

2010

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**The beginnings of agricultural education in Midwestern rural schools,
1895-1915**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

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Ames, Iowa

2010

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Introduction

In April, 1901, O.T. Bright, the superintendent of schools in Cook County, Illinois, went on a lecturing tour to speak to the residents of his county. Travelling from town to town, he presented a series of “illustrated lectures.” Standing up in front of each small village, its audience consisting both of village dwellers and country folk, Bright showed a series of photographs of the county’s schools. Sarcastically titled “Look at the Trees” and “Note the Landscape,” Bright’s photos depicted the barren schoolyards and dilapidated buildings that made up Cook County’s rural school system. He pleaded with the residents of his county to supply funds and labor to make the county’s small district schools more attractive, claiming that schools such as those existing in Cook County could easily drive “an ambitious boy” from the country.¹

Placed for convenience at dirt crossroads, and featuring no “landscaping” to speak of, the schools in Cook County were typical of many of the 100,800 one-room district schoolhouses in the Midwest.² Drafty buildings erected and controlled by local families, most of the rural schoolhouses in the center of America were small frame houses, washed white or painted red by the families that constructed them. These schools most often sat on the least-farmable land in an area, the “highly erodible ground at the top or bottom of a hill, or near a low-lying swampy area, or some irregular, perhaps triangular patch created by the intersection of a field, a stand of timber, a rail line, or a winding gravel road.”³ Because rural schools were often surrounded by unplanted pasture, many had issues with grazing livestock,

¹ “County Superintendent Brights Pleads for Attractive Surroundings for Country Schools,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 22 April 1901, p. 9.

² Wayne E. Fuller, “Making Better Farmers: The Study of Agriculture in Midwestern Country Schools, 1900-1923,” *Agricultural History* 60(Spring, 1986): 154.

³ Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 88.

local animals that damaged the stairs, privy doors, and any trees that might have been planted to provide even a modest amount of protection from the beating sun. To keep rodents and snake populations down, the schoolyard was usually mowed, but it was rare for a school to have landscaping of any note. Play equipment did not appear in rural schoolyards until the 1910's and 1920's, when parents and reformers began to stress both mental and physical education.⁴

Inside these schoolhouses, between walls usually painted a "light drab color," local students of all ages sat in a tiny, drafty, poorly-lit room. Heating, especially in the winter, was a problem; not only were trees for fuel scarce in prairie states, but any wood piled outside the school could often become wet and rotten before its use.⁵ An inefficient wood or coal stove (though coal was seldom used because of its dirtiness) usually heated the entire building. This stove generally sat in the middle of the classroom with a long, horizontal pipe running the length of the ceiling to a brick chimney at the back of the building. The stove's efforts may often have come to naught in the windy, coldest months of the school year, as a common building technique called banking, in which the school was raised on a stone foundation to separate the wooden frame house from dirt and moisture to prevent decay, caused air to run underneath the school's floorboards.⁶ Distribution of the heat through the building by means of the stove during the winter was inequitable at best, and students in the middle of the room roasted while those in the back froze. Meanwhile, on the hottest days of

⁴ Theobald, 90.

⁵ Theobald, 91-3.

⁶ Theobald, 90.

the school year, the scarce breeze coming through the walls and windows made the building a sweltering, stagnant mess.⁷

Students who attended these schools received a limited, though time-tested and traditional, education. Based heavily on memorization, traditional rural teaching focused almost exclusively on the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Teaching "through the use of recitations and drills," rural educators taught "multiplication tables, poems, speeches, names, dates, cities, islands, rivers, mountain chains" and more by repetition and memorization. Having heard and repeated a lesson multiple times, students would recite all they had learned back to the teacher. By the early 20th century, this type of education had existed for decades in rural Midwestern schools, and it was perpetuated by tradition. Teachers, often teenage graduates (or even non-graduates) of another local school, learned from other teachers, who taught the same lessons they learned in their small schools decades earlier. Based in the common-sense idea that a child who could not repeat what he had learned had not really learned it at all, teaching in the rural schools required students to digest and repeat the basic information they would need to live within their immediate community for the rest of their lives.⁸

This type of education dominated rural schools until the early 20th century, when progressive educational reformers turned their attention to reforming the training offered at rural schools all over the country. Fueled by new pedagogical philosophies that emphasized practical lessons that were relevant to children's lives, reformers attempted, between the years 1895 and 1915, to overhaul the rural educational system. Reformers reasoned that

⁷ Theobald, 123.

⁸ Wayne E. Fuller, "Making Better Farmers," 202.

reform was a dire necessity, both for the health of the countryside and the entire country; they predicted, with the rapid expansion of the cities, that the rural population, if not better and practically trained, would not be able to produce enough food to feed the growing urban population. They blamed an early 20th-century trend of youth movement from the country to the cities on the pitiful state of rural education, which convinced children that their lives on the farm would be dull, boring, exhausting, and ultimately fruitless. Progressive educational reformers, who hailed from state colleges, city school administrations, legislatures, and activist groups, especially promoted practical training in agriculture to solve the problems created by the rural school.

For their part, rural residents did acknowledge the dilapidated conditions in many of their schools, but many resisted the notion that it was the schools driving their children from the farm, blaming the exodus on the draw of the cities, the lack of social life in the country, and the general hardships that came with a life in farming. When it came to the reform of their schools, many rural residents were hesitant to give up control of their schools, institutions they had built and maintained for decades. When it came to agricultural education, it was difficult to convince many country parents that their children should be schooled in agriculture when they could learn it at home. Furthermore, the idea that their children would learn only agriculture in a world that was increasingly becoming more diverse and making greater demands on them frustrated parents who saw in progressive reforms an attempt to force their children into farming.

Historians of this subject have focused especially on this latter aspect of the early 20th-century program to reform rural schools through the implementation of agricultural

education. Often describing the attempted agricultural overhaul of the rural curriculum as part of a greater urban attempt to gain control of the rural educational system, historians have criticized the progressive program to replace rural education with vocational agricultural training as top-down, naïve, condescending, and ultimately, a complete failure. However, writing the program off as a complete failure places many of the nuances of the program, and the rural reaction, in shadow. If one looks at the locations in which the agricultural education movement did take root and flourish, and there were such places, historians may find clues to why the overall program failed, what exactly the rural population resisted in this movement, and where the real roots of the antagonistic relationship between urban educators and rural residents existed.

This paper will address the development of the agricultural education reform movement, discuss the various and opposing motivations behind the actions of reformers and rural residents, and attempt to draw conclusions about the movement's general failure and specific successes. It will argue, through specific examples of communities in which agricultural education did exist with community support, that the failure of the progressive movement was not in the belief that the rural population needed training in agriculture, but the belief that agricultural education could replace traditional education wholesale. It will demonstrate that much of the resistance that reformers encountered was based on rural abhorrence for imposed change, and that agricultural education was often not the problem, but that outside reform irrespective of local tradition was. Finally, it will demonstrate that in those places where reformers and community members cooperated to implement a measure

of agricultural training that was voluntary, the movement could flourish and create stronger, more educated communities in the countryside.

The argument that community involvement could play a role in the successful adoption of a program of agricultural education in rural elementary and secondary schools is new to the discussion of the agricultural education reform movement. Historians have emphasized, to this point, the top-down nature of the movement that caused its ultimate failure. Lumping agricultural education in with the progressive movement to consolidate schools and reform teaching qualifications, historians have neglected to satisfactorily address the agricultural education movement as its own entity.

David Danbom's 1979 publication *Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* briefly addressed rural curriculum reforms. As part of a greater movement to reform rural schools to become "a force for social and economic efficiency and organization," Danbom saw the reforms to the rural curriculum as an outside attempt to make the rural school contribute to national society by producing a streamlined, educated, efficient, business-minded rural population that was capable of supporting the growing urban populations. Reformers, Danbom wrote, believed that agricultural education could not only make the rural population more like modern, efficient factory workers. It could also create opportunities for cooperation with parents, other students, and community leaders. Thus, agricultural education could serve as a solution to the problem of the country's lack of social life.⁹ Ultimately, though, Danbom's reformers met

⁹ David Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), 56.

with failure predicated on the inherent “ignorance, arrogance, and an undemocratic tendency” toward forced reform devoid of cultural understanding.¹⁰

In 1982, Wayne E. Fuller published *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West*, a much more pointed study of the changes that occurred in rural education between the early 19th and the middle of the 20th century. Supplemented by an article entitled “Making Better Farmers: The Study of Agriculture in Midwestern Country Schools, 1900-1923,” Fuller alone has devoted true scholarly attention to agricultural educational reforms. Much like Danbom, though, Fuller believed that the top-down approach and forced changes pushed by progressive educational reformers were the project’s greatest downfall. Fuller noted that it was the natural conservatism of the farmer that made him wary of educational reform.¹¹ He wrote also that the program’s real failure came in its inability to stop the youthful drift to town because “the fact was that education in the one-room school was not, as the Country Life Commission thought, the reason young people left the farm.” Fuller noted, however, that this may not have been the greatest goal of the school reform movement. “In retrospect,” he wrote, “it is clear that most professional educators in the Midwest who were involved in rural education were much less interested in relating the country school curricula to life than in controlling rural education, as they had so long tried to do.”¹² Fuller painted much of the rural educational reform movement as a part of a grander scheme to wrest control of one-room schoolhouses out of the hands of the rural parents that had controlled them for decades.

¹⁰ Danbom, 58.

¹¹ Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 224.

¹² Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 226.

Hal S. Barron, author of *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* attributed the failure of the agricultural education movement to the cultural conservatism of Midwestern farmers. He noted that the battle over the rural school, including curriculum reform that included agricultural training and home economics, took on cultural significance as farmers and farmers' wives perceived urban attempts to "professionalize and bureaucratize" rural society.¹³ Rural residents, who believed their schools preserved age-old "agrarian traditions," felt their schools, but more importantly their culture, were under attack from the "new, organizational society."¹⁴ According to Barron's analysis, the rural population believed that in becoming part of that new society, it would lose much of the individualism and uniqueness of rural American life.

Perhaps best at describing the varying motivations of the progressive educational reformers was Paul Theobald, whose 1995 publication *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* detailed the complexity of progressive-era reformers' goals in rural school overhaul. While many historians have characterized reformers, especially members of 1908's Commission on Country Life, as "urban-based" progressives with a general distaste for rural dwellers and rural culture, Theobald noted that many reformers had rural backgrounds, and instead attributed the failure of the agrarian reforms of the early 20th century to the agrarian population's tendency to stick to its roots, defending the "agrarian agenda, communally derived stewardship of the soil." Farmers felt that agenda was under attack from outsiders who wanted to professionalize them and teach their children to maximize efficiency and minimize costs. Farmers saw in this push to make their farms efficient the destruction of the

¹³ Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 57.

¹⁴ Barron, 73.

rural communities, which were heavily based on communal work and family relationships. In professionalizing the farms, farmers believed, progressive reformers would fundamentally alter the character of rural communities, and rural life.¹⁵

Theobald's argument incorporated one of the major themes of this paper, the role of community involvement in the success or failure of agricultural education reforms. While scholars of rural educational reform have directed their studies toward consolidation, teaching standards, overall curriculum reform, and attempts to make organized schools the center of rural communities, this paper addresses the attempt to place agricultural instruction into rural schools. Reconstructing the history of this movement, including its beginnings, the early years of attempted agricultural education, and the reactions of communities all over the Midwest, this paper argues that it was the failure of the reformers to understand the function of the rural school as community center and protector of local traditions that made much of the movement a failure. However, this study also argues that in places where community support and involvement existed in rural agricultural education programs, agricultural education could take root and flourish, becoming a part of the community's culture and a source of pride for its residents.

The argument, then, is that community support was the lynchpin upon which the success or failure of the agricultural education movement rested. If educators tried to impose agricultural education on rural residents by taking control of their schools and replacing the entire curriculum with agricultural education, they often met with vehement resistance. If educators solicited the help of the community, and then continued to ask the community for

¹⁵ Theobald, 176.

both support and input during the program's operation, they could establish successful agricultural education in the countryside. This fact, that community support dictated the outcome of the program, means that the characterization of rural population of the early 20th century as backward, non-progressive, or even overwhelmingly conservative, is flawed. The rural population, which reformers believed themselves to be helping by fundamentally altering its most basic institutions, wanted to protect its institutions from destruction or cultural degradation. This population was not completely averse to change, as long as that change did not threaten the inherent communal character of rural society. Progress was welcome, as long as progressives were willing to compromise with rural communities on its definition.

Chapter 1: The Impending Crisis in Rural America

“The rural problem is more pressing just now than any other North American problem...For two generations there has been a mighty life-current toward the cities, sweeping off the farm many of the brightest boys and most ambitious girls in all the countryside, whom the country could ill afford to lose,” wrote sociologist and theologian G. Walter Fiske in his 1912 study The Challenge of the Country.¹⁶ Fiske echoed countless authors, professors, politicians, teachers, and rural citizens of his day. To many observers, the American countryside appeared to stagnate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to the booming, exponential growth of the country’s urban centers, rural America seemed to these people to be caught in a kind of arrested development. Backward and outdated farming methods, weak or non-existent rural infrastructure, and crippling social isolation had created the social equivalent of a dusty desert out of the nation’s bread basket. The coming years would host a variety of discussions aimed at pinpointing the causes and solutions to the perceived stagnation of rural America.

Discussion of the rural problem came most loudly from the nation’s intelligentsia: collegiate professors, well-known scientists, and political leaders with a vested interest in reforming the countryside. These urban outsiders, viewing the heartland as through a sociological lens, understood the problems in the countryside to be the first warning signs of a dire national crisis. The degradation of the countryside alerted many to a brewing problem in American culture. President Theodore Roosevelt himself wrote in 1908, “No nation has achieved permanent greatness unless this greatness was based on the wellbeing of the great

¹⁶ George Walter Fiske, *The Challenge of the Country: A Study of Country Life Opportunity* (New York: Association Press, 1912), 19-20.

farmer class, the men who live on the soil, for it is upon their welfare, material and moral, that the welfare of the rest of the nation ultimately rests... this problem of country life is in the truest sense a national problem.”¹⁷

The degradation of the countryside was a “national problem” for many reasons. The belief that the movement of rural youth into the cities would permanently cripple the farming class worried modern reformers. This theory was based on a popular new sociological theory called “social Darwinism.” Those who believed the theory argued that as the cities lured the best of the rural youth to urban lives supported by factory jobs, the rural population would slide into mental and physical decay.¹⁸ Only those incapable of becoming urban laborers would remain in the countryside, and in a few generations, as those left behind produced children, the rural population would be biologically inferior, and ultimately, unable to farm.

The existence of a mentally and physically crippled farming class was an even more dangerous problem than it sounded. The prospect led many to question the group’s eventual ability to feed the expanded population of industrializing American cities. Those who observed the rapid rise of the metropolis reasoned that farmers would soon need to produce more food than ever on the same amount of land they had traditionally cultivated. If those who produced the nation’s food could not modernize because they lacked both the physical ability and mental capacity, the cities would suffer. Rising food prices would create social havoc, and eventually, the major cities would starve. Clearly, agricultural innovation was necessary to halt the onslaught of the coming food crisis.

¹⁷ “Life Out on Farm Roosevelt Theme,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 Aug 1908, p. 11.

¹⁸ Theobald, 166.

Politicians and educators engaged the public in a dialogue that emphasized the need to keep the best and brightest on American farms, if for no other reason than to feed the rest of the nation. By 1911, President William Howard Taft was voicing the concern of reformers, economists, statisticians, and even ordinary urban citizens who feared an impending food crisis. “In the last ten years [agricultural] acreage did not increase more than 35,000,000, or a little over 4 percent. In that same time our population increased 20 percent... within the life of many who are born now we shall be pressing the limit of our self-support from the soil unless some other method than by the mere extension of area be found for the increasing of our crop production.”¹⁹

Those observing the rural problem connected the physical and mental decline of the rural population with the impending food crisis, and quickly noted that halting the flow of the most exceptional rural youth to the cities was the first step to solving the problem. James Wilson, Secretary of Agriculture under Theodore Roosevelt, noted in a 1910 speech to the Philadelphia Manufacturer’s Club, “It has been said an American is the best fed, best clothed, best educated, and best housed man upon earth. We shall have to add now that he is the most expensively fed...the boys and girls of the farm...are being lured away to the cities...and to too great an extent, the agricultural resources of the country are being neglected.”²⁰ H. J. Waters, President of the Kansas State Agricultural College echoed Wilson’s concern. “If enough people are to stay on the farm to supply the world with bread, and if they are to be intelligent enough to produce this bread at a price which the world can pay, the call of the city to the country to ‘send forth the best ye breed’ must henceforth fall upon unwilling

¹⁹ “Taft at the State Fair,” *New York Times*, 10 Sept 1911, p. 2.

²⁰ “U.S. Pay Most for Living,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 Jan 1910, p. 1.

ears.”²¹ To those who made the connection between the exodus of rural youth and the perceived impending food shortage, the danger was clear, and a solution was necessary if agriculture was going to recover in time to avert the crisis. Fearing that the next generation of farmers would be unable to do the work needed to feed the cities, one observer wrote, “The more energetic having moved on to the cities, the residue presents a sort of dead level from which enterprise cannot be expected.”²²

However, while the possibility of a food crisis was perhaps the most troublesome and immediate of the problems created by rural depopulation, it was not the only concern fueling the uneasiness. Early 20th century Americans (both urbanites and farmers alike) had, like generations before and after, a nostalgic view of the independent farmer as a representative of American character and stability. Working farmers were, perhaps, the last breed of mighty men, and the deterioration or loss of the farming class meant the destruction of an important part of the American identity. At a meeting of the Farmers’ National Congress in 1905, a speech by the association’s President, Georgian farmer Harvie Jordan, made it clear the special place the farmer held in the American pantheon of professions:

Financial institutions might break, the first in the engines that turn the wheels of trade of commerce and industrial activity might be banked without imposing a tragedy in human life; the miner could lay down the pick, the workman could leave his bench, the blacksmith the forge, the merchant his counter, the lawyer his desk, without detriment to human life; but the very moment the farmers should leave their plows and reapers, gaunt famine would face the world and human life would face a death more awful in its destruction and utter annihilation than could be conceived in any other form... As farmers, we maintain the Government in times of peace, fight the battles of

²¹ H.J. Waters, “Making the Rural School the Community Center,” *Wallace’s Farmer* 37 (14 March 1912): 545.

