

Rural Reconstruction

By Irene Parlyb, President of the United Farm Women of Alberta

DO you ever think how different our rural life might have been if we had had sane building from the first gradual carefully selected settlement radiating out from the trunk lines of communication, constructing its branch lines, and its roads as it slowly spread out, taking its well built schools and hospitals with it, educating its people as they came in to the highest ideals of honest and efficient local self government, using the vast sums spent on immigration machinery in consolidating and preserving the lives of those settlers who came to us of their own free will, knowing the worth of the country, its conditions and how to meet them, not



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needing the enticements of immigration agents and their highly colored propaganda? Do you ever think over the sins of commission and omission of our various governments in the past? How badly they erred in allowing those men away in the market places of the world to grab with their greedy hands vast areas of our best lines of communication, and so driving settlement into land lying along the far off regions of the province, where no help could reach its people, where doctors, and nurses and teachers did not want to go? How with senseless folly they allowed competing railway systems to build in some districts closely parallel lines, and left other large tracts of country entirely non-served. As you travel much around the country does it not strike you in a forcible way, how these great public utilities, the railways, might have been made to serve the people, to a far greater extent, if they had been mapped out with a single eye to the best interests of the people who wanted channels of transportation and distribution by the government of that people, instead of by various corporations with increasing dividends as their prime object.

Then again the stupidity of allowing people to settle in waterless wastes, of saying to them, "You have Canadian air to breathe, Canadian soil at your feet, Canadian skies above your heads, go to and make a living as best you can!" Can people exist, let alone live on some kind of a crop once in every few years?

Some of the rural people have been puzzling over these things for some years; while they plowed their deep furrows, their minds were busy. Some went on working in a dull unintelligent kind of way, but some began to study their environment, to enquire in to conditions political and economic. The trail was a difficult one, camouflage, and every kind of deception baffled them in their search for truth, but like good hounds the scent once found these people went forward in the chase.

In days of old men wrote pen pictures of the utopias they saw in their dreams, our thinking rural people saw that here in these Western provