

Romance of a Book Farmer

By Herbert Quick in The Saturday Evening Post

Real book farmers are pretty scarce—and most of them are spurious. The county agent here says to the neighbors that I, Abner Dunham, am the worst mossback in the neighborhood; and proves it, not by that old story of my putting a whip socket on my automobile, but by what he calls my sneering remarks about book farming. Now I hold that you can no more learn to farm out of a book than you can learn to swim, or play baseball, or cut hair in the same way. Doctor Spillman's bulletin on the farming of Chester County, Pennsylvania, admits that the farmers who are guided by the general experience of the farming business in their neighborhoods, rather than by theory, constantly tend to make their methods what they ought to be—or they go broke. And that proves my case. If the scientists and theorists ever come to know all the facts and principles of farming well enough to enable them to formulate designs for correct practices, I suppose they will be able to tell us in books just how to farm.

The only man we've had in the Fairview neighborhood to carry book farming thru as a life work is Jeff Sharpe. To be sure we have had our share of back-to-the-landers who thought they could read their way to successful agriculture, and of visionary people who thought the rest of us fools; and themselves proceeded to fool their farms away by doing everything differently. But it wouldn't be fair to charge such cases to book farming, because, in all probability, they would have failed if they had gone into any other business. Jeff Sharpe, however, is an example of the man who gave book farming a perfectly fair chance to succeed.

His full name is Oliver Geoffrey Sharpe, and when he came to the Pup Farm he signed it O. Geoffrey Sharpe. Everybody calls him Jeff now, however, which shows how civilized he has become. Of course in the meetings of our Co-operative Grain Dealers' Association, the wags who deal in lumber and moldings have nicknamed him Ogee Sharpe; but his sobriquet at the Ridgeway Pup Farm was Becky Sharpe, as a matter of course, as soon as he made his appearance there.

My little granddaughter Marion says that Jeff's story is a wonderful romance, and she hopes to put it in a play sometime. This brings up the question: Can there be such a thing as romance in the Corn Belt? Marion says it is full of romance; but she is now in the midst of her own first adventure in the realms of faerie—you know, young Clyde Bohn. I have seen the Corn Belt before it received that name, when the very spirit of mystery and promise blew over it—and those things, I have always supposed, are in themselves unwritten romance. I shall never see its like again. Nobody will ever see its like again.

Corn Belt Romance

I have seen it when the far-off shoulders of its low hills were blue with violets, or when anemones were pushing their woolly heads up thru the gray grasses under gray skies; seen it as an ocean whose swells were hills and whose ripples were the shadows on crinkling grasses, spreading away as far as the eye could see, unmarred by homestead or track. I have lived with the wild fowl, now gone, the wolves, the gophers, and badgers; seen the clouds flying over this wonderful prairie, each followed over the knolls by its double in shadow; watched the tornado go ravaging over the land seeking prey where none was found; breasted the blizzards; heard the prairie brooks as they rippled out of the patchy snows, in the spring sunlight, down to the swales and off with the roaring creeks to

An ex-English army officer has established a farm to teach American agriculture to young Britons. Jeff Sharpe, the son of a well-to-do English family, is sent out to this "Pup" farm. He fails, but meets a practical American girl, whom he later marries. He buys a big farm and settles down to dig everything possible out of agricultural books and journals and to make it go. How he used this information that so many despise is most interesting and instructive. It is a charming story full of humor, intensely interesting and pregnant with practical ideas.

the river—and then I have seen the black-burnt sod shimmer into the delicate green of April, to pass thru every shade of pink, yellow, gold, gray and brown, until the tumbleweeds chased each other from hillock to hollow in the autumn, like stampeded brown sheep. I would give anything to see it again; but I never can, for the world does not hold its like.

I have seen all this green sod broken by the plow; and where I saw a desert I now see a teeming empire of men and women, the best, I am persuaded, in America. All in my life. Perhaps there is no romance in that, but there is something mighty. I have read a book called "A Foreign Tour at Home," by a New Englander, who not many years ago for the first time went across the continent to California, and could see nothing but what seemed to him rather squalid and dismal in the Corn Belt. He didn't like our endless succession of farms, each with a house of no particular style of architecture and towerlike silos and big red barns. The roads were not good, they were all distinctly straight, and ran north and south, or east and west. The whole country seemed unkempt to him—not realizing how much there is of it to be kempt and how few people there are a square mile to kempt it. To him there was no romance or beauty in the groves we planted in the prairie, and which now stand tall and green about the farmsteads; nor in the long rows of waving corn, nor in the herds of sleek cows and the feed yards peopled with fat steers, dividing their time between alfalfa in the racks and corn in the troughs, with an occasional nibble at the lush blue grass in the pastures. Well; maybe there isn't any beauty in it, but it looks good to us. I honestly believe that this New Englander, who is a literary man, was repelled from the Corn Belt's beauties because of the straight lines, the absence of great areas wasted in the grounds of gentlemen—in short, because it didn't look like England. We get most of our literary farming from British writers.

And in that opinion Mr. O. Geoffrey Sharpe would have agreed when he arrived at the Pup Farm. He was twenty-five or so, and had been shipped over from that same England by a family who couldn't for their lives find a place for him there. If we are to understand young Sharpe we must know what the Pup Farm was—and, in my opinion, a real writer could make more of a story of that than of Jeff's career. If Dickens of his Dotheboys Hall and its Mr. Squeers made immortal literature, I should think a writer who knew his business could do as well with Major Ridgeway and his Pup Farm—even if it was in the Corn Belt.

Major Ridgeway was an Englishman who came in about the time of the German invasion in the Mid-West, bought a goodish tract of land in the western part of Wheeler's Crossroads District, and went into farming. He built a house on the plan, I am told, of an English country home, the probably not so fine; but it was a good deal too much house for the farm. It made the overhead too big for profits. The major was a pompous, red-whiskered, topsey chap who came over the sea expecting to found an estate, a family line, and all the rest of it on the European plan. A considerable number of men did the same thing in the sixties. I can recall now the cases of Doctor Knopf, a German professor; Conrad Schwagermann, a German landowner; Thomas O'Hara, an Irish squire; and a Frenchman named Fournier, who came from France to Quebec and then to this country. They all failed, because land was plenty and Americans would not work for these gentry for less than they could earn working for themselves; and if the gentry paid the scale, they could, as a matter of course, make no profits, since, when a man gets all he makes, there is nothing left for his employer.

Major Ridgeway's Pup Farm

In the same wave of immigration there came thousands of poverty-stricken peasants who succeeded where the men with capital and aristocratic notions almost always failed. The reason is perfectly obvious. The only way to succeed was to produce, and the only way to produce was to work; gentlemen could not work, while peasants could and would. Major Ridgeway occupied himself for several years in finding out that for some reason he was gradually sliding downhill into bankruptcy by the operation of a farm of the richest land on earth; and in looking out for a remedy he hit upon the idea of establishing a school in which young Britons might learn American agriculture and thus avoid the failure which, it was beginning to be suspected, was likely to overtake the nonworking landowner on the cheap lands of the United States.

This school was the Pup Farm. Of course that was not its correct name, but we never thought of calling it by any other. I happen to know how the name originated, because I remember when the old major established kennels of various kinds of dogs and tried to sell their progeny. Naturally, a simple people, who called a farm from which pigs were sold a hog farm, called Major Ridgeway's estate a Pup Farm; but, after he had restocked it with scions of British gentility, the name stuck, and I believe had something to do with the more or less well-founded popular notion that these young men each represented a skeleton in the closet of a rich and possibly titled British family. So, you see, we despised Ridgeway's Pup; and they certainly looked down on us, whether they did us the honor of concerning themselves so far as to despise us or not. And Jeff Sharpe was one of Ridgeway's Pup.

Alice Bailey, a niece of mine, was a country school teacher in those days, and was keeping the Wheeler's Crossroads School. The Ridgeway farm and a school section were in that district, and neither of these was the home of children, so her school was small—only half a dozen pupils, and often none at all. In going to and from school she followed a road which ran over the prairie in those curves which our aesthetic Eastern critics so much miss; but Ridgeway had begun to break the prairie and was trying to make teams follow the section

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GENERAL LETCHITSKY
The master of Cornucopia



VICE-ADMIRAL KANIN
Commanding Russia's Baltic Fleet



M. VENIZELIS
Greece's real but neglected leader



M. SKOULOUDIS
The master Greek premier



THE LATE F.M. VON MOLTKE
The man who planned the war
Courtesy of The Graphic, London, Eng.