²² “Praises Aspirations of Laboring Men,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 July 1913, p. 9.

our country in times of war, and in addition thereto feed, clothe, and shoe the world from the surplus products of our labor.²³

Often, writers emphasized the character of the farmer, along with the importance of his occupation to feeding the nation. Those writing about the natural honesty and integrity of the agricultural laborer believed it was his occupation and environmental surroundings, along with a pioneering spirit handed down from his settler ancestors, that produced his greatest qualities. Charles William Dabner, President of the University of Cincinnati, wrote for the *New York Times* in 1912 that “the country boy, reared in contact with nature’s laws... becomes fully accustomed to the common experiences of humanity, which alone can supply the true interpretations of all life and literature...the degeneration of rural life is a far more serious question than the depopulation of the country. History teaches that national decay always follows upon the deterioration of country life.”²⁴ Having grown up surrounded by nature, country boys and men truly held the last vestiges of American hardy manhood, and when they no longer existed, America’s connection with its pioneering past would disappear, too.

Furthermore, it was not only the independent farming man, the man who embodied American values, who benefited from the environment offered by rural life and his occupation. Writers also praised the farmer’s wife, who served as caretaker, educator, and spiritual guide to rural men and their children. A shortage of farm women would prove disastrous, and yet young women made up one of the largest groups leaving the farms, as they were drawn to positions as shop girls and secretaries in the cities’ booming business

²³ Harvie Jordan, “President’ Annual Address” in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Session of the Farmer;s National Congress of the United States*, (Farmer’s National Congress of the United States, 1905), p. 65.

²⁴ Charles William Dabney, “Better Country Schools, Pleads President Dabney,” *New York Times*, 28 Sept 1912, p.17.

districts. So disturbing was the prospect of a rural America devoid of feminine influence that by 1909, President Roosevelt himself was specifically addressing the need to keep farmers' daughters on the farm, giving the farmer's wife an even higher place of importance than the farmer himself. "If the woman shirks her duty as housewife, as homekeeper, as the mother whose prime function is to bear and rear a sufficient number of healthy children, then she is not entitled to our regard. But if she does her duty she is more entitled to our regard even than the man who does his duty."²⁵ As rural girls moved to cities, they left the farmer and his children without the edifying influence of a farm woman, and thus a shortage of young women on the farm could be just as bad as a shortage of farm laborers. If the farmer's crop was agricultural produce, the farmer's wife cultivated rural American values, and a farm population without its fabled values did nothing to preserve the identity of rural America.

The view of the independent farmer as the American ideal fueled the rising urban uneasiness brought on by rural depopulation. A particular brand of patriotism that focused on the farmer as the representative of American cultural values caused an increasingly negative reaction to the perceived emptying and weakening of the country population. That same feeling also prompted frustration and criticisms of the farmer, especially when scientists, sociologists, and politicians compared his failure to modernize to what they saw as a rapidly-modernizing European peasantry.

Early 20th-century progressivism encouraged a rash of international fact-finding excursions to compare and contrast the lower classes of the United States and Europe. The investigators who conducted these inquiries often came back with one verdict: that while

²⁵ "Roosevelt Message on Farmers' Needs: Special to the New York Times," *New York Times*, 10 Feb 1909, p. 2.

European peasants were quickly modernizing as a result of overcrowding and population growth, American farmers were steadfastly refusing to attempt the kind of innovation that was necessary in the face of the country's own population explosion. University groups and cooperatives invited European agricultural reformers to discuss the modernization of the farming classes. For instance, in 1908, Sir Horace Plunkett, a famous Irish agricultural reformer and a member of Parliament, addressed over 800 agriculture students at the University of Wisconsin. He discussed the many cooperative groups being formed by farmers in Ireland, who had accepted farming as a business and were now working together to secure economic advantages for all.²⁶ Speaking before this group of students, Plunkett mused, "...I think that, considering the intelligence of the farming community in this country, the farmers of the United States are lamentably backward in a knowledge of business methods... There is not a single county, not a parish in Ireland where the farmers are not completely revolutionizing the entire business of farming by introducing cooperative methods."²⁷

In reaction to statements like this one, state legislatures sent representatives to Europe to observe and discuss the modernization of European farming. In 1899, the state of Wisconsin funded a trip by Lorenzo D. Harvey, the state superintendent of public schools, to investigate agricultural education in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, France,

²⁶ Plunkett was more than just an avid agriculturalist. He was their heir to an Irish fortune, an Oxford graduate, and acquaintance of Roosevelt. He was interested in American rural degeneration, and throughout the early 1900's made multiple studies of the subject. He published his book, *The Rural Life Problem in the United States: Notes from an Irish Observer*, in 1910 (New York: MacMillan), as well as quite a few articles in academic journals, and he hosted several round table discussions at the annual meetings of the American Economic Association. See Horace Plunkett, "The Problems of Country Life. Round Table Discussion; Sir Horace Plunkett, Chairman," *American Economic Association Quarterly* 11 (April, 1910): 171-176, and Plunkett's discussion of the Country Life Commission in Horace Plunkett, "American Agricultural Commission," *The Economic Journal* 23(Jun., 1913), p. 291-293.

²⁷ "Cooperation of Farmers," *Farm Home*, 1 Jan. 1908, p. 32.

Switzerland, and Belgium.²⁸ Harvey reported that Europeans were laughably ahead of the U.S. in modernization, especially in the realm of childhood agricultural education. A representative of the United States' National Bureau of Education made a similar expedition in 1914 to Denmark. The trip yielded a report similar to Harvey's. The *Farmer's Wife* published it widely that same year.²⁹

These reports spoke most acutely to the sense of American identity tied to progress. Americans who believed themselves, or at least wanted to believe themselves, to be on the cutting edge of science and technology watched Europe modernizing more quickly. Investigators published calls for agricultural reform, criticisms of the backward American rural population, and unflattering comparisons with European agriculture (especially popular agricultural education). In the wake of such publicity, the farmer, in the eyes of outside observers, took on an extremely contradictory and ambiguous identity. While in many ways, Americans who did not live on the farm held rural traditions and conservatism in high esteem, they simultaneously criticized what they perceived as the farmer's troublesome tendency to latch onto antiquated ideas and resist modernization and improvement. As the criticisms grew more heated, it became clear that rural depopulation and stagnation had to be addressed. The first step, of course, was to find out exactly what was chasing youths away from the farm.

²⁸ Lorenzo Dow Harvey, *Report of the commissioner appointed by the legislature in 1899 to investigate and report upon the methods of procedure in this and other states and countries in giving instruction in manual training and in the theory and art of agriculture in the public schools* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1901), 11-12.

²⁹ Harold W. Foght, "What Denmark is Doing: A Study of Their Rural Schools of Agriculture and Home Economy," *Farmer's Wife*, 1 Aug 1914, p. 24.

Diagnosing the problem in rural America was going to be, from its outset, a difficult task, but progressives took a systematic approach to finding and curing the countryside's sickness. Many sociologists conducted their own surveys of the "rural problem." They produced a flood of information in the form of books, articles, pamphlets, and editorials. These authors claimed to offer solutions to the exodus of youth from the countryside.³⁰ The most comprehensive of these studies was one undertaken by the United States Government itself. Created in 1908 by Theodore Roosevelt, the Country Life Commission (CLC) endeavored to gain a truly representative understanding of rural problems. The CLC undertook the massive task of finding out what really plagued the American countryside.³¹ It counted among its leadership seven of the nation's most prosperous and well-known agriculturalists. The committee included pioneering agricultural educator and dean of Cornell University's New York State College of Agriculture Liberty Hyde Bailey, and Henry Wallace. Wallace was the editor of *Wallace's Farmer*, one of the most popular and widely-distributed agricultural periodicals of the early 20th century.

The Commission's strategy in diagnosing the problem was multi-layered. In conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau, the commission distributed more than five hundred thousand surveys to rural residents asking them to respond to twelve questions pertaining to

³⁰ Sociologists took varying approaches to these studies. George Fiske, a theologian and professor at Oberlin College attempted to find ways in which the YMCA could establish a presence in rural communities, while another more academic study made by Ernest Groves attempted to diagnose rural problems by approaching "rural social life from a psychological angle." See George Fiske, *The Challenge of the Country: A Study of Rural Life Opportunity* (New York: Association Press, 1912), and Ernest Groves, *Rural Problems of Today* (New York: Association Press, 1918).

³¹ Scott J. Peters and Paul A. Morgan, "The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 78(Summer, 2004): 293. Though these responses would offer a wealth of information to modern historians, they met an unfortunate fate. A few years after the Report of the Commission was published in 1911, Peters and Morgan write, "President Woodrow Wilson's secretary of agriculture, D.F. Houston, ordered that the one hundred thousand plus letters and completed circulars that rural men and women had sent in be burned."

the problems of country life. They received more than 115,000 responses.³² Furthermore, the committee divided itself into individual sub-committees that addressed specific problems in country life, issues such as rural roads, churches, and labor-tenancy. The commission toured twenty-nine states, “holding public hearings designed to reveal the views and ideas of others on the state of country life.”³³ It encouraged regional meetings of farmers and other rural residents, who were to discuss their areas’ problems and report back to the Committee.³⁴

Perhaps the most famous member of the Committee (aside from Wallace, who was famous everywhere) was Liberty Hyde Bailey. An innovative agriculturalist himself, Bailey had founded the New York College of Agriculture at Cornell University in 1903. When Roosevelt called for the creation of the CLC in 1908, he appointed Bailey as chair, writing in a public letter that served as a national announcement of the commission’s creation, “I shall be glad if the commission will report to me upon the present condition of country life, upon what means are now available for supplying the deficiencies which exist, and upon the best methods...to secure greater efficiency and attractiveness in country life.”³⁵

A hesitant Bailey accepted Roosevelt’s appointment on August 20th, 1908, and joined the Commission as its organizer and ultimate author of its report. Roosevelt anticipated Bailey’s probable diagnosis of the countryside’s problem. As an educator, Bailey was predisposed to a thorough investigation of rural schools, and Roosevelt’s nationally-printed letter intimated to the public that rural education would be one of the Commission’s greatest interests. “It is especially important that whatever will serve to prepare country children for

³² Peters and Morgan, 294.

³³ Peters and Morgan, 294.

³⁴ Peters and Morgan, 294.

³⁵ “Life Out on Farm Roosevelt Theme,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 Aug 1908, p. 11.

life on the farm... should be done promptly, thoroughly, and gladly... You will doubtless also find it necessary to suggest means for bringing about the better adaptation of rural schools to the training of children for life on the farm.”³⁶ Roosevelt’s prediction of Bailey’s and the rest of the Commission’s critique was correct. In 1909, just five months after their appointment (Roosevelt had given the commission until December of the following year to submit a report, but the work was done by January of 1908), the Committee submitted its report.³⁷

While the *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, authored by Bailey and approved by the members of the Commission, contained explanations of many rural problems, including corporate encroachment into farmers’ water rights, soil erosion, the prevalence of land tenancy, lack of decent roads, and poor sanitary and health conditions, its most biting and emphatic critique of the countryside was that its schools were woefully inadequate for preparing rural youths for farm life.³⁸ “The schools are held to be largely responsible for ineffective farming, lack of ideals, and the drift to town. This is not because the rural schools, as a whole, are declining, but because they are in a state of arrested development and have not yet put themselves in consonance with all the recently changed conditions of life.”³⁹

The “state of arrested development” in which the members of the Commission found the country schools was built upon a set of long-standing rural traditions. One-room schoolhouses sitting, isolated, at the corners of dusty rural roads hosted local children of all

³⁶ “Life Out on Farm Roosevelt Theme,” p. 11.

³⁷ Peters and Morgan, 290.

³⁸ Clayton S. Ellsworth, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission,” *Agricultural History* 34 (Oct., 1960): 166-7.

³⁹ Liberty Hyde Bailey, *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1911), 121-2.

ages. Teachers were often barely-educated teenagers who travelled from one district to another, hired by parents who dictated much of the curriculum and the school term (often only 7 or fewer months of the year).⁴⁰ Individual groups of parents with little surplus cash funded most of the 100,800 district schoolhouses in the Midwest; the buildings were ill-equipped, poorly heated, badly ventilated, and atrociously staffed.⁴¹ The Midwestern country school seemed to progressives to be rural America's least organized, most backward institution, and to the members of the Commission, who were college-trained politicians, businessmen, and university educators, it seemed the schools' failings had created the stagnant rural environment, which was chasing away the most industrious, capable youths.

The worst shortcoming of these schools was the content of their curricula, which consisted of traditional, classical subjects built upon the three R's. This, however, was not serving the needs of the rural community, or more broadly, American society. "The school must express the best cooperation of all social and economic forces that make for the welfare of the community...The school must be fundamentally redirected, until it becomes a new kind of institution," the Commission wrote.⁴² It made its recommendation for this redirection:

The subject of paramount importance in our correspondence and in the hearings is education. In every part of the United States there seems to be one mind, on the part of those capable of judging, on the necessity of redirecting the rural schools. There is no such unanimity on any other subject. It is remarkable with what similarity of phrase the subject has been discussed in all parts of the country before the Commission. Everywhere there is a demand that education have a relation to living, that the schools should express the daily life, and that in the rural districts they should educate by means of

⁴⁰ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 46-53.

⁴¹ Fuller, "Making Better Farmers," 154.

⁴² Bailey, *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 123.

agriculture and country life subjects. It is recognized that all difficulties resolve themselves in the end into a question of education.⁴³

Thus, the Country Life Commission's final recommendation, the summary of months of intensive investigation into rural conditions in the American countryside, was that the one reform that would do the most to improve country life, halt the flow to town, and educate the backward farmer class was the insertion of an agriculturally-based curriculum into country schools.

The Country Life Commission's recommendation was, in fact, only the most widely-publicized of numerous investigative reports submitted between 1895 and 1910 by educators who advised that the current system (or lack thereof) of rural schools needed to be "fundamentally redirected" to suit the schools to rural life. The earliest of these had been written by the Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools, formed in July of 1895 at the annual meeting of the National Council of Education.⁴⁴ "In view of the importance of the subject, and of the growing interest in the question of improving the condition of rural schools," the National Council had formed the committee, which subsequently divided itself into four subcommittees, charged with investigations into rural school maintenance, school and teacher supervision, the supply of rural teachers, and finally, "instruction and discipline," an investigation of which was to include a discussion of "the relations of rural schools to their environments: as to farm life, mining life, etc."⁴⁵

Two years after the Committee of Twelve began its work, the Subcommittee on Instruction and Discipline reported that while the "course of study in the rural schools should

⁴³ Bailey, *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 121.

⁴⁴ Henry Sabin et al., *Report of the Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools Appointed at the Meeting of National Educational Association, July 9, 1895* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1897), 5.

⁴⁵ Sabin et al., 10.

be substantially the same as that of the city schools,” care should be taken to provide education in collateral branches that would “relate to the pupil’s environment and help him understand the natural features of that environment, as well as the occupations of his fellow-men in the neighborhood.” These collateral branch courses should include some “special attention to the elementary principles of the useful arts practiced in the neighborhood of the school, namely, farming, horticulture, grazing, mining, manufacturing, or the like.”⁴⁶

Ten years later, the National Education Association commissioned yet another committee, this time to specially investigate the need for agricultural and industrial education in the nation’s rural schools. The Committee on Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities submitted its report to the National Council of Education at the annual meeting of the National Educational Association in July of 1905. The report featured a much more substantial call for agricultural education than the Committee of Twelve’s report. A 97-page commentary on the need for vocational farm training in elementary and secondary schools, the report featured chapters entitled “Argument for Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities,” “Industrial Education in the One-Room Schools, and “How to Make a Place for Industrial Education in Rural Schools.” It recommended a radical redirection of schools, and advocated a much firmer push in the direction of mandatory agricultural education in communities in which the primary occupation of most residents was farming. The committee argued that vocational education was the one real, corrective solution to the rural population’s problems; agricultural education would solve not only the problems of the farmer who, using antiquated farming techniques, was unable to make a living, but would also serve the purpose of those who were worried about the welfare of the nation as a whole.

⁴⁶ Sabin et al., 102.

There has never been a time in the history of this country when the arguments for industrial education in rural communities could be presented with as great force as at the present time. At no time before have farmers ever stood facing such problems of industrial organization as they do today...It is no longer a question of the man who can work the most hours and hardest, but it is a question of the man who works most effectively, and he is the one who has been prepared for it by a study of what is essential, a training in thinking and doing in dealing with these essentials, and who now puts the best thinking and doing into his work.⁴⁷

The new committee's pedigree far outshone that of the National Education Association's Committee of Twelve, and the reputations of its members helped to legitimize its recommendations. The chairman of the Committee on Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities was Lorenzo D. Harvey, state superintendent of Wisconsin public schools and future Dean of Wisconsin's Stout Manual Training School. Willet M. Hays, Professor at the University of Minnesota and assistant secretary to James Wilson, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture was a member, and Professor Liberty Hyde Bailey himself served on the committee. Other contributions came from the state superintendents of Illinois and Missouri. These men all endorsed the redirection of rural schools toward agricultural education.

With an impressive list of supporters, the movement was quickly picking up steam and evolving into a real national discussion. By 1905, urban America was well aware of the rural problem. It was worried about it; the loss of the rural population, and ways in which to stop and reverse the damage, were subjects discussed in legislatures, at national meetings of educators and political leaders, and in books, magazines, and newspapers. These "outsiders" understood rural stagnation and degradation to be a critical national problem. They based this

⁴⁷ L. D. Harvey et al., *Report of the Committee on Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities to the National Council of Education* (National Education Association, 1905), 16.

fear on the problem's potential to permanently alter the American national identity and create a worldwide food crisis in industrializing cities. By 1909, the Report of the Country Life Commission served both to publicize an issue already on many urbanites' minds, and to lend it the authority of a presidentially-appointed commission that had submitted a detailed report to the Congress of the United States.

While urbanites, politicians, educators, and sociologists pondered the causes and solutions to America's rural problem, the country population itself had its own interpretation of the problems it faced. Well aware that many boys and girls were leaving the countryside, farmers and their wives saw different dangers in the exodus, and traced its roots to a far wider array of rural issues. They blamed the schools as well, but also the churches, the roads, the isolation of the countryside, and often, themselves. Furthermore, while they tended to worry about the loss of rural youth, this did not always mean that they wanted to deprive their own children of the right to leave the farm. Their complex attitudes toward both the rural problem and its possible solutions are preserved in the farm periodicals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

"The fathers and mothers who deplore their own hard lives and wish something better for their children are somewhat responsible for exodus from the country," read a 1912 editorial in the farm periodical *The Country Gentleman*.⁴⁸ This statement, which blamed the exodus of farm youth on parents who complained about their lifetime of drudgery, was a typical one. Though much of rural America was proud of its heritage as "men who live on the soil," early 20th century farmers and farmers' wives were also quick to admit that such a life

⁴⁸ "How School Agriculture Works," *The Country Gentleman* 77(May 18, 1912): 11.

often consisted of hard work, long hours, and little financial security. They blamed much of the loss of rural youth on the fact that farming, as a profession, was increasingly yielding less of a livelihood from more work.

While preparing to write *The Challenge of the Country*, George Fiske interviewed a man who blamed his own city-ward migration on the uphill struggle of working on his father's farm. The man, whom Fiske called a "Western lawyer," told Fiske that as a farm child he had risen at four o'clock every morning and worked all day until 7:30, at which time he did chores that kept him at work until 9 o'clock at night, when he was "advised to go to bed right away so that we would be able to do a good day's work on the morrow." Fiske concluded, "No wonder the boy rebelled...Country boys must not be exploited if we expect them to stay in the country."⁴⁹ An editorial in the *Prairie Farmer* noted, "A boy is not going to stay on the farm, merely because he is told that it is his duty, that it is to his interest, to do so, or that there is dignity and honor in compelling nature to yield to him the food for himself. For often experience has taught him the inconsistency between such expressions and the plain reality."⁵⁰

The belief that farm life consisted of nothing but hard work and tedious routine with little extra time for play or entertainment was so pervasive that it even appeared in early 20th century farm machinery advertisements. Promoting the work-saving properties of the "Aermotor" feed grinder, a full-page advertisement with the headline "Keep the Boys on the Farm" read, "Don't let drudgery drive the boys away from the farm...Many ambitious and

⁴⁹ Fiske, 24-5.

⁵⁰ "Keeping the Boys on the Farm," *Prairie Farmer*, 12 January 1889, p. 1.

capable boys leave the farm for the city to escape a life of needless drudgery.”⁵¹ The advertisement touted the possibility of saving the farm boy from hours of boring, tedious work when he could be more gainfully and entertainingly employed.

That the boys were being driven away by their perception that a life on the farm would be both exhausting and without reward was a common belief among farmers and their wives. The belief that young women were being driven away by the same perception, though, was just as common. One farmer from Decatur, Illinois, when addressing a local meeting of the Farmer’s Institute, declared, “If we should keep our boys on the farm we must so improve our ways of living that our girls will wish to stay on the farm.”⁵² Girls cited the grueling work expected of a farm wife for their flight from the country, and in fact, many observers cautioned that the problems of girls leaving the farm, and of boys leaving the farm, were joined. If one taught her daughter that her life would be miserable on the farm, she would leave, and soon, the boys would follow. “Shoving a lot of hard, unsystematized drudgery on a girl is not giving her responsibility...When you place economy above the development of your daughter, remember you are depriving her of that responsibility which will make her a successful wife, homemaker and mother. While you are depriving your girls of that right, you are driving the boys away from the farm and the theory of all the papers in the world can’t solve the question of how to keep them...”⁵³ If boys leaving the farm was a problem, girls leaving the farm was a greater one, for not only would the country be left without feminine influence, but the exodus of young girls would eventually make the exodus of young boys

⁵¹ Aermotor Company Advertisement, *Prairie Farmer*, 2 April 1903, p. 6.

⁵² “Keeping the Boys on the Farm,” p. 1.

⁵³ “Girls and the Farm,” *Farmer’s Wife*, 1 Jan 1911, p. 14.

even worse. Parents who wished to keep their girls on the farm needed to find a way to make their lives less exhausting and their futures seem less dim.

While the intense labor involved in farming was a major reason leading to the exodus of rural youths, it was not the only reason rural residents believed the farmers of the future were deserting the countryside. Just as hard work pushed boys and girls from the land, social opportunities and exciting possibilities pulled them to the growing cities. A man calling himself the “Father of Two” wrote an article in *The Country Gentleman*, explaining that it was the excitement of the city, not the work he impressed upon them, that was luring his children away from the farm. “The country boy knows...that the panorama of the woods and fields does not exceed in interest that which every day spread before the dwellers in cities. And he also knows that the city is the arena where human ambitions are in fiercest conflict and where, far more than anywhere else, the great battles of life are being fought.”⁵⁴ The bustle and opportunity of cities lured girls from the farm, too, wrote one observer. “Each incoming train brings its cargo of new, fresh blood to be infused into the hustling, working world...Particularly does it appeal to young girls and women, who find avenues of profitable employment restricted in their home towns.”⁵⁵ The draw of the city was undeniable, and while farmers and their wives who lessened the work load on their children might convince them that farming was not only drudgery, if they wanted to keep their children on the farm, they had to instill a love of the country and country society that would help their children ignore the lure of the metropolis.

⁵⁴ Father of Two, “How to Keep Boys on the Farm,” *The Country Gentleman* 77(8 May, 1912): 9.

⁵⁵ “Girls Lured to City Face Unforeseen Dangers: Dangers that Confront Girls Who Come from Small Towns to Seek Work in Chicago,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 8 April 1906, sec. F, p. 4.

Those parents who believed their children should stay on the farm were fighting a losing battle, though. Even if they managed both to lighten their children's work load and create more social excitement, all the efforts made at home to convince children that rural life was exciting were lost if parents could not control the messages their children received outside the home. It was for this reason many parents began to criticize the rural schoolhouse, especially rural school teachers. Parents blamed rural teachers for educating their children away from the farm. One called the tendency of rural teachers to push children from the country the "most potent of all and yet most insidious" cause behind the drift to town. "In the teachers of the little children in the country do we find the danger...[they] instill the thought from the beginning, "Get an education so as to get away from this place into a big city where you can have a chance!"⁵⁶ A college student interviewed at Cornell College's School of Agriculture verified the story of those who blamed the schoolteacher. He said that it was the influence of the principal of his village school that had caused him to move away and work toward a career in another business. "He continually urged me to get away from the farm, to go to college, and prepare myself for something better," the young man wrote.⁵⁷

Aside from the "insidious" influence of the city-touting schoolteacher, many believed there was a more fundamental problem plaguing the traditional district schoolhouses. The lessons in the rural schools were so formulated that they pushed children from the farm. Often, the lessons children were learning were "merely a copy of that given to city school

⁵⁶ Universalist Leader, "Why the Country is Deserted," *Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, 21 Sept 1912, p.7.

⁵⁷ "Why Boys Leave the Farm," *Prairie Farmer*, 1 Feb 1910, p. 2.

children,” rarely referencing the unique environment in which the country boy or girl lived.⁵⁸ It was for this reason that the parts of the farm population made their own call for a redirection of the rural curriculum. Many rural residents believed that fitting the country school to farm life would make the farm more attractive, imbuing “those who are worthy with the spirit of agriculture.”⁵⁹ Though their call was both less emphatic and less specifically directed toward agricultural education than the demands of urban observers, segments of the farm population did support efforts to redirect the lessons children learned in schoolhouses, adapting many of the classical subjects to incorporate a measure of farm education.

The rural population’s main concern in this endeavor, however, was to make sure that this type of education did not exacerbate the problem of educating children away from the farm. There was a pervasive fear that formal education in agriculture would only cause students to move away to the new agricultural colleges, state schools, and city high schools, where they would get a taste of “professionalism” and decide never to return to the family farm. College, in particular, was a dangerous place to send a farm boy or farm girl. “Two years in an agricultural college unstrings the boy’s muscles, gives him a note-learned [book-learned] lot of knowledge, wholly impractical because not practically taught...and sets him to loathing the every detail of his old farm home,” wrote one farmer from Maryland.⁶⁰ It was extremely important, therefore, that any agricultural education children received in their elementary school training excited them about farming and rural life, but did not push them

⁵⁸ Universalist Leader, p.7.

⁵⁹ “Agriculture in the Rural School,” *Wallace’s Farmer* 33(18 Dec 1908): 1564.

⁶⁰ Francis B. Levezey, “Do Agricultural Colleges Seduce from Agriculture?” *Farmer’s Voice*, 10 Sep 1898, p. 9.

to leave the farm and become collegiate professors, scientists, or other urban professionals who studied agriculture instead of practicing it. Rural people wanted to make sure that if agriculture was added to their small schools' curriculums, it served the purpose of interesting their children in farm life instead of pulling them from the farm.

However, though many farmers worried that their children would leave the farm eventually, this did not mean they wanted to deprive their children of the right to do so if they wanted. In 1904, one man wrote to the *Prairie Farmer*, "I believe there should not be any artificial inducements offered to keep boys on the farm. Let them choose for themselves that which suits their own taste, be farm, factory, or office. If it is in them, they will succeed, which is one of the highest aims in life. They are more likely to succeed in following that business that is especially to their own liking, than in following what would be your choice for them."⁶¹ The author, who called himself simply "Farmer" and located himself in Fayette County, Indiana, went on to explain that while farming was his profession of choice, and he would be proud to have his boys follow in his footsteps, he wanted his children to have the right to choose their profession for themselves. Even if most parents still wished for their children to remain on the farm, they never wanted to deprive their children of the right to leave.

As demonstrated in the farm periodicals, much as urban educators and politicians were calling for attention to the rural problem, country mothers and fathers were searching for ways to convince their children to stay on the farm. The groups had different reasons for their worries; while urbanites worried not only about a possible food crisis, but also about the

⁶¹ Farmer, "The Boys Have a Chance," *Prairie Farmer*, 21 April 1904, p. 3.

degeneration of the American identity as a whole, rural residents were watching their country neighborhoods lose their best and brightest youngsters to the city, and pondered what the future of the countryside would hold if no capable children were left to run the farms. Even while worrying about the future of the country, however, they continued to place great emphasis on the rights of their children to choose their own profession, even if that meant leaving the farm.

As professors and politicians made massive, supposedly thorough investigations of the subject to determine the possible solutions to the rural problem, they utilized the resources of colleges, the U.S. Census Bureau, and popular political leaders. The studies of both the National Education Association and the Country Life Commission concluded that the rural schools were to blame for the drift to town, and they offered a fix. Educators should begin a program of improvements to the rural school system that focused on agricultural education in regions in which the majority of students lived on farms run by their families. This program called for farm training to become the main subject of study in most rural schools, and often adherents to the philosophy advocated such a radical change that they pushed for agricultural education to the exclusion of the classical subjects. With the publication of these findings, the movement to radically redirect rural education from the outside gained hordes of well-known, well-educated, well-funded proponents.

However, while urban reformers pushed ahead with their organized studies and urged the need for a general overhaul of the rural school system, a large number of popular farm periodical articles addressing ways to “keep boys on the farm” suggest that there was a general state of confusion in the efforts of the rural population to preserve its youth. These

articles offered many solutions to the problem, and agricultural education in the school was only one of the answers they produced. Others included improving home life, fixing rural roads to provide more access to social networks, decreasing the work load on rural children, and even encouraging farm fathers to become their sons' personal agricultural educators. One writer stated, "A farmer father should himself be a student of the farm, and his boy should be his fellow student. The father should talk to the boy... teach him, drill him, until...he has graduated from the home school and learned all that the father has learned in the hard, expensive school of that father's experience."⁶² Rural residents believed there was a real problem in the countryside, but they also believed the problem was systemic and required solutions in many areas of rural life.

By the early years of the 20th century, the farm population did worry about the loss of its youngest members, but few believed in or supported any sure-fire fix for the problem. There was no single group pushing for a single solution, and no single solution received much more press than another. With so little organization on the part of the rural population, it would be the organizers of the national campaign to overhaul rural school education, those urban outsiders who worried about the health of the farm population (sometimes while disregarding its need for happiness or occupational freedom) who would have the opportunity to bring their ideas to fruition.

The turn of the century was characterized by the efforts of educators and politicians to take control of rural schools, radically overhaul the type of education rural children received, and use agricultural education as a means of convincing farm boys and girls to stay on the

⁶² William C. Sprague, "The Boy on the Farm: Shall We Educate the Farm Boy?" *Farm Home*, 1 Oct 1903, p. 14.

farm. This program would meet with mixed results, and while some communities would readily accept many of the proposed reforms, many rural fathers and mothers would steadfastly refuse to relinquish their right to control their schools' curricula. Agricultural education had many powerful supporters, and it even worked in places where communities could participate in its implementation, but often, the rights and needs of rural families were ignored in the face of rural school reforms. The success of the system in any given place would come to hinge upon the involvement of the community in educational reform. Where reformers and parents worked in accord, allowing the community and individual farmers to influence the direction of educational reforms, the proposed overhaul of rural education met with a measure of success. Locations where reformers simply attempted to take the school from parents, who resented intrusion into their basic right to oversee their child's education, witnessed resistance to reforms and often the reforms' complete failure.

Chapter 2: Implementing Agricultural Education in Rural America

In the fall of 1854, as the last sounds of the harvest faded and an October chill began to creep over silent fields, Michigan's farmers settled in for a brief winter's respite. Robert Johnston, educator and supporter of the agricultural education movement, used this quietest time of the farmers' year to promote the cause of rural reformers. On October 12, he stood before a meeting of the Agricultural Society of Calhoun County in Marshall, Michigan, a tiny village just outside the soon-to-be-incorporated town of Battle Creek. A firm believer in Michigan's opportunity to set an example in modern farming, Johnston spoke of the growing movement to provide agricultural and vocational education in farm schools. He explained the purpose of this education to the society, declaring that "to acquire that knowledge, both mental and physical... [and] to make use of it in developing the resources of our land, calling forth its powers, building up its institutions, promoting all its great interests, and making our day and generation one worthy to be remembered, this is what is meant by *agricultural education*."⁶³

Johnston spoke to the farmers of rural Michigan about the "new relations, new duties, and new privileges" of the American farmer, attempting to convince them at even the earliest stages of the agricultural education movement that the coming age would put new stresses upon the average farmer, stresses that would demand that he innovate, streamline his business, and learn new farming techniques being developed all over the world. He declared that the only permanent crutch upon which modern farmers could lean when faced with the challenges of a new era was agricultural education. According to Johnston, the farmers of

⁶³ Robert F. Johnston, "Agricultural Education, An Individual, State, and national Necessity; with Suggestions for the Establishment and Endowment of an Agricultural College in Michigan: an Address before the Agricultural Society of Calhoun County" (Detroit: Daily Democrat Establishment, 1854), 10.

rural America needed to accept and support agricultural education, or find themselves left in the dust of the modern age. His statements echoed many of those made by other educational reformers.

As the 19th century drew to a close and the 20th century began, educators, politicians, and sociologists prepared for a grand task. Through studies and surveys, observations and conversations, they had determined that rural America was wounded, its life blood draining into the cities and its remaining population weakened and sparse. In progressive fashion, they had decided that the solution to the problem was wholesale reform of the rural education system. The cornerstone of this massive project would be agricultural education; urban reformers believed that the radical redirection of rural schools to include agricultural education and farm training would both restore and revive the ailing rural population.

Observing the American countryside from the cities and universities, reformers believed that the then-present rural educational system chased children from the farm, while those who stayed found themselves part of a dying rural society that was ill-prepared for the coming modern age. Dark, poorly-heated schools that taught children of all ages only the most basic of skills were, as far as reformers were concerned, the root of the rural exodus. The countryside, especially in food-producing Midwestern states, needed urban intervention to stop the hemorrhage of the countryside and secure the futures of both the farm and the city. Reformers believed that agricultural education, their solution to the American “rural problem,” would educate, modernize, and stabilize the farming population.

Though the outcry from educators and politicians about the deplorable state of rural education saturated reformers’ discussions in universities and legislatures, it was weaker and

less focused from the rural population itself. Aware of a dreadful rural problem, but unsure about a single solution, farmers and their wives were hesitant about the value of agricultural education. Rural Americans were traditionally wary of any outside influence; they were downright suspicious of full-fledged city-dwellers with college degrees in subjects specific to the rural experience. Specifically, country mothers and fathers often feared the loss of control that would come with the educational reform university professors and college-trained teachers tried to implement, and they often disapproved of the intrusion of urbanites into the rural sphere.⁶⁴

Thus, reformers had their work cut out for them if they wished to ensure a smooth transition from the one-room schoolhouse where rote memorization dominated to the organized school where children learned modern farming techniques. To secure rural support for agricultural education in farm schools across the country, particularly in the Midwest where the population was overwhelmingly rural, educators, politicians, scientists, and sociologists had to pitch agricultural education, selling it to individual rural residents, and convince the average farmer that it was his children's greatest hope for security, prosperity, and fulfillment in the approaching modern era.

Before convincing the rural population that agricultural education was the answer to the rural problem, educators promoted the value of education to any farmer of any age, and asked farmers to consider the disadvantages the untrained agriculturalist would face in just a few short years. The "educated farmer," according to reformers, was the man or woman who had the greatest potential and preparation to become a financial and personal success on a

⁶⁴ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 224.

20th century farm. Educated men and women were both more capable of adapting to modern technology and more likely to enjoy the hard work of agriculture. Informed and enlightened, the modernized farmer and his wife were entrepreneurs with a profound appreciation for both the past and future of their callings. He was a businessman who understood the history, science, and social value of the work he did in the farm; she was an efficient scientist who ran her home and her family like a well-run business.

As a businessman, the educated farmer was a man with advantages that would catapult him to success while his uneducated colleagues languished in poverty. As researchers made advances in methods, chemicals, and machinery, reformers argued that only the farmer who was a trained agricultural scientist could stay afloat. They argued that farming was no longer a job for any person born on the farm, but it was a calling which only the most capable and informed need answer. “The character of farming is changing,” reported the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. “It has been so ‘easy’ a business that untrained men could succeed in it. The change in economic and social conditions is breaking up the tradition...In the future only the well-informed and efficient-thinking man can succeed; that is, only the educated man.”⁶⁵ Claims that farming had ever been “easy” laid aside, educators tried to convince farmers that they were at a crossroads. Men who depended upon their land for a living were left with one choice: become educated, scientific, modern businessmen, or find themselves unable to cope with the challenges of a new era. Farmers were at present paying for the mistakes of previous, backward generations. Dr. W.M. Hudson, an educator at the University of Illinois, proclaimed that it was not only the changes of the future, but the damage of the past, that forced the education of farmers. “Our fathers had a virgin soil and

⁶⁵ “Farming is Changing,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 April 1908, p. 8.

only a few people to feed, but our children must take the soil that has been farmed by two generations, and oftentimes literally robbed, and feed a population that is growing by leaps and bounds,” he wrote in the *Farmer’s Voice*.⁶⁶ Perhaps blameless for their predicament but soon to be held accountable for the solution, farmers had to modernize or suffer the consequences.

Because the farmers of the future would face such terrible challenges, it was today’s farmer’s responsibility to educate his children to cope with the approaching era of modernization. Reformers appealed to the farmer’s responsibility to the next generation; they attempted to convince him that his children required a kind of training he had never needed. “Twenty years ago...well, anybody could farm!” read an article in the *Farmer’s Voice* featuring calls for agricultural education from James Wilson, the Secretary of Agriculture of the United States, and Kenyon L. Butterfield, President of the Rhode Island College of Agriculture. “To-day the successful farmer is the trained farmer, and ten years from now the farmer who is not trained in his calling will find it hard sledding to get on at all.”⁶⁷ Educators worked to convince farmers that it was their responsibility to prepare the youth that remained on the farm for a world that would modernize with or without them.

Telling farmers that they were approaching a point at which they could no longer resist modernization was not the only tactic used by reformers to convince farmers that educational reform was imperative. Nor did these educators and politicians simply rely upon farmers’ guilt, and the fear of leaving the next generation to certain ruin, to gain support. Aware that simply “guilting” farmers into educating their children would not provide the large-scale support they wanted to elicit from the rural population, organizers also looked to

⁶⁶ W.M. Hudson, “Education in Agriculture,” *Farm Home*, 1 Nov 1914, p. 31.

⁶⁷ “Technical Training in Agriculture—Its Values and Its Opportunities,” *Farmer’s Voice*, 29 Aug 1903, p. 2.

Europe to publicize the success of such programs in the rural regions of the Old World. They published the reports of those educators who had made investigative trips to Europe in the beginning stages of the movement and appealed to farmers' sense of nationalism to convince them to keep pace with their international competitors.

In 1899, the legislature of the state of Wisconsin had sent Lorenzo D. Harvey, its state superintendent of schools and future dean of the Stout Manual Training School in Menomonie, Wisconsin, on a tour of Europe to investigate the growing variety of its public institutions for agricultural education. After exploring rural education in eight separate countries, Harvey reported that European agricultural education was far more developed and accessible than American agricultural education, and that "we are far behind foreign countries, both in the scope of the work attempted and in the extent to which it has been organized."⁶⁸

Each of the countries Harvey visited ran a system of agricultural schools which made vocational training available to the country's rural residents. However, contrary to the reputations of American agricultural colleges, these schools were not known for educating their students away from the farm. Harvey believed this was a result of the criteria used for selecting students. Of the students admitted to most European schools, Harvey wrote in his *Report*,

At least one year's practice in ordinary, farm work is required as an essential for admission, and an application, written by the candidate himself, must be sent to the director of the school. The candidates must finally pass an entrance examination in composition, arithmetic, geography, and history, before being admitted as pupils. Preference is given to applicants living in the

⁶⁸ Harvey, *Report of the commissioner*, 4.

district where the school is located, and to eldest sons having allodial rights, who therefore may be counted on settling as farmers in the district. The number of applicants for entrance to these schools greatly exceed the number that can be accommodated, so that only those who are well qualified for the work, and who intend to become farmers in the district in which the school is located, are, as a rule, likely to be admitted.⁶⁹

Harvey's report spoke to a number of concerns held by both rural residents and reformers in the beginning stages of the agricultural education movement. He looked to assuage the rural population's fear that schools, especially colleges, only convinced their children to leave the farm, arguing that agricultural training directed at those most likely to become farmers would succeed in creating a more capable farming class that would actually farm. In his final report, Harvey never argued that tough standards for admittance into European agricultural schools had to be used in creating an agricultural education system in the United States, but he did promote the cause of publicly-funded, widely-available agricultural education as a solution to the rural population's inability to modernize. The more students who could be exposed to this type of agricultural education, and never be sent too far from home for too long a period, the better.

Harvey admired above all the strides he believed the schools in Europe were making in stopping the flow of rural youths to town. After all, the greatest argument made by reformers was that rural agricultural education would help to stop the drift to cities that was crippling small towns of in middle of the nation. Harvey wrote in his concluding remarks that

The education given in these schools is well calculated to open the minds of the peasant and the farmer to everything that could interest them in their daily life, making them see beauty where otherwise they might see nothing; training them while still young to perform the daily labours of rural life with interest and intelligence, and thus begetting in them a love for

⁶⁹ Harvey, *Report of the commissioner*, 11-12.

country life, which bodes well for the future prosperity of their native land...How to stop this drain [to town] is, in France and Switzerland as well as here, the question of the hour; and have we not in these rural schools the best solution of the question yet offered? These schools are for the many, not for the few; for the young, not for the old; and they are to be found within easy reach...of every pupil, and thus satisfy all reasonable requirements.⁷⁰

Reporting that European agricultural education was fixing the very problem haunting the American countryside, Harvey bolstered reformers' arguments that such a system could work the same way in the United States. He argued for an accessible system of agricultural education that would foster a love of the country in the youngest of the rural population, and he offered examples throughout Europe in which such systems were accomplishing that goal. Appealing to the state legislature of Wisconsin to support such a system of schools, Harvey and other reformers hoped that farm education would find real support in the Midwest, and hoped to find the kind of support from the rural population that European schools seemed to elicit.

Harvey's report discussed one more extremely essential part of the plan educational reformers proposed, an argument educators were making for the kind of education children should receive while studying agriculture. Citing the Irish Parliamentary Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction in Primary Schools in Ireland in his report, Harvey confirmed the ideas of a growing group of educators in the U.S. who criticized teaching from textbooks as a worthless pedagogical practice. Quoting the Commission's report on the uselessness of textbook-based agricultural education, Harvey wrote, "The evidence we have received throughout Ireland goes to show that the subject so taught is of little educational value. The children do not get any real grasp of the subject, as no efforts need be made to

⁷⁰ Harvey, *Report of the commissioner*, 24-5.

give them a practical acquaintance with the objects and processes described in the lessons.”⁷¹

Instead of an unpractical textbook education, the Commission and Harvey both recommended agricultural education that was taught as a hands-on experience. Textbooks taught theory; experience taught agriculture as a science and an occupation.

In quoting this council on education and relating the success of hands-on education in Europe, Lorenzo Harvey lent legitimacy to an idea already circulating in educational circles by the time the American rural educational reform movement gained momentum. Teachers and educational theorists were, at the turn of the 20th century, buzzing about a trend in educational methods called “new education.” Proponents of this type of education promoted a system of teaching and course design that used hands-on training in place of rote memorization and repetition. Basing their new system on the idea that education should be relevant to a child’s life (perhaps even his or her future profession), new education’s supporters “proposed to begin the child’s education with his own experience, to teach him to learn by doing, and above all to relate education to life.”⁷² Teachers in urban schools had already used new education in the contexts of math and science for years by the time educators began to apply it to the rural agricultural education movement. However, when they applied new the hands-on methodology to agricultural education in rural schools, reformers began to pitch new education as the cure-all to the rural school system. They argued the excitement it created in students could simultaneously educate and inspire children to enjoy rural life.

⁷¹ Harvey, *Report of the commissioner*, 17.

⁷² Fuller, “Making Better Farmers,” 155.

Educators believed especially that new education could be implemented in elementary grades to teach school children to appreciate the rural environment, and many implemented a program they called “nature study” into rural curricula beginning in the 1880s.⁷³ No single person was a greater supporter of this educational method than Liberty Hyde Bailey, who wrote the movement’s most supportive text, his 1903 book *The Nature Study Idea: An Interpretation of the New School-Movement to Put the Young Into Relation and Sympathy with Nature*.

Bailey believed that new education, training that focused on material objects and “learning by doing,” was particularly adaptable to the rural environment in the form of nature study. Children in rural areas lived and worked in a place that constantly offered opportunities for lessons in the life sciences. The nature study system encouraged teachers to plan trips to local meadows, streams, and woods to investigate the various types of plant and animal life that existed there. Teachers could grow plants in their classrooms, discussing with children the changes in the plants as they grew before their eyes. As a result of regular, structured exposure to nature, country children learned not only to observe their environment, but also to draw conclusions about the interconnectedness of the ecosystem they inhabited and would someday learn to use. Children would understand the natural world, and eventually, learn not only nature study, but also “nature sympathy,” recognition of the value of nature in all its complexity.⁷⁴

⁷³ L. H. Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea: An Interpretation of the New School-Movement to Put the Young in Relation and Sympathy with Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York: MacMillan company, 1913), 28.

⁷⁴ Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea*, 28.

“Nature-study,” Bailey wrote, “is not the teaching of facts merely for the sake of the facts, or materials for the sake of the materials: its purpose is to develop certain intellectual powers by the use of the materials...It is astonishing, when one comes to think of it, how indirect and how remote from the lives of pupils much of our education has been.”⁷⁵ He meant for this new type of education to augment lessons in arithmetic that taught only of “brokerage and partnerships...and other things that mean nothing to the child,” botany lessons which taught about cells but not about the grasses growing outside the schoolhouse’s door, and history that taught “political and military affairs” but never that history was really the “results or expressions of the way in which people live.”⁷⁶ Nature study could bring the child’s life into the classroom, interesting him in lessons that were connected to him in an intimate manner.

Relating education to children’s lives was to be the real purpose of nature study. Bailey admitted that this implied a lack of structure in daily lessons, but insisted that it was through this lack of structure that children learned the real lesson of nature-study: to reach their own conclusions about the natural world, based in science but also in reference to their own experiences. “The nature-study effort,” Bailey wrote, “sets our thinking in the direction of our daily doing. It relates the schoolroom to the life that the child is to lead. It makes the common and familiar affairs seem to be worth the while. It ought to make men and women effective and responsible.”⁷⁷ Making the “common and familiar affairs” of the farm worthwhile, especially, would make children more eager to continue their lifelong, informed

⁷⁵ Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea*, 32-4.

⁷⁶ Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea*, 34.

⁷⁷ Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea*, 54.

interaction with the rural environment. Rural life could be related to the “life that the child is to lead,” making life on the farm attractive from earliest days of a child’s education.

As the most easily-implemented part of the proposed plan of agricultural education, nature study was the first of the rural educational reforms to take hold in many small schools. It required no textbooks, and, as Liberty Hyde Bailey recommended, only a small segment of time at the beginning or end of each school day. It could even perhaps serve as a break from particularly difficult lessons in the middle of the day. Teachers could combine traditional lessons with nature study; Bailey suggested blending it with geography or art, having children draw plants and animals during their art period, or identifying different geographical regions based on weather or plant life.⁷⁸ This was a small, gentle way in which reformers could introduce agricultural education into small schools all over the Midwest with little investment in capital or time. It was accessible in a way no other part of the program could be, and thus it gained the almost unanimous support of educational reformers in a way that large-scale agricultural education, which required planning, investment, and of course many varying methods of implementation, never really could.

Nature study was a popular topic of discussion in the farm periodicals, as parents and teachers discussed all the wonderful lessons that could be included in its study. Many parents, even those who were skeptical of agricultural education in general, could support limited periods of nature study in their schools, and the best nature study programs became a source of pride for some small school districts. Grant County, in west-central Minnesota, was so proud of its students’ work in nature study that it ran a full-page article in the *Farmer’s*

⁷⁸ Bailey, *The Nature Study Idea*, 49.

Wife detailing its students' nature study adventures. Grant County's nature study program, and the process by which it was implemented, is a perfect illustration of the method by which educational reformers saw agricultural education taking root in small schools. The success with which this particular program met, and the support it garnered from local parents, was exactly the type of reaction reformers hoped to elicit from rural residents.

Grant County, in 1916, was a county overrun by weeds. Frustrated by his inability to convince farmers that Grant County's farms were at risk from the spread of these "vandals of the fields," extension agent A. L. Norling, who hailed from the University of Minnesota's School of Agriculture, approached Miss Blanche Brenning, the superintendent of Grant County's schools. "[Norling] had been talking seed testing to the farmers but without wide response," read the article. "Mr. Norling did some thinking and decided that the solution of the problem would be for the children to take up weeds as nature study."⁷⁹ Miss Brenning sent the idea along to the county's school teachers, who gave children the choice to elect to take the course with the approval of his or her parents. Every child in the county chose to take the course, and soon, every student was bringing weed seeds into the classroom to study.

Encouraged by this support, the teachers participating in Mr. Norling's program sent students' seeds away to the State Seed Testing Laboratory, which reported to them the types of weeds their students had collected. According to the article, the program was so successful that a year after its introduction, teachers were implementing weed lessons in the regular

⁷⁹ Edith Brown Kirkwood, "Children Eagerly Study Weed Seeds and Their County is to be Weedless," *Farmer's Wife*, 1 Oct 1916, p. 12.

school schedule that included the history of each weed and its “habits under differing conditions.”⁸⁰

Even more exciting than what the students were learning was the fact that the parents of Grant County became actively involved in the project. One of greatest goals of the agricultural education movement was for children to teach their families at home the lessons they learned in school; students in Grant County’s weeds project seemed to be taking the lesson home and educating their parents better than county agricultural agents had ever been able to do. “The study was carried from the schools to the homes,” exclaimed the author of a newspaper article on Grant County’s nature study program. “Seed tests were made by children and parents together. Big farmers and their small daughters became real partners of the fields. The tillers of Grant County soil were making intimate acquaintance with the little underground workers upon whose eradication their fortunes depended!”⁸¹ In fact, the following season, Grant County’s farmers, who were unmoved by Mr. Norling’s lessons but convinced by their children’s projects, called for almost 400 seed tests from the State Seed Testing Laboratory, tests they ordered independently.⁸²

Grant County’s program, its success among both children and parents, and the lasting changes observers believed it caused in Minnesota farmer’s attitudes, was the perfect example of the effects reformers hoped agricultural education, beginning with nature study, could have on a farming population. As an easily-implemented part of agricultural education, reformers ardently believed that nature study could introduce both farmers and their children

⁸⁰ Kirkwood, p. 12.

⁸¹ Kirkwood, p. 12.

⁸² Kirkwood, p. 12.

to scientific farming while respecting rural residents' natural conservatism. Nature study could be a building block upon which educators could arrange an acceptable program of agricultural education in rural America's public schools, working through children to modernize and stabilize the rural population.

The ease with which educators could implement nature study into rural schoolhouse curricula was its greatest advantage. A few hours per week could bring the beginning stages of agricultural education to rural children, with little need for new teachers with special training, better facilities, or extra time. However, implementing a comprehensive program of agricultural education into rural schoolhouses presented more of a challenge; to complete the proposed overhaul of rural education reformers believed was necessary, educators had to make massive changes in rural schoolhouses. Consolidated township schools controlled by superintendents needed to replace district schools controlled by local families, facilities capable of handling scientific lessons had to supplant isolated one-room schoolhouses, and many times, brand new, college-educated teachers needed to replace unqualified teenagers teaching the most basic of lessons. The school year itself even needed a change; while less than seven months of formal instruction per year might have sufficed for traditional rural education, agricultural education had to be taught in the summer as well, and teachers had to convince parents to keep their children involved in school activities during summer and winter breaks.⁸³ In implementing all these changes, most educators would meet resistance from communities that feared losing control of their children's educations. The supporters of agricultural education faced serious battles to come in their war on antiquated rural education.

⁸³ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 46-53.

To combat the lack of facilities for agricultural education in rural schools, reformers pushed for school consolidation, a movement which was, by 1900, already decades old and had a history of meeting strong resistance from rural families.⁸⁴ Based upon the progressive belief that multiple small communities should send their children to a central, well-funded building to learn from professional teachers, consolidation proved to be one of the most explosive issues of the educational reform movement; rural families who had for decades controlled their tiny district schools viewed the intervention into their children's education as an attack on traditional agrarian values.⁸⁵ For rural people, the one-room district school had "provided a sanctuary for the individualism and small scale of local life that were being threatened by the new, organizational society."⁸⁶ School consolidation, as part of the broader rural educational reform movement, became a point of contention for rural families; fearing urban influence in general, farmers fought against integration into a system that failed to express the independence of rural culture, and could eventually educate that culture out of their children.

The larger reform issue of consolidation was, however, only one of the obstacles agricultural education reformers encountered. The nature of agriculture, and of the proposed program of agricultural education, prompted the need for solutions to even more puzzling problems. The nature of agriculture itself presented a problem; many of the lessons teachers wanted to teach could only be taught in the summer and during harvest season, when children

⁸⁴ Danbom, 57-8.

⁸⁵ For an in-depth discussion of the school consolidation movement, see Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), and Wayne Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁸⁶ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 73.

were absent from their schools. This meant lessons had to carry into the home, to be reinforced by activities outside of school and the school year. To gain the kinds of facilities, materials, and time that teachers needed required the support of parents. This presented a problem: rural teachers were, as a rule, outsiders in the community. Teenagers and young adult teachers traveled from one school to another, rotating lodging among the families of the district, and often left after one year of teaching in a single school.⁸⁷ Rural families were often loath to house these traveling teachers, and school boards often had to detail in a teacher's contract just how he or she would be housed throughout the year if the prospective teacher were to sign that contract.⁸⁸ Because teachers were so generally an outside member of the community, reinforcing lessons in the community was a real challenge. Solutions required a completely different approach to both the rural school year and traditional attitudes toward rural teaching.

To gain support for teachers wishing to implement agricultural education, groups of educators worked to change attitudes toward rural teachers. Teachers needed to become esteemed members of the community, and if possible, the rural school needed to become the center of social life in the neighborhood. This was an imperative part of rural educational reform. In 1904, the annual meeting of the Northern Illinois Teacher's Association sent out a general request for the termination of the "sallow faced, irritable, frowning, spectacled pedagogue [of] yesterday." The meeting concluded that rural teachers, traditionally isolated

⁸⁷ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 186-7.

⁸⁸ Theobald, 121-2.

from the rural social network, needed to “go into society,” making themselves “popular in the community” to gain local support for progressive education.⁸⁹

Other reformers criticized the lack of commitment to rural life that many rural school teachers displayed. “It is from the social side...that the rural teacher is most woefully lacking,” wrote Bureau County’s school superintendent in an editorial in the *Prairie Farmer*. “...Too often the teacher comes into the district Monday morning and gets away as early as possible Friday to some town or city.”⁹⁰ Teachers who made themselves important members of the rural community were more likely to invite interest in the school’s development, and eventually, its reform. One writer in the *Chicago Defender* praised the community involvement of a rural teacher in Iowa, where the rural school was so pleasant and community-oriented that its enrollment included six children from the city, sent by parents who valued the school’s attachment to the community. “[She] is making the schoolhouse the center of social life for the district...she plans various social functions with stunts and games that have abundance of life, that are new, that are harmless,” wrote the author. He noted that at the latest community function the teacher organized, “every man, woman, and child in the district was there.”⁹¹ This school’s community supported its teacher, who made herself an important resident of the neighborhood. As a member of rural society, she was unlikely to be viewed as an intrusive outsider and more likely to be considered an advocate for rural students’ well-being. The rural teacher, when involved in the community and committed to rural life, could make the school the center of social activity and thus interest parents in its

⁸⁹ “Doom the Old Timer,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 Oct 1904, p. 1.

⁹⁰ C.B. Smith, “The Rural Teacher,” *Prairie Farmer*, 13 Jan 1923, p. 20.

⁹¹ “Where Rural Schools Attract,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 June 1911, p. 8.

development. She could then implement changes into the curriculum with the support of the rural community, and not as an intruder.

Teachers who gained the support of parents and the surrounding communities could begin the introduction of real agricultural education into their students' curriculum. After teaching nature study in the elementary grades, teachers formulated a system whereby they exposed their students to more practical agriculture as they aged. As students passed out of early childhood, they encountered regular, traditional subjects that teachers had redesigned to include agricultural instruction. In the 1915 agriculture textbook *Agriculture: A Text for the School and the Farm*, the authors argued that regular subjects that integrated agriculture into the lesson were extremely effective. "Much of arithmetic can be taught more efficiently and naturally from the lessons in agriculture than in any other way," they advised. "Language work, including composition and letter-writing, can be related to much of the work of the agriculture course."⁹² One educator wrote to the *Country Gentleman* in favor of the addition of agriculture to the traditional curriculum. Having visited multiple district schools within his region, he wrote, "I have seen bookkeeping taught in a district school with only indifferent success...But I have seen those same pupils, or others like them, take farm bookkeeping in a very few lessons and grasp the theory of the whole subject."⁹³ Another proponent wrote in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1914, "If anybody can suggest a better or more practical way

⁹² O.H. Benson and George Herbert Betts, *Agriculture: A Text for the School and Farm* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1915), viii.

⁹³ H.H. Lyon, "Teaching Agriculture," *The Country Gentleman* 73(3 Sept 1908): 839.

of teaching arithmetic, botany, bookkeeping, writing, and spelling...he is invited to present it to a waiting world.”⁹⁴

To combat the problem of the shortness of the rural school year, teachers created home projects that students could complete over the summer. In Cook County, Illinois, children rented land at the “rate prevailing in the neighborhood” from their parents to cultivate their own experimental gardens, many of them profiting from their garden’s produce by the end of the summer.⁹⁵ One student, labeled the “Boy Tomato King” in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, was so successful growing tomatoes in his school project garden that area instructors invited him to a teachers’ institute to present his project. Standing in front of eight “capped and be-aproned” little girls who were canning his produce, young Harvey Brooks, the “Lilliputian-monarch philosopher of the tomato market,” discussed his summer project, including the ups and downs he had experienced in the price of tomatoes over a summer, the canning process, and the various types of tomatoes he could grow.⁹⁶

Of course, such summer home projects, while instructive to students, also posed a challenge for rural teachers. The traditional school year ended in the late spring, and teachers generally left to find other employment for the summer months. If the traditional school year continued, students doing home projects would be left without the guidance of teachers during the summer. To combat this issue, school districts hired agricultural educators for year-long appointments. In Cook County, Illinois, for instance, the school superintendent hired Mr. Seth Shepherd, teacher and gardening expert, to travel throughout his school

⁹⁴ Henry M. Hyde, “School Teacher Places Farming in Curriculum,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 June 1914, p. 7.

⁹⁵ Henry M. Hyde, “Big Strides Made by Rural Pupils in Farm Activity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 Mar 1914, p. 1.

⁹⁶ “Boy Tomato King Amazes Teachers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 Aug 1913, pg. 4.

district from the closing of school in May through the summer, inspecting his students' gardens and aiding them in the sale of their crops. Through the summer months, Cook County residents saw Shepherd wandering up and down the country roads in the district. As the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported, on each of Shepherd's "daily strolls" through his district, he stopped every half an hour to "weed a garden or measure an onion bed, talked over the market prices of garden products with his pupils, gave such advice as he was asked for, and went on across the fields to the next farm."⁹⁷ Cook County's students were enormously successful in learning both about their crops and the value of farming. One student, Herman Boesch, cleared over \$350 in one summer on an acre of cucumbers. Boesch noted that someday he hoped to be a "progressive farmer."⁹⁸

To continue the spread of agricultural education into the rural community, teachers also encouraged children to form clubs to reinforce school lessons. Children throughout the community could organize into groups that held contests to produce the best yields or highest quality specimens of a given crop. Boys' corn clubs, girls' home clubs, swine clubs, egg clubs, and tomato clubs sprang up all over the Midwest with the encouragement of rural educators. These clubs interested children in agricultural production, but also served another purpose: they disseminated the lessons children learned in school to the rest of the community.

One boy, the president of Sangamon County's Corn Club in Illinois, wrote a letter to his fellow club members in 1915, asking them to join in a county-wide contest to produce the greatest yields per acre, and urging them to discuss their projects with members of the

⁹⁷ Hyde, "School Teacher Places Farming in Curriculum," p. 7.

⁹⁸ Henry M. Hyde, "Prizes Given to Youths for \$25,000 Crops," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 Jan 1916, p. 1.

community. Leonard Trutter wrote that every boy should “consult freely with your father and the corn growers in your neighborhood and especially with the other members of the Corn Club, who will give you valuable information and you may be able to give them some helpful pointers...Get busy boys, keep very busy until your corn crop is cribbed and you will need no suggestion about the great importance of making the best possible record for yourself and Sangamon County.”⁹⁹ With endorsement from the county’s superintendent of schools, the Corn Club of Sangamon County offered prizes to the district Corn Club that could, with the help of parents and other local farmers, produce the highest yield in a season. Corn Clubs could reinforce lessons learned in school by involving the community in the training of young farmers. Similar clubs existed to supplement the lessons girls learned in school. Girls, who learned about home economics, sewing, domestic hygiene, chemistry of foods, dairy, poultry, and vegetable gardening in school, organized home clubs, canning clubs, and tomato clubs.¹⁰⁰

Finally, in high school, students who had been involved in nature study and out-of-school clubs, and had taken regular courses with agricultural education integrated into the lessons, could take courses in agriculture specifically. In line with new education’s tenets, students enrolled in these courses learned by doing. For high school courses, textbook authors Benson and Betts cautioned, practical experience was exceedingly important. “Successful teaching of agriculture, more than that of any other subject, depends on the spirit and methods of the teacher...only so small a part...can be effectively taught by textbook and in class room without the assistance of field and farm. The teacher of agriculture must

⁹⁹ Leonard Trutter, “Boys’ Corn Clubs,” *Farm Home*, 1 June 1915, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ K.C. Davis, “A County Agricultural School,” *Farm Economy* (February 1903).

remember first of all that there is no *real agriculture* in the textbook.”¹⁰¹ Agricultural education for older students had to incorporate lessons in which students planted crops, cared for livestock, and analyzed the real-world problems faced by farmers in the field.

In order to provide facilities for this kind of study, rural counties in which educators could find the resources and local support often either renovated their old schools or built new consolidated buildings with the facilities needed to teach two- or four-year courses in agriculture. For example, in 1908 a “public-spirited person” from the community of Niles Center, Illinois, endowed an Illinois school district with eighteen thousand dollars. The county used this contribution to fund the consolidation of nearby country schools and to establish an experimental station to occupy six acres adjacent to the new building. On this plot of land, both students and the public took courses in animal husbandry and horticulture. The institution offered a four-year course and ample opportunities for electives to enrolled high school students.¹⁰² Such a school could teach both students and the surrounding community, disseminating the lessons of progressive agriculture to farmers of both the present and the future.

School consolidation and the slow addition of agricultural education into existing curriculums were the most typical, widely-practiced methods employed by education reformers to provide for agricultural education in the countryside. This method kept children on the farm while teaching them lessons to make the farm more productive and enjoyable, and most reformers pushed for this type of reform. A much smaller group of reformers, however, proposed a much more radical solution to the agricultural education issue: the

¹⁰¹ Benson and Betts, table of contents.

¹⁰² Ada May Kreker, “What Women are Doing,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 May 1908, p. E2.

creation of “county schools of agriculture,” facilities in which students were to pursue agricultural studies exclusively. While many educators were trying to modify the existing rural educational system to incorporate agricultural education, reformers who supported the creation of county agricultural schools were trying to construct a system of secondary schools that offered vocational training in agriculture, arguing that such schools would prepare students to become farmers immediately upon their exit from formal education.

The greatest supporter of this movement was Willet M. Hays, a graduate of Iowa State University and Assistant Secretary of Agriculture under James Wilson in the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. Hays argued that a system of secondary agricultural schools, each catering to one county and drawing students from the surrounding area, could supplement and enhance the existing system of rural schools. Such schools would take as their model the growing numbers of labor-schools established in the cities, but would aim to produce both farmers and future teachers of elementary and secondary agriculture.¹⁰³ Hays proposed that in schools of this type, “practically, the foreign languages and a small part of the other general studies [in traditional schools would] give way to book, laboratory, and shop or outdoor studies related to the basic industries of the community or to home-making.” Students would receive training that prepared them for immediate entrance into farming upon graduation, and the less immediately useful lessons learned in traditional education would be removed from the curriculum to make room for agricultural education.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Willet M. Hays, *Agriculture, Industries, and Home Economics on Our Public Schools: An Address to the Department of Superintendence, National Education Association of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908), 3-5.

¹⁰⁴ Hays, *Agriculture, Industries, and Home Economics on Our Public Schools*, 3-5.

In supporting the construction of secondary schools of agriculture, Hays disputed a popular argument that such schools, which would require students to board on the property and attend for between two and four years, would exacerbate the drain to town and encourage the professionalization of farm children. “The consolidated rural school,” Hays argued, “and especially the village school, in which the farm boys and girls begin their courses of vocational training, need the large finely equipped agricultural high school where the secondary vocational course relating to country life can be completed, where both instruction and inspiration will be given.”¹⁰⁵ Hays believed that secondary schools that boasted intensive education exclusively in agriculture had the best chance of preparing modernized farmers to return to the land. Hays’ design for secondary schools of agriculture would be implemented in several states in the first decade of the 20th century, and would meet with some success, though that success was by no means widespread.

The early 20th century saw the first real implementation of agricultural education into rural schools. While the effort to convince farmers that agricultural education was a necessary addition to rural education took many forms, reformers focused on expressing to rural America the need for modernization in a rapidly changing world. Drawing inspiration from Europe, where agricultural education was far more accessible to rural residents, many educators pushed the farmer to understand his own backwardness. Others worked to persuade farmers that, while their generation had needed little formal education to farm profitably, their children would not be so lucky. It was their duty as parents to prepare their children for the industrial era. While rural America had to this point been isolated from the modern era, educators assured farmers that that their isolation, and therefore insulation, was soon coming

¹⁰⁵ Hays, *Agriculture, Industries, and Home Economics on Our Public Schools*, 25.

to an end, and uneducated farmers would soon suffer the consequences of their refusal to modernize with the rest of the world.

Many educators, aware of the traditional conservatism held by rural Americans, gradually introduced agricultural education into rural schools. Nature study made its appearance in the late 19th century, and gained a following and national popularity with the endorsement of Liberty Hyde Bailey. Epitomizing the tenets of the late 19th century “new education” movement, nature study was a low-cost, low-profile type of farm schooling that could function as a building block for later, more focused studies in agricultural issues. Teachers who gained local support by involving themselves in the surrounding community could introduce agriculture into traditional, classical subjects. To reinforce these lessons at home, county superintendents and extension agents encouraged the establishment of children’s and parents’ farm clubs, which encouraged the dissemination of classroom lessons into the community. Home projects, which required the dedication of year-round teachers and the involvement of parents, gave students a chance to profit from agricultural education while gaining practical lessons and hands-on experience raising a crop or caring for livestock.

Eventually, schools with exceptionally progressive leaders could establish courses that taught agriculture exclusively. Consolidated schools were especially capable of this innovation; schools built with laboratory facilities and adjacent experimental plots could provide students with room and resources to conduct scientific experiments and work on large-scale projects. The most radical proposal for secondary-level agricultural education

promoted the establishment of schools that taught agriculture exclusively to students who boarded for two or three seasons over a period of two to four years.

Early 20th century educational reformers made great strides in the first years of the agricultural education movement. They established a procedure through which teachers could introduce agricultural education into small schools, and even succeeded in establishing some schools which taught agriculture to the exclusion of classical subjects. If such a program could gain momentum and become widespread, the rural population would soon find itself modernized and stabilized. If agricultural education could really be implemented in so smooth a manner, it could produce a safe and secure farming population, one that had been informed of its faults and had actively participated in its own renovation.

Many of the movement's supporters, however great the successes they achieved, failed to realize the problems such massive overhaul of rural education, and consequently rural culture, could present. Though the first decade and a half of the 20th century saw educators establish and practice a plan for implementing agricultural education in rural schools, it also saw backlash against the system. Rural residents, asked to accept modernization wholesale from urban reformers, often resisted large-scale reform, and though many progressively-minded teachers were able to gain support from the rural community, there were some communities that fought the agricultural education movement vehemently. Without the support of local residents, agricultural education often failed to take root in rural schools. Agricultural educational reform in the early 20th century came to hinge upon the approval and involvement of the rural community.

Chapter 3: Reactions to Progressive Agricultural Education

“In all fairness it must be said, the modern gospel of progressiveness has not been everywhere accepted, far from it.” The reformer George Fiske lamented in his book, *The Challenge of the Country: A Study of Country Life Opportunity*, that by 1912, “plenty of farmers, doubtless the majority, are still following the old traditions. Country folks as a rule are conservative. They like the old ways and are suspicious of ‘new fangled notions’.”¹⁰⁶ In criticizing the “natural conservatism” of farmers, many of whom rebuffed progressive rural reform attempts, Fiske gave vent to the frustrations of many reformers; though they managed in the first decade of the 20th century to pinpoint what they believed to be the biggest problem in rural life, the rural school system, many reformers could not gain the kind of local support required to implement an effective strategy for improving the rural school. Studying the problems of the one-room schoolhouse, inventing processes for reform, and providing funding and support from national leaders to teach agricultural education in these schools was only effective with the help of individual rural communities. In many if not most places, farmers and their wives, parents to the next generation of rural residents, clung to the existing system of rural education when reformers attempted radical overhaul by replacing traditional education with agricultural training.

