphasis on the development of initiative and leadership, all looking toward more adequate living. The educational influence of the church and home also have an opportunity in this field.

Youth, Jobs and Relief. In the opinion of members of this group, our educational system is too traditional, and too nearly antiquated, to cope with present day demands of society. Young people are not adequately trained to make the necessary adjustment to new situations that have recently arisen. In order to meet the changing conditions, our entire educational set-up must reach beyond the high schools and colleges and include adults who are outside "the confines of the class-room walls."
It was mentioned that the inflexibility and intolerance of adults frequently constitute serious impediments to progress. Question was raised, however, if what is, has to be. Scientific research has effectively demonstrated that adults can continue to learn; and with the proper attitude on their part, education can be made a lifelong process. Unless this becomes a reality, the frustration of youth will continue, because of the crucial positions held by adults in society. Only if education during the in-school period is made to touch all phases of development and relate to individual and community problems, and only if people continue to be educated from "the cradle to the grave" will coordinated progress in the interests of youth and adults become possible.

Favor was expressed for the N. Y. A. set-up which has made it possible for many young men and women to attend college; in very few cases has the project tended to "shelter" the individual, to the extent that it makes him independent of his own ambition and resourcefulness. It was suggested that since the government is offering this aid, that it be accompanied with further extension in compulsory school attendance age to 20 or 21 years. Two avenues of approach to solution of the unemployment problem among youth were pointed out. One was a wider and wiser use of our natural resources for alleviation of immediate and remote unemployment situations. The other emphasized the need for keener recognition of important social and spiritual values. Thus, it would be possible for trained social workers as well as others, to do the more socially useful things, and thereby mitigate evils of the over-emphasized money wage element. It was commonly believed that society holds potential jobs, as yet unknown, fruitful of producing happy and contented rural lives.

Rural Art and Nature Study. There has been a misunderstanding of what art means, notwithstanding an unlimited opportunity to study it in the rural environment. Neither as a child nor as an adult has the rural dweller had pointed out to him the beauties of nature, such as the plumage of birds, the shading colors in the forest, or the fragrance of blossoms, largely, because such commonplace things are all taken for granted. Their annual appearance and disappearance without effort on the part of the farmer make him unappreciative of their beauty.

What can be done about it? All homesteads, school grounds, church lawns, cemeteries, and roadsides can be made places of beauty. Much can be accomplished by intensive, well planned, clean-up and landscaping campaigns. Instances were related where school-promoted
campaigns were most fruitful of causing adults to become actively interested in beautifying their own homesteads. It was urged that local clubs such as P. T. A., church groups, cemetery societies, 4-H clubs and garden societies give real thought occasionally to this matter of rural art, making adults more mindful and appreciative of it. Art should and can be made a part of our lives.

In the classroom, the teacher can develop the kind of appreciation needed by presenting and discussing artistic production of the proper sort.

### Special Interest Activities

Owing to "the industrial revolution overtaking agriculture," the working hours of the farm people are becoming much shorter, giving more time for them to "live". The standards which will be maintained are relatively independent upon the use made of free-from-work or leisure hours. The conference conducted a number of special interest "learning by doing" sessions, small group activity in metal, wood and leather craft, finger painting, block printing, play casting and make-up, puppetry, game equipment, music directing and folk dancing, toward which rural people may turn for more wholesome living.

The general procedure of each session consisted first of demonstration, followed by participation. It was assumed by those in charge that just "seeing a thing done" would not permit the realization of the desired objectives. Consequently, each attendant was urged to take part in some form that he might get the "feel of doing it."

A typical example of the "learning by doing" numbers was puppetry. This smaller group participation was preceded by a show before the larger assembly. Characters taken from the novel "Treasure Island" were mimicked, accompanied by singing off stage of the modern song with the same name. Through the use of simple picture drawings for a miniature stage setting, skillful manipulation of characters, and appropriate music, the audience was given suggestive possibilities for helping both young and old use more wisely and more enjoyably their leisure time. After the demonstration, each person in the smaller group was permitted to note how simply the parts were constructed, and to try his skill at making the "characters" perform. Some enjoyed putting on individual features such as a long nose, big ears, or a peculiarly shaped head. Necessary materials for construction of a puppet show include small blocks of wood, soap, water, paste, chalk, wire, and tacks.
The climax of activity interests was reached in the evening when two groups working independently interspersed various game stunts with folk dancing. Simply made equipment was used. Each game, of which there were a dozen or more, and each folk dance was first demonstrated by either a leader or a group of leaders, after which all were urged to take part. Thus the creative recreational interests and activities of the day were brought to a successful close in a comprehensive program number shared by all in attendance.

In Summary

The tone of the conference is clearly evident from some of the "gems" which emerged from the deliberations of the young people during the day. A few of those drawn from some of the discussions and pertaining to different phases of the topic are worthy of repetition. "Education has indoctrinated youth with the past." "The laissez faire philosophy which has pervaded education has over-emphasized the path of gold." "Disillusionment frequently results after young people leave school." "We must develop a type of education which will teach youth to take care of themselves and live right." "We should keep in mind that in the modern world we must live with other people and not each person for himself." "The policy of rugged individualism does not work in the modern world." "Much of the want that is present in society today is caused by inability to buy, and it is questionable if there is or has been actual over-production of agricultural or industrial goods." Young people do not ask for help as a gift, but insist that they be given a chance to obtain an education, earn a living, and establish homes." "We should forge out in new directions in making plans for the conservation of our national resources."

Generally, the discussions brought forth many points bearing directly on needed conservation. The family as a democratic unit, the farm as a home, and agriculture as an industry are worthy of continuance. Economic independence, up to a certain point, is important; but much ground has been lost, especially with respect to land ownership. To some extent, greater self-sufficiency should be maintained for individual farms. Perhaps, this should represent a happy medium between "the horse-and-buggy", self-sufficient type of farming and a highly commercialized dependent type, both extremes of which we see characterized rural life in the past. Among the salient features are a stability which is not easily stampeded into hasty action, a freedom from hypocrisy, and a certain dogged thread of optimism which shows itself in a spark of hope for the future.
At this point it is not amiss to give the reactions of adults who were in attendance at the conference. Some of the comments made are summarized as follows: The philosophy of life of these young people as evidenced by a regard for the rights of others, a desire to make the benefits of an age of technology available to all, and a generally wholesome outlook for the future, is commendable. Another feature which impressed several was the sensitivity of these young people to important problems which confront society, and the serious and sensible approach which was made to their proposed solution.

An educational leader present expressed the viewpoint that we need more of these intelligent youth in our classrooms as teachers, as seldom did he hear such wholesome and tolerant discussions. Perhaps the outstanding feature of the day's events is the renewed faith by both youth and adults in the democratic process which results from observation and participation in various activities. Thus, youth and adults teaming together in the interests of all can usher in the "Civilization of abundance, tolerance, and beauty" as suggested by Harold Rugg in The Great Technology.

YOUTH Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

The basic desires of youth are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Man youth wants to be a man with man's responsibilities, and woman youth wants to be a woman with woman's responsibilities. Sometimes, due to the rapidity with which the world is changing, people lose sight of the abiding fundamental objectives of youth. These are the desires of young people to build homes and create opportunities of health, comfort, education, recreation, and a reasonable degree of security for their established families. Such, constitutes the basic desires of youth.

Changing conditions have perhaps shifted the emphasis somewhat on fundamental objectives. We have passed from a deficit to a surplus economy -- an economy in which there is now enough for all.

* Excerpts from the address by W. C. Coffey, Dean of Agricultural College, University of Minnesota.
Formerly, children were considered an economic asset, while today they are a liability. Economic freedom from youths' responsibilities to parental protection has placed them in a different world from the youth of yesterday. No longer are they expected to care for their parents, hence the government proposes old age security.

The status of woman has changed noticeably. Today she is privileged to act along the line of her true desires -- sometimes even choosing the alternative of bachelordom to an uninviting alliance in homemaking.

Relative to a future program for rural youth, the all work emphasis of yesterday is gone, and tomorrow young people will have to make a more inclusive work-play-culture preparation. This will mean a more painstaking preparation for work, because jobs will be scarcer, and less getting ready for leisure time activities, as there will be more of them. There is also danger of youth's putting greater emphasis on leisure than on work.

Group understanding and action will be increasingly important, and training commensurate with the new demands must be provided. Such training will include the suppression of personal antagonisms and revulsions and the cultivation of cooperation. Already some high schools have attempted to measure the ability of pupils to engage in group activity. In the training for adjustment amid endless variety in the views and behavior of people, it is most important that one have his own high standards of life and conduct which must not be compromised.

In closing, a note of warning is sounded to the youth of tomorrow. Each will have to face careful choices, for the world will present a dazzling array of things men and women will want. It will be a case of carefully determining what things really do matter because only a few will have enough income to buy whatever the whim of the moment demands. For making selections, the greatest assets will be knowledge guided by one's own place in life.