Progressives believed the customary system of rural education was antiquated and backward, but many of those residing in the country believed that between the drafty walls of one-room, cross-roads schoolhouses, rural Americans protected age-old “agrarian traditions as they sought to preserve...their time-honored rights of self-government and independence

¹⁰⁶ Fiske, 93.

in the face of challenges from nearby villagers and faraway professional educators.”¹⁰⁷ When outside reformers attempted the overhaul of rural life by rearranging one of its most basic institutions, farmers and their wives often grasped at what they believed was one of the last remnants of rural home rule, the right to dictate the conditions under which farm children were raised and educated. When progressives rode in and tried to force the overhaul of rural schoolhouses, they almost invariably met with resistance that could ultimately spell disaster for the proposed system of agricultural education

However, despite widespread resistance to rural educational reform, a subject which some historians have covered at length, there were several towns across the Midwest in which rural Americans accepted agricultural education into their schools. In these towns, cash-strapped and overworked farmers contributed money, time, and valuable farmland to the efforts of educators. Here, community members took an active role in planning and implementing changes to the existing educational system. Given the opportunity to influence agricultural education in their schools, some rural Americans, however unlikely, embraced progressive educational reform.

It is important to expose the complexity of rural America’s reaction to educational reform, specifically agricultural education, in the beginning of the 20th century. Avoiding the wholesale rejection of agricultural education reform as a failure simply because most rural residents resisted outside interference allows historians to understand the relationship between rural and urban America in ways more complex than previous interpretations of this subject have allowed. If progressive reformers failed in completely implementing a program

¹⁰⁷ Barron, 73.

of agricultural education that replaced traditional education in the countryside, doing so with the goal of improving the rural population and ensuring its continued existence and health, they did so in a way that exposes to historians the complexity of the rural-urban relationship in early 20th-century America.

Historians have, to this point, noted the failure of the rural educational reform movement, remarking especially upon rural resistance to the use of agricultural education to modernize the farming population through its children. This critique of the rural educational reform movement is well-deserved. It could be called a failure for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the condescension of reformers toward the very farmers they believed themselves to be helping. The reaction of the rural population to outside interference was, in many ways, predictable; when confronted with urban reformers who wished to overhaul rural society by radically altering the fundamental purpose and direction of the rural schoolhouse, many farmers and their wives refused to relinquish control of their schools.

Rural residents, who did in fact hold a certain “conservatism,” often reacted negatively to the condescension they perceived in reformers’ critiques of their schools. This tendency toward defensiveness did, of course, have historical roots. Born out of necessity, the earliest rural public schools had been the results of sparse settlement. Parents living on the frontier in the early decades of the 19th century had to organize their own schools if they wanted formal education for their children. “Subscription schools,” local schools established by associations of parents, predominated in the rural countryside until the 1830’s.¹⁰⁸ State legislation allowed villages to tax their residents to provide for such schools in this period,

¹⁰⁸ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 25-7.

but in the late 1840's an early breed of rural education reformers from New England managed to pass laws that required state-wide taxation to provide for local schools.¹⁰⁹ Farmers had fought against this type of legislation and were likely to remember this first wave of reforms when confronted by the educational reformers of the early 20th century. Though state legislation required and funded the establishment of rural public schools by the turn of the century, farmers continued to control the curriculum and school calendar in these schools. By the early years of the agricultural education movement, many farmers were predisposed to defend their rights to manage the rural schools, schools they paid for, staffed, and maintained through local control.

When reformers from the cities, colleges, and legislatures invaded the Midwest to reform those schools, farmers often perceived condescension in their rhetoric. There was a reason for this perception: rural educational reformers were, in fact, condescending in their judgment of the farming class and its rural schools, attributing their backwardness to a rural tendency toward ignorance. For example, while lamenting the natural conservatism of Midwestern farmers, George Fiske related a comment Liberty Hyde Bailey had heard at a rural reform meeting, writing in his book, "It was after [Bailey] had been speaking at a rural life conference, doubtless proposing various plans for better farming, which differed from the honored superstitions of the neighborhood. A stolid native was overheard saying to his neighbor, 'John, let them blow! They can't hurt me none.' He prided himself on being immune to all appeals at... a rural revival."¹¹⁰ Fiske labeled such farmers as this one "superstitious," declaring, "A farmer may be so superstitious as to begin nothing on a Friday,

¹⁰⁹ Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 41.

¹¹⁰ Fiske, 93-4.

nor butcher during a waning moon for fear his meat will shrink, nor use an iron plow for fear it may poison the soil!”¹¹¹ Clearly, Fiske had little regard for farmers who refused to listen to the advice of a reformer as famous and respected as Liberty Hyde Bailey.

Kenyon L. Butterfield, a leader in agricultural education who would become president of Michigan Agricultural College in 1924, was perhaps one of the kinder critics of the farming population. He attributed the conservatism of the farmer to his background as a “rampant individualist,” but many reformers simply attributed the antiquated ideas of the typical farmer to his lack of education and culture. Lorenzo Harvey wrote in 1900, “Not one in ten of them can read a popular book on the principles of agriculture, or a farm journal intelligently.”¹¹² Even the Committee on Industrial Education for Rural Schools, established by the National Education Association of the United States in 1905, reported that, “It is the belief of the committee that the chief cause for all the evils . . . is the low educational ideals of the people in the rural communities. This cause exists because of the lack of a proper conception of what true education means, of what is possible in the field of industrial education for country children, and of its value to them.”¹¹³ Reformers belittled the rural population in their correspondence and publications, attributing resistance to reform to the farmers’ overwhelming ignorance.

Reformers believed this perceived natural tendency to reject reform and continue in ignorance hindered their efforts at all rural educational reform. B.M. Davis, a professor of

¹¹¹ Fiske, 93.

¹¹² Lorenzo D. Harvey, “Instruction in Agriculture and Domestic Economy in Rural Communities in Wisconsin,” *Bulletin of Information No. 5* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1900), 7.

¹¹³ L. D. Harvey et al., *Report of the Committee on Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities to the National Council of Education* (National Education Association, 1905), 14.

agricultural education at Miami University of Ohio, wrote of a consolidation meeting he had attended in a rural community.

The meeting was held in a district schoolhouse which had been built some forty years ago. The house itself, with its much-mended walls, unjacketed stove, and general dilapidation, might have been regarded as a powerful argument for consolidation. The township was rich and prosperous, and conditions were apparently most favorable for the entire township to unite in securing a splendid consolidated school including a high school, in the place of several isolated struggling district schools and a one-room, one-teacher high school... But strange as it may seem, the common cause that brought them there was to express an opposition to the proposed scheme. When one prosperous and influential farmer, a grandfather, stated that fifty years ago the district school was good enough for him, and that he could not see why it was not good enough for the children of today, there were many nods of approval.¹¹⁴

The behavior of the farmers at this meeting was evidence, Davis argued, of the general opposition of the farming class to educational reform, even when that reform meant the improvement of awful conditions like those in the schoolhouse he described. He wrote that the greatest challenge facing reformers was “how the conservatism that has so hedged about rural education may be broken down.”¹¹⁵ While a small group of reformers believed that real interaction with the rural community could aid the implementation of agricultural education in small rural schools, most simply complained about the problems caused by rural conservatism. One author, Ernest Groves, wrote that outside reform was failing and it was “reasonable to regret that a larger part in the discussions relating to rural education has not been taken by people living in the country and familiar with the rural life of the present time.”¹¹⁶ B.M. Davis simply reported that, due to the stubbornness of the rural population,

¹¹⁴ B.M. Davis, “The General Problem of the Relation of the rural School to Community Needs—A Summary,” in *Tenth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, part II: The Rural School as a Community Center*, ed. B.M. Davis (Bloomington: Public School Publishing Company, 1911), 61.

¹¹⁵ Davis, 61.

¹¹⁶ Ernest Groves, *Rural Problems of Today* (New York: Association Press, 1918), 45.

“there is no difficulty in finding fault with the rural-school situation but there seems to be great difficulty in finding means to improve it.”¹¹⁷

This hesitance to accept all reform attempts from the outside was even more frustrating to those specifically interested in establishing a program of rural agricultural education. Reformers who pushed to replace traditional education often received complaints from parents who were either confused by the program, offended by it, or both. One educator wrote in *The Country Gentleman* in 1908, “While much may be accomplished [with agricultural education], it will usually be found that parents will approve only a limited amount of work, no matter how successful it may seem to the teacher to be...The most advanced rural school I know of is the one where the most work in agriculture has been done, but I doubt very much if any resident of that school district would readily give any credit to agriculture for the result.”¹¹⁸ Teachers who implemented agricultural education in their school rooms often found parents reluctant to support the new curriculum outright.

Reformers believed that rural resistance to agricultural education in district schoolhouses was based on an inability of farmers to understand the importance of such an education, and to understand the benefits that would accrue to the entire community when its children received modern, scientific agricultural training in its schools. B. M. Davis wrote that it was necessary to show farmers these benefits, and that demonstration of the effects of agricultural education had to happen soon after its implementation if the teacher wanted to gain parental support. “The farmer is conservative not only in educational affairs but in other matters as well,” Davis wrote. “He thinks in terms of agriculture, and generally estimates his

¹¹⁷ Davis, 61.

¹¹⁸ H.H. Lyon, “Teaching Agriculture,” *The Country Gentleman*, 13 Sept 1908, p. 839.

values of things in dollars and cents. When he has his milk tested in the public school and is shown that some of his cows are losing him money, he gets a new light on education and assumes a new attitude toward the public school.”¹¹⁹ Davis believed that it was necessary to show real, tangible evidence of the advantages of scientific training if reformers wanted to gain support from the parents of the children they taught.

Davis echoed the sentiments of the Committee on Industrial Education in Schools for Rural Communities. The writers of the committee’s report noted that if communities in which farmers were uneducated and wary of intrusion were to accept agricultural education into their schools, it was important that

...the people in those communities must be educated to see and appreciate the possibilities and value of industrial education; that the value of this kind of education in increasing the productive capacity of those being educated is the argument which appeals most strongly to the rural population. Therefore, in the beginnings of industrial education in any community, the immediate, practical results that will appeal directly to the interests of the people who support and maintain the schools must be made prominent by those concerned with its development.¹²⁰

Reformers believed that evidence of the benefits of agricultural education would sway the rural population to its favor; they criticized the rural population for being ignorant of the value of agricultural education, and believed that all that was required to change the farmer and his wife’s mind was a demonstration of the benefits of rural educational reform.

There was a problem with the progressive interpretation of the rural population’s reaction to agricultural education: it oversimplified that reaction. While reformers believed farmers who reacted negatively did so out of a simple failure (or inability) to understand the

¹¹⁹ Davis, 62.

¹²⁰ Harvey et al., *Report of the Committee on Industrial Education*, 9.

purpose of agricultural education, the rural reaction to agricultural education, a program meant to modernize and stabilize them, was many-layered. While reformers attributed rural resistance to a natural wariness of outsiders and an inability to understand how agricultural education would help rural society, rural residents demonstrated an understanding of the movement for which reformers gave them too little credit.

Rural Americans observed in the agricultural education movement an attempt to ensure that they and their children would become and remain the permanent stewards of American agriculture. Unfortunately for reformers, many farmers and their wives believed their children should be able to choose whether they wanted to become farmers, and they believed that education solely in agriculture would force their children into farming, choosing their profession for them, and keeping them from becoming qualified to do anything else. Country residents who rejected agricultural education in their schools wrote to the farm journals to express their frustration with the reform movement's ultimate goal.

In 1900, an article appeared in the *Columbia Herald*, the daily newspaper of Columbia, Missouri, and it was reprinted in the *Farmer's Voice*. "Why must all farmers' sons become farmers any more than all doctors' sons should become physicians?" wrote the author. "Occupation is not a matter of inheritance...If the son of the farmer manifests an inclination and aptitude for farming, he should stick to the farm. Otherwise let him go into that trade or profession for which he shows most desire and fitness."¹²¹ The author revealed one of the greatest worries of the farming population. Many parents worried that agricultural education could "peasantize" their children, turning the next generation into a class tied to

¹²¹ "Keeping Boys on the Farm," *Farmer's Voice*, 15 Sept 1900, p. 6.

the land by an education that qualified them for nothing else. Parents, who observed rural teachers throwing out traditional subjects in the elementary levels of rural school to replace them with rudimentary agricultural education, worried that their children were not receiving an adequate, basic education that would prepare them for their entrance into the real world.

One writer for the *Farmer's Review* commented in 1904

The Farmer's Review is very earnestly in favor of educational advancement in every department of study, but cannot overlook the fact that something is radically wrong in the class of teaching now ruling in the district schools, as evidenced by the backwardness of young people coming from them to college...those who do attend are not thoroughly drilled in the "three R's" or receive their instruction in a manner ill calculated to develop memory and efficiency...If the addition of rudimentary agriculture to the present curriculum is to further impair efficiency in spelling, reading, writing, and arithmetic it becomes a questionable policy.¹²²

While some parents could support the use of agricultural education as a tool to interest their children in the farm and the country, they refused to allow it to become the only subject taught in their schools. Farm children, parents argued, required the same elementary education in classical subjects that city children received.

Even those parents who supported a limited amount of agricultural education were wary of it; they worried that agricultural education would mean that their children did not receive rigorous schooling, simply performing agricultural experiments, caring for livestock, and keeping farm books, but never learning the real lessons required by society. While these parents supported the concept of a child's "responsibility of the care of a calf, a colt, a pig, a sheep, or a bank account," they also worried about their children's basic education, fearing

¹²² "Rudimentary Agricultural Education," *Farmer's Review*, 11 Feb 1904, p. 2.

the “tendencies of both parents and teachers...to reduce the ‘burden’ of the child’s responsibility and lessen its chances to develop moral and mental strength.”¹²³

Educators acknowledged but disputed the fear that farm training would peasantize rural youths. Willet M. Hays, one of the greatest champions of the agricultural education movement, and certainly the most vocal supporter of the movement to establish secondary schools of agriculture, acknowledged and attempted to relieve this fear. “None need fear [that the agricultural high school] will cause a stratification of society,” Hays wrote. “It will put farming and home making on a parallel with other vocations in which the workers are trained for the work. Rather we should fear that farmers...if left uneducated, or educated in schools with ideals mainly for the nonagricultural, will be in a peasant-like stratum, weighed down under a load of ignorance.”¹²⁴ Hays reiterated many of the arguments of the early educational reformers: that education for the farmer was a necessity. If he was to stay relevant and prosperous in the modernizing world, he needed an education to suit him for the business and science of farming.

Hays tried to convince farmers that their children’s education would not tie them to the land, but did hint that the purpose of the program was to secure the farming population to provide its necessary contribution to society. “Since the strength of the country is made up of the sum of its units, it is proper paternalism for the State to assure to each of its youth a training to be effective in self-support and contributing to the whole of society both of material wealth and of individual influence for the social uplift. It is not improper

¹²³ “Editorial,” *Wallace’s Farmer* 37(9 Feb 1912): 256.

¹²⁴ Willet M. Hays, *Education for Country Life* (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Experiment Stations, Government Printing Office, 1909), 36.

paternalism to offer school facilities to all youth until they attain the age of citizenship and to provide vocational facilities for all.”¹²⁵ Though Hays and others argued that the impetus behind the farm education movement was the uplift and modernization of American farmers, rural residents were not blind or deaf to the movement’s other purpose, the purpose that stemmed from the fear of the farming population’s inability to provide the nation with food. The program might help the countryside in the short run, but in the long run, many skeptical parents believed an education directed solely toward the study of agriculture could turn their children into a permanent farming class, tied to the land and forced to continue providing food to the rest of the nation.

Though it ran up against an ideological roadblock created by farmers who wished to continue their children’s education in the traditional, classical subjects, the agricultural education movement also encountered resistance from the population for financial reasons. The consolidation movement, upon the success of which much of the agricultural education movement depended, encountered feverish protests from the rural population, as well. Consolidated schools were necessary to the success of agricultural education because they provided the improved facilities and resources necessary to carry out scientific training in agriculture. These schools could hire multiple teachers who specialized in specific subjects, including agriculture. However, when reformers pushed for the formation of public consolidated schools out of the many scattered district schools across the Midwest, farmers and their families protested that the cost of such consolidations laid a heavy burden upon them.

¹²⁵ Hays, *Education for Country Life*, 37.

Rural residents often believed that the creation of consolidated schools would raise taxes and cause the depreciation of the value of lands that were adjacent to the original district schools. They worried about the costs and dangers of transporting their children to schools miles away from their homes.¹²⁶ Winter, especially, presented a problem, for as temperatures dropped it was difficult to provide warm, safe, economical transportation for children to attend school; the district school, to which bundled children could walk, seemed the safer alternative. Furthermore, outside reformers often even failed to win the support of teachers who were already teaching in rural districts. These teachers worried that consolidated schools, controlled by outsiders from the state's educational colleges, would "bring higher professional standards and cost them their jobs."¹²⁷ With opposition to consolidation so widespread, it was often difficult for reformers to collect the kind of resources required to teach real scientific agriculture in schools. The district school was simply ill-equipped; the consolidated school was often ill-supported.

Reformers faced challenges and opposition to the agricultural education movement from its inception. Though they tried to convince the rural population that the movement began with sincere concern for the health of the countryside, often rural residents saw in the reformers' plans an attempt to peasantize farm children, tying them to the land for generations to come. Holding college educations and identifying with the urban fear of a food crisis, reformers were loath to give up on agricultural education's potential to modernize the farm population, and despite some opposition, they managed to implement nature study and agricultural education in some schools by the end of the first decade of the 20th century.

¹²⁶ Danbom, 79.

¹²⁷ Danbom, 80.

However, widespread implementation of agricultural education in rural schools never materialized in the kind of wholesale fashion that reformers hoped it could. Reformers met with something unexpected when trying to control the rural population: a rural population which did not particularly want to be controlled.

This is the common interpretation of the entire agricultural education movement. Historians today look back upon the attempt to implement vocational training in agriculture into the small schools of the Midwest, a part of a wider Country Life Movement geared at improving life in the country and stopping the flow to town, and see the “naiveté, the condescension, and the arrogance of the new-middle-class experts in the education establishment.”¹²⁸ Much of this critique is deserved. Country Life educators from outside rural America never thoroughly understood rural society and believed that overhauling it would be both easy and beneficial to the rest of the nation. If they could both improve rural America and ensure the safety of urban America, the program could be, in their narrow view, a resounding success. Reformers failed to account for rural Americans’ attachment to their own social institutions and values, and furthermore attacked opposition by “denigrating rural people and calling for compulsory change.”¹²⁹ Rural Americans, who believed their institutions represented the uniqueness and individuality of their own country culture, resisted the influence of outsiders to the point of rejecting their educational reforms in almost every corner of the Midwest.

This does not, however, mean that progressive reformers’ attempts to implement a program of agricultural education in rural schools failed everywhere. There were locations in

¹²⁸ Danbom, 58.

¹²⁹ Danbom, 81.

the Midwest where rural Americans accepted educational reform, and where they especially embraced the movement to place farm education in their schools. Understanding why these places were different, and what was different about the educational reforms implemented in these places, can aid in providing a more complete understanding of the rural response to outside influence in the early 20th century.

The town of Menomonie, Wisconsin, was one of those locations in which rural residents adopted and embraced a program of agricultural education. The story of the establishment of the Dunn County Agricultural School, opened in 1903 after Wisconsin's state legislature provided part of its funding in 1901, demonstrates that agricultural education, when implemented and sustained in a way that invited participation from the surrounding community, could succeed in a rural Midwestern town. Its success highlights the role that community could play in the establishment of a thriving agricultural education program.

The Dunn County Agricultural School was part of a program supported by some of the most radical of the rural education reformers. Among those reformers were Willet M. Hays, an agricultural educator who served as assistant Secretary of Agriculture under James Wilson, and Lorenzo D. Harvey, superintendent of Wisconsin's public schools and future president of Wisconsin's Stout Manual Training School.¹³⁰ Avid supporters of agricultural

¹³⁰ Hays was a native of Eldora, Iowa, and graduated from Iowa State University with a Master's degree in 1886. After this he became the associate editor of the *Prairie Farmer* magazine until 1888, when he became the first faculty member selected to staff the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station at St. Paul. A leader in the study of scientific plant and livestock breeding, Hays held a position as professor at the North Dakota Agricultural College at Fargo between 1891-3, when he returned to Minnesota. He was appointed assistant Secretary of Agriculture under James Wilson in 1904 and served from 1905 until the end of the Taft administration in 1913. During his tenure as assistant Secretary, he helped draft the Nelson Amendment and the Smith-Lever Act. For a full description of Hays' life and his contribution to agricultural science, as well as

education, Hays and Harvey were vocal advocates of the push to establish “county schools of agriculture”, finishing schools which replaced traditional high schools by offering courses in agriculture to rural youths. Those youths were to dedicate between two and four years to board at the school and be trained in agricultural and domestic science.

These schools could provide the type of facilities needed to train youths in agricultural science, but more importantly, they could be rallying points for communities, and become centers from which educators could distribute bulletins, pamphlets, and agricultural journals, teach classes open to the public, and hold farmers’ discussions and clubs. If the community could supply the financial support, such schools could include departments for training agricultural educators. They could even host professors from the agricultural colleges, teachers who would “be sent out...going from one [school] to another, remaining a sufficient time to give instruction not only to the students, but to farmers who might care to attend, in various subjects which would not be taken up in the school itself.”¹³¹ County schools of agriculture, reformers like Hays and Harvey argued, could be places where students could devote themselves to the exclusive study of agricultural education, and could offer the community a place to learn scientific agriculture.

Hays especially believed the county school movement could create better support for agricultural education in regular rural schools, too. “The agricultural secondary school,” he declared when addressing the National Education Association’s Department of Superintendence, “will set standards for the consolidated rural school and provide its

agricultural education, see A.F. Troyer and H. Stoehr, “Willet M. Hays, Great Benefactor to Plant Breeding and the Founder of Our Association,” *Journal of Heredity* 94: 6(2003): 435-441.

¹³¹ Lorenzo D. Harvey, “Instruction in Agriculture and Domestic Economy in Rural Communities,” in *Bulletin of Information No. 5* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1900), 22.

teachers, and the graduates returning will make possible its excellence.”¹³² Believing that the schools would not only train farmers, but also train teachers to continue agricultural education’s incorporation into rural schools, Hays saw the plan to establish such schools as essential to rural educational reform’s long-term success.

County agricultural schools, in the eyes of their supporters, could create a multi-leveled system of agricultural education in the countryside; by providing a middle step between regular, small rural schools and the agricultural colleges of the state, they could tie rural communities to the states’ centers of scientific agriculture. “This movement contemplates that, below and leading to our more than 60 state colleges of agriculture already established, we shall have 300 to 400 agricultural finishing schools—practically one in each country Congressional district of ten or more counties, either separate or as a strong department of an existing institution,” Hays wrote in 1909.¹³³ To make sure that students who left these schools did, in fact, become farmers, Lorenzo Harvey recommended that students only be admitted after having completed a course of agricultural instruction in the rural schools, and only admitting those students over the age of 16.¹³⁴ Hays believed most would, in fact, return to the soil, either directly or after teaching agriculture for a period. “Suppose the great state of Iowa had 10 of these schools with a total of 5,000 students,” he wrote, “and should graduate annually 1,000; suppose further that 400 of these graduates would become teachers of agriculture and home economics in consolidated farm and village schools, eventually for the most part becoming farmers or farmers’ wives; 400 return to the farm

¹³² Hays, “Agriculture, Industries, and Home Economics in Our Public Schools,” 5.

¹³³ Hays, *Education for Country Life*, 5.

¹³⁴ Harvey, “Instruction in Agriculture and Domestic Economy in Rural Communities,” 20.

direct; 100 go forward to the agricultural college and 100 into non-agricultural vocations.”¹³⁵

Hays believed that these schools could easily create a network of educated farmers all over the state in a few short years of operation, without losing many students to the city or permanent academic careers in the agricultural colleges.

The county schools of agriculture, as designed by these reformers, served another purpose as well: to vitalize and develop the rural communities in which they existed. These schools, distributed throughout the states, could aid in drawing the community into the school’s activities, and even perhaps encourage the development of local industry. “It is fortunate,” Hays wrote, “that the enlarged school...not only lends itself to cooperative organization, but leads our rural population into other lines of cooperative organization. It creates a large, compact, organized country life unit, re-centering country life in a way to effect many needed developments along economic, social, and religious, as well as along educational lines...and in developing the local creamery or other cooperative establishment for preparing farm products for market.”¹³⁶ County agricultural schools, as touted by Hays, Harvey, and other supporters, could create an entire system of agricultural education, while at the same time encouraging community stability and economic vitality. Such a school could truly become the center of a community.

At the urging of the county school supporters, the state of Wisconsin was the first to appropriate money and propose plans for the construction of two county schools of agriculture. The first town to erect and open one of these schools was Menomonie, a small city in west-central Wisconsin which had, a decade earlier, become the home of the Stout

¹³⁵ Hays, “Agriculture, Industries, and Home Economics in Our Public Schools, 15.

¹³⁶ Hays, *Education for Country Life*, 20.

Manual Training School, part of the University of Wisconsin's system of colleges. Planning and construction of the Dunn County Agricultural School began in 1901, when State Senator J.H. Stout, millionaire, local philanthropist, and founder of the Stout School, headed a committee to establish the institution.

To plan and build the agricultural school, the residents of Dunn County, Wisconsin, demonstrated real faith in the importance and necessity of agricultural education and manual training. Dunn County, as stipulated in the legislation passed by Wisconsin's state assembly, received no state funding in the school's first year; to fund the school's construction, the tax-paying residents of Dunn County dedicated a total of \$20,000 to the school's construction. Furthermore, they dedicated a large plot of land in the center of the city for the building site, property worth \$5,000, equipment worth \$5,000, and "running" and maintenance costs of \$6,000.¹³⁷ After one year of operation, the state repaid two thirds of these maintenance costs, but none of the money to fund the original building of the school. The city of Menomonie and its surrounding county, therefore, made a massive investment in the D.C.A.S.¹³⁸ For this investment, they received a large brick structure with three floors, which housed both the Agricultural School on the first two and a teachers' training school on the third, and a "two-story frame building which is soon to be equipped for blacksmithing and carpentry." Furthermore, the land surrounding the school held garden plots and poultry houses, while students learned any large scale farming at a county farm established approximately a mile from the school near the county's fairgrounds and facility to house its mental patients.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ K.C. Davis, "The First County School of Agriculture," *Farmer's Voice*, 29 Aug 1903.

¹³⁸ K.C. Davis, "A County Agricultural School," *Farm Economy*, Feb 1903.

¹³⁹ Davis, "A County Agricultural School."

As a manual training school, the Dunn County Agricultural School offered classes geared to train future farmers and farmers' wives in scientific crop production and domestic science. Boys enrolled at the school could take classes in stock raising, soils, crop production, farm carpentry, blacksmithing, and farm machinery operation, and could enroll with girls in classes to learn poultry production, dairying, and flower and vegetable gardening. Girls could take cooking, sewing, home and farm economy, domestic hygiene, food chemistry, and millinery. To continue their traditional education, students could also take classes in English and mathematics, but also scientific courses in elementary science, physical geography, human physiology, and economics.¹⁴⁰

To oversee the education offered at the D.C.A.S., the county hired K.C. Davis to serve as its principal. Davis had studied at the Kansas State Normal and Agricultural College. After graduating with his Bachelor's degree, he had received post-graduate training from Liberty Hyde Bailey at Cornell College, and received a Ph.D. from that institution in 1900. By the time he was hired in 1902, he had published articles in Bailey's Encyclopedia of Horticulture and three books of his own.¹⁴¹ He worked as a tireless promoter of the school's potential, and his hiring demonstrates the school's commitment to scientific agricultural education.

¹⁴⁰ "Two Dunn County Schools," *The Dunn County News*, 14 Nov 1902.

¹⁴¹ Davis received his doctorate in 1900 from Cornell University under Bailey's supervision. See Kary Cadmus Davis, "A Taxonomic Study of North American Ranunculaceae: a treatment of the members of this natural order, whether found in gardens or native in North America (including Mexico)," (Ph.D. Diss., Cornell University, 1900). Other publications include K.C. Davis, *Native and Garden Delphiniums of North America*, Minnesota Botanical Series, 1900, and K.C. Davis, *Sialididae of North and South America*, Albany: University of the State of New York, 1903.

The local response to the school's opening was decidedly enthusiastic. A class of forty students, ten of whom were women, enrolled in the school's first year.¹⁴² By its second year, the incoming class boasted 79 students, 34 of whom were women, and 85 percent of whom were from the countryside. Students from Dunn County attended tuition-free, while others from outside the county's borders paid a small fee. More importantly, though, the school encouraged and received real participation from the surrounding community. It organized farmer's institutes, agricultural club meetings, and encouraged the attendance of rural school teachers who were employed in the surrounding areas. For those farmers who were tax-paying residents of the county, the school offered an array of free and low-cost services: free butter fat testing for milk and cream, free seed testing, free testing of clover and beans for bacterial content, free grafting for orchard trees, free "good road planning", the treatment of oats and potatoes for smut and scab for a minimal cost, free planning of barns and drainage systems, free stock selection for livestock buyers, free copies of farm bulletins, and an array of free material about all subjects agricultural.¹⁴³ Local farmers attended and aided in classes held on Fridays and Saturdays during the school year and winter months. In these classes, farmers from Dunn County both gave and observed presentations on everything from Dunn County fruit growing to the principles of sound silo construction.¹⁴⁴

K.C. Davis boasted that the majority of the school's graduates returned to the farm. "The Dunn County School has graduated just forty young men and women who have, almost without exception, gone back to their homes in the country and are working out the problems

¹⁴² Davis, "A County Agricultural School."

¹⁴³ K.C. Davis, "Agricultural High Schools: Dunn County, Wisconsin, School of Agriculture—Possibilities in Rural Education," *Farmer's Voice*, 1 Oct 1905, p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ "The Dunn County School of Agriculture and Domestic Economy," *Prairie Farmer*, 4 Aug 1904, p. 7.

they find there with an intelligence that is inspiring,” he wrote in 1905, after the graduation of the school’s inaugural class.¹⁴⁵ These students had received an education in the D.C.A.S. that was comparable to that offered at the state’s agricultural colleges, but at minimal cost and with little need for travel. Furthermore, parents whose children attended the school needed not worry that their children would be educated away from the farm; if Davis’ assessment of his students’ post-graduation plans was correct, most of the graduates of the D.C.A.S. returned to the farm to apply their education.

The Dunn County Agricultural School’s promoters touted the school as “an institution for the ninety-five percent,” contrasting it with the state agricultural college, “an institution for the five percent.” Students from rural Wisconsin, who might never have the opportunity or financial means to attend the state agricultural school, could attend a local school for scientific education that they could take back to the farm. K.C. Davis wrote that his students “have a right to this kind of training, and to the kind of knowledge necessarily acquired in securing it,” noting that the education his school offered to rural residents was one that was simply essential for success, and attainable for a very small price.¹⁴⁶

The school made headlines at its opening, and became a true source of pride for Wisconsin’s educators and rural citizens alike. The Wisconsin Journal of Education praised the Menomonie school system, including the Stout Manual Training School and the Teacher’s School, declaring, “We know of no other system of schools, certainly not any within the borders of Wisconsin, which it would pay a teacher to go and see more than those at Menomonie. Surely every teacher in the Northwest should make [sic] a pilgrimage to this

¹⁴⁵ Davis, “Agricultural High Schools,” p. 13.

¹⁴⁶ Davis, “A County Agricultural School.”

educational center. He cannot help but go away with new thots [sic], new ideas, and new ideals for the betterment of his work.”¹⁴⁷

The city of Menomonie continued its support for the schools long after the Dunn County Agricultural School’s inception. Nine years after the legislation to provide for the school’s construction passed, the school, under a new administration, was still committed to the principle of modern agricultural education. “Twenty-eight young men of the Dunn County Agricultural School last week passed the examination for testing cows for tuberculosis,” read an article by the school’s new leader, F.R. Crane. “The secondary school of the future is a necessity. These schools must be the expression of the life of the community. We must not only put agriculture into the schools, but we must put the schools into agriculture.”¹⁴⁸

The Dunn County School of Agriculture was an exception to a rule. If historians have, to this point, argued that the introduction of agriculture into rural school systems was a failure, it may be beneficial to understand why Dunn County managed to establish this school, especially noting the necessary local support necessary to create and maintain the school. Tax payers in Dunn County supplied the school with buildings, equipment, and land. Furthermore, they paid a third of the schools maintenance costs, including the salaries of three full-time teachers, for the rest of the school’s existence. The school took up a large section of the center of the town, and a substantial piece of the county’s fairgrounds served as its agricultural land. The school was a constant, visible reminder of the community’s

¹⁴⁷ “The Menomonie School System,” *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 35(Nov 1903): 193.

¹⁴⁸ F.R. Crane, “Thousands of Sheep Eating the Standing Standing Stalks of Sweet Corn,” *Farmer’s Voice*, 1 Nov 1910, p. 7.

commitment to new education and scientific agricultural training. It remained so until 1959, when it finally closed due to its cost and the availability of agricultural classes at Menomonie High School.¹⁴⁹

Historians have argued that reformers faced massive, overwhelming resistance to rural educational reform, but the success of the Dunn County Agricultural School would seem to dispute the notion that resistance was ubiquitous. In Dunn County, residents donated money, time, and land to the school's construction. They participated in weekend and off-season programs offered by the school. Local farmers gave and received instruction at the school's farmers' institutes. They accepted the scientific services offered by the school, including the use of its equipment and the specialties of its teachers and students. K.C. Davis noted the involvement of the school's community, reminding readers that, "county schools of agriculture cannot be a success unless the farmers of the vicinity take an abiding interest in them. In Dunn county they speak of it as the 'farmer's best friend,' 'the best place to send our boys,' 'the college for the rural classes,' and in such complimentary ways only."¹⁵⁰ Dunn County's great School of Agriculture, for which it gained fame in Wisconsin and a reputation as a center of scientific learning everywhere else, succeeded because it encouraged community support, and supported the community that encouraged it. The Dunn County School of Agriculture thrived because its leaders, already part of the community as the administrators and benefactors of the Stout Manual Training School, relied upon the town of

¹⁴⁹ "School's Oldest Ag High School Razed for College Building Site," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 29 Nov 1959, sec. A, p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ K.C. Davis, "The First County School of Agriculture," in "Technical Training in Agriculture—Its Value and Its Opportunities," *Farmer's Voice*, 29 Aug 1903, p. 2.

Menomonie for support, and then involved the local community in both its children's and its own education.

The communities of Dunn County, Wisconsin, molded and sustained the Dunn County Agricultural School, and in this way, its creation was more a continuation of tradition than a break with the past. Though residents touted the school as a new frontier in education, small Midwestern schools had been the social centers of rural communities for decades. Rural residents, who were often separated by a mile or more, could find in their schoolhouse a common meeting center where they were able “to watch their children's exercises, to worship on Sunday, to listen to political speeches, to participate in debates and “literaries,” and to attend Grange meetings.”¹⁵¹ Despite the sometimes decrepit conditions of the buildings, these schools were community centers nonetheless. Control of the traditional rural school had always been communal, involvement in the school had been communal, and maintenance of the school had been communal. The Dunn County Agricultural School, and other successful agricultural education programs like it, utilized instead of ignored the social function and spirit of the rural schoolhouse to ensure their survival and relevance to their surrounding communities.

Those reformers who ignored the function of the rural schoolhouse as a social center invited protests; those reformers who acknowledged, embraced, and subsequently nurtured the local school as a community center were more likely to be able to create school agricultural programs that parents supported. Historians who have condemned the rural agricultural education movement, and thus the rural education reformers, as top-down,

¹⁵¹ Wayne E. Fuller, “Changing Concepts of the Country Schools as a Community Center in the Midwest,” *Agricultural History* 58(Jul., 1984): 433.

condescending, naïve, and arrogant, are, in general, correct. Widespread failure of the movement occurred when reformers attempted to impose agricultural education by taking over schools, legislating agriculture into the curriculum, and removing traditional subjects from farm children's lessons. However, to write the rural agricultural education movement off as a complete failure blinds historians to the nuances of this program's reception. Its failure exposes the disconnect that existed between urban reformers and rural residents, but, in very few places, its success illuminates the importance of community in rural America. It demonstrates the depth of community sentiment in places where residents lived miles apart. It demonstrates that this "backward", "conservative", ignorant population, when allowed to maintain and express its cultural identity through institutions it cherished as basic and important, was perhaps not as resistant to change as it was cultural elimination. Rural Americans were perhaps not as afraid of the future as they were afraid of losing the past, a past which the community preserved in its rural school.

Epilogue: Agricultural Education in Rural America after 1915

Barely ten years after rural educational reformers were clamoring for the compulsory and wholesale restructuring of the rural curriculum to include agricultural education, the verdict of that program's success was decidedly negative. Critics of the progressive movement looked at the program reformers tried to implement in the countryside and recognized its inherent condescension and naiveté, criticized reformers for attempting to modernize the rural population without its consent, and chalked the movement up to a failed experiment in social control. While one critic noted the plan's use of the "elementary school in the rural community as an agent of propaganda for making farmers and farmers' wives of boys and girls who chance to live in the open country," another educator criticized the movement's inherent condescension.¹⁵² "Those who have most fully imbibed the urban, economic, and official-governmental conception of the farmer-group," Orville G. Brim, a professor of education at Cornell, wrote in his cutting critique of the agricultural education movement, "see the rural child as a producer only, and his social service mainly in terms of food."¹⁵³ Brim argued that the vision of the child as a producer, instead of a member of society with rights and choices, prompted progressive reformers to reduce and restrict rural children's experience with the world, educate them only to farm, and strip them of the right to choose vocations for themselves. Brim wrote, "To use the institution to the realization of his [the rural child's] fullest ability as a means of increasing his material production and his

¹⁵² George A. Works, "Agricultural Education" in *Biennial Survey of Education, 1922-1924*, U.S. Bureau of Education, Bulletin 23, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926): 185.

¹⁵³ Orville G. Brim, *Rural Education: A Critical Study of the Objectives and Needs of the Rural Elementary School* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1923), 209.

economic resources is reducing his social service and his individual satisfaction to their lowest planes.”¹⁵⁴

As educators began to rethink the purpose of education as a whole, and rural education specifically, Brim noted that the progressives’ program, while it touted itself as a program that preserved American values, was distinctly un-American in its conception. “Such a plan is more characteristic of the fixed class system of Europe where the idea seems to have had its origin,” Brim wrote.¹⁵⁵ Educators who handed the program a negative critique in the 1920’s labeled progressives, who viewed themselves as heroes and their project as a safeguard for traditional American-ness, as arrogant bullies who tried to control rural America against its will and create a peasantized farmer class. The attempt to modernize the rural population of America through its children’s schools was, in the 20/20 hindsight of later educators, a top-down attempt at social and intellectual control that only resulted in the alienation of America’s farming population.

Historians have noted that the movement to replace traditional education with agricultural education in rural schools failed to understand some very basic things about the rural population. Progressives simplified the solution to the rural problem. Farmers’ sons and daughters were not necessarily leaving the farm because their schooling was poor; they left the farms for the many exciting “opportunities the cities afforded them.”¹⁵⁶ Rural people were not willing to give control of their schools to professional educators simply because they were professional educators; one-room schoolhouses were important community centers

¹⁵⁴ Brim, 214.

¹⁵⁵ Brim, 214.

¹⁵⁶ Fuller, “Making Better Farmers,” 165.

in which farmers and their wives believed their children learned basic rural American values.¹⁵⁷ Finally, farmers believed their children should have the same opportunities, and even education, that children in the city received. Educating children to live on the farm was not the same as educating them to live in the world, and farmers saw through the progressive attempt to create a stable and permanent farming population.¹⁵⁸ Progressive reformers who labeled resistance to agricultural education as an ignorant reaction fueled by lack of belief in the value of education oversimplified the rural reaction. Rural residents saw social control in the program's purpose, and fought back accordingly in most places where reformers tried to implement a wholesale renovation of the rural curriculum to train children for farming alone.

Despite the critique that progressives never truly achieved their goal to establish required instruction in agriculture in public rural schools, the notion that the program was somehow an absolute failure conceals the small successes of the movement, namely the establishment of a network of voluntary agricultural education that was accessible to rural youth. Though reformers failed to create a modern rural population solely with the radical redirection of American rural education, the steps they took along the way to this radical redirection actually spurred the creation of voluntary programs of agricultural education. Out of the widespread creation of boys' and girls' agricultural clubs, which educators supported as ways to take classroom lessons into the community, came the massive youth organization known today as 4-H. Out of the movement to pass legislation to provide for vocational and agricultural education in public secondary schools, which culminated most notably in the Smith Lever Act of 1914 and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, came the Future Farmers of

¹⁵⁷ Barron, 73.

¹⁵⁸ Fuller, "Making Better Farmers," 165.

America, later renamed the National FFA Organization, a youth organization that supports high school agricultural education. Though reformers may have failed in the wholesale overhaul of rural education, an overhaul they believed would bring critical and sweeping changes to rural society, they succeeded in establishing long-standing, voluntary organizations in which country children could gain the kind of training the reformers had envisioned for the rural population's youth.

The 4-H organization, today the largest youth organization in the United States, boasts, according to its own count, more than 6.5 million members in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, and U.S. Army and Air Force bases all over the world.¹⁵⁹ This enormous system of rural children's organizations emphasizes the learning of life skills and community dedication. However broadly 4-H now defines itself, given that the training it offers youngsters no longer focuses solely on agriculture, it finds its roots in the corn, swine, and canning clubs that early rural agriculture teachers established to continue classroom agricultural education into rural homes after school.

The educators who championed school agricultural education during the Progressive Era also praised home projects as ways in which students could both "learn by doing" (a phrase 4-H adopted as one of its mottos) and teach their parents the scientific agriculture they were learning in schools. Easy to establish and geared toward community involvement, home projects and eventually agricultural clubs were one of the truly successful methods teachers used to implement agricultural education in the countryside. The 4-H organization developed

¹⁵⁹ "Frequently Asked Questions About 4-H," National 4-H Council, <http://4-h.org/4hstory.html> (accessed March 9, 2010).

out of the small county groups that teachers organized in the Midwest and elsewhere to reinforce school agricultural training on the farm and involve the surrounding community in scientific education.

While compulsory agricultural education failed in rural schools, the voluntary, community-oriented nature of club work meant that it was a way in which educators from nearby agricultural colleges could introduce agriculture into rural homes while respecting rural peoples' conservative desire to maintain control of their children's educations. The agricultural clubs that teachers organized with the help of parents and community leaders received strong support from the agricultural colleges, where extension programs were already working to disseminate agricultural information to adults. By 1900, many of these college-based extension programs were also working to include youths into their programs. Educators, drawing on connections they had from their training at the agricultural colleges, encouraged boys' experiment clubs to work cooperatively with existing Farmers' Institutes, organized by and at the state schools, to issue "circulars, bulletins, and forms" to students to guide them in their home-based agriculture projects.¹⁶⁰

While club work was flourishing in the Midwest and elsewhere, other reformers were pushing for legislation to solidify funding for vocational and agricultural instruction in the rural countryside. With the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, college extension gained federal funding that allowed it formally to incorporate youth club work into the extension system. Though this initiative "merely recognized what was already going on" in rural youth organizations all over the country, it gave federal support to an existing system of education

¹⁶⁰ Franklin Reck, *The 4-H Story: A History of 4-H Club Work* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1951), 16-7.

that engaged rural youth, their communities, rural educators, collegiate educators, and federally-funded experiment stations.¹⁶¹ Club work continued to expand under the supervision of collegiate educators and rural school teachers. In 1919, educators formed the National Committee on Boys' and Girls' Club Work to supervise a national system of promotion for club work.¹⁶² In 1924, proponents of organized youth club work adopted the moniker "4-H Club work." Instruction in 4-H club work emphasized the whole-life approach that adult leaders took in educating children for rural life. Adopting the four-leaf clover as its emblem, 4-H made its motto "Learning by Doing," the same concept pioneered by new education advocates a quarter of a century prior.¹⁶³

Though wholesale, formal redirection of the rural education ran up against vehement rural resistance, 4-H was a organization in which parents and children could choose to participate; the community-oriented nature of 4-H meant that it was both more easily-accepted by rural residents, and more-easily promoted as a democratic solution to the rural problem. The passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 created even more opportunities for reformers, as it provided federal funding for vocational education in public schools.¹⁶⁴

Students in public schools could voluntarily enroll in classes in industrial and agricultural education. With the passage of the Act came the establishment of state Future Farmers of

¹⁶¹ Reck, 123-4.

¹⁶² Reck, 171.

¹⁶³ "Frequently Asked Questions About 4-H," (accessed March 9, 2010).

¹⁶⁴ The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided for more than agricultural education; it gave support to education in home economics, agriculture, trade, and industry. However, industrial education in manufacturing and machinery soon became all but obsolete in schools, because technologies advanced too quickly in the first half of the 20th century for schools to remain adequately equipped for such an education. For a discussion of the effect of technological advances on school industrial education, see Lawrence A Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 57, and for a contemporary critique of the inability of the Hughes Act to create meaningful industrial education in public schools, see Paul H. Douglas, *American Apprenticeship and Industrial Education* (New York, 1921), Chapter 5.

America and Vocational Education clubs, the first in Virginia in the early 1920's. Thirty three young men from these state clubs came together in 1928 to establish a national club, whose members consisted of students studying vocational education in public secondary schools. The organization grew steadily over the course of the 20th century. Today, the National FFA Organization, which changed its name in 1988 to encompass agricultural science, technology, and agribusiness studies, boasts over 507,000 members in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.¹⁶⁵ The students in today's FFA are part of the heritage of the early 20th-century progressive push for agricultural education in rural schools; their organization, which has lasted through ever-more-intensive mechanization and professionalization of farming, finds its roots in new education and the progressive philosophy behind agricultural training in the American countryside.

Though radical educational reform never managed to implement compulsory agricultural education in the vast majority of rural schools during the Progressive Era, it did manage to inspire the creation of organizations like 4-H and FFA. These youth organizations were voluntary activities in which rural youth could participate, gain vocational agricultural training, and work to spread the lessons they learned in school and club work to their surrounding communities. They did not impinge on what rural Americans perceived as their parental right to control their children's education, but they offered a forum for students to gain the kind of training that progressives were hoping to give the countryside. Furthermore, they incorporated rural America into an educational system that fed into industry and the colleges, creating contact between the rural community, the rural school, the state

¹⁶⁵ "A Brief History of the National FFA Organization," National FFA Organization, http://www.ffa.org/documents/about_ffahistory.pdf (accessed March 10, 2010).

agricultural colleges, and the federal government that aided in the distribution of agricultural information all over the countryside.

4-H and the FFA succeeded because they involved rural communities in agricultural training and education without making that education compulsory, and without taking rights away from parents who worried about the damage of outside influence to their children and communities. The continued existence of these and other organization nearly 100 years after the initial agricultural education movement speaks to the complexity of the rural population's early 20th century relationship with the urban world. The fact that rural residents resisted consolidation of their schools and then vocally rejected the forced overhaul of rural curriculums has convinced scholars to this point that the reason rural educational reform failed was a combination of conservative rural opposition to urban influence and (mostly correct) rural perception of the condescension and arrogance of reformers' attempt to modernize the countryside. However, the acceptance and support of county schools of agriculture and the development of programs like 4-H and FFA are pieces of this story that indicate to historians that they need to understand the role of community in this movement's great failure and small successes.

The few successful organizations that emerged from the agricultural education movement of the early 20th century relied on community support and parental involvement to remain in operation. For instance, county schools of agriculture not only needed community support in word, but relied upon tax money in individual counties across the Midwest to provide funding for the scientific agriculture they taught. They relied upon donations of funds, equipment, and land to operate upon. They required involvement from the farming

community, and the best schools even asked local farmers to become unofficial educators by demonstrating and explaining their farming techniques.¹⁶⁶ The Dunn County Agricultural School, by utilizing the support of its surrounding community in these ways, remained in operation for 55 years, finally closing in 1959 due to the costs of running a specialized training school and the establishment of agricultural classes at Menomonie's high school. By the year of its closing, the school had graduated 1,126 students. "Old Aggie," as the town affectionately called its experimental school, had provided training to and received funds from Dunn County for more than half a century, drawing from the country and sending its graduates to positions of leadership in Dunn County's small towns.¹⁶⁷ By providing decades of county-level funding for this school, Dunn County's residents demonstrated that agricultural education could survive in a rural place when the community provided support.

Smaller rural schools that elicited the support of their communities found similar success. The district schools in Page County, Iowa demonstrated this; their superintendent, Jessie Field, noted that community involvement in her schools turned them into community centers.¹⁶⁸ Declaring that "a live school means a live community that is working together," she described a relationship between her county's schools and their communities in which each enriched the other. Farmers sent their children to learn agricultural education in the schools, and took advantage of the opportunities the school afforded for helping their businesses. Field described at least one farmer who had borrowed the school's Babcock milk tester to find which animals in his herd were worth their keep. Another farmer helped the

¹⁶⁶ Davis, "Agricultural High Schools," 13.

¹⁶⁷ "State's Oldest Ag High School Razed for College Building Site," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 29 Nov 1959, sec. A, p. 6.

school to work the ground needed for its agriculture lessons. “It was for this school,” Field wrote, “that the grouchiest farmer in the district opened up his heart and came himself and brought his son and his hired man and three teams to work on the yard because the school had won a place in his respect by doing such strong and transforming [community] work.”¹⁶⁹ Page County, Iowa’s schools were social centers which both taught agricultural education and reached out to the community whose support they needed.

Where educators respected rural traditionalism, and involved parents and communities in the education they offered rural children, they found a rural population that was surprisingly willing to accept agricultural education, albeit in amounts that were limited so as not to hinder rural children’s exposure to traditional subjects. Rural residents did not completely reject outside intervention into their institutions, but simply wanted to be able to dictate how thoroughly reformers overhauled a system of education that had stood for decades without change. Their resistance was not based on an inability to understand the principles of education, or lax standards toward educational in general, but in a desire to provide their children with the kind of training that would prepare them for the world. While hardcore progressives and the rural population were radically opposed in their visions of what the goals of rural education should be, moderate progressives who implemented a measure of agricultural education into schools while respecting parents’ desire to influence the curriculum, and involving the surrounding community in the gentle redirection of part of the curriculum, were able often to revitalize rural schools, and even some communities, through agricultural education.

¹⁶⁹ Jessie Field, “The District Schools in a County as Educational and Social Centers,” in *The Tenth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, part II: The Rural School as a Community Center*, ed. B.M. Davis (Bloomington: Public School Publishing Company, 1911), 17-18.

In the early 20th century, cities and the countryside were becoming more and more different from one another. Reformers believed that as cities grew, the countryside stagnated, and they planned to solve that problem by implementing scientific agricultural education into rural schools to revitalize and modernize the farming population. This attempt to overhaul the rural education system, which had stood without change for decades, prompted outcry and resistance from much of the rural population, but in places where educators and rural communities worked together to implement a moderate amount of agricultural education into schools, agricultural education took root and flourished. Understanding that community involvement played such a huge role in the success of a program like the agricultural education movement helps historians of rural-urban interaction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries understand a relationship which, on the surface, seems inherently antagonistic. In many places, the rural-urban relationship involved condescension and stubbornness, arrogance and resistance, naiveté and dogged opposition. However, contrary to this characterization of that relationship, the rural population was surprisingly amenable to change when that change respected its traditional institutions and values. The success of community-oriented agricultural education programs, during a period when imposed secondary-level agricultural education everywhere else met with resistance, demonstrates that the “backward” interpretation of the rural community in the early 20th century may not be completely accurate. The rural population, stubborn as it was, could still embrace change when reformers respected the basic institutions of rural life.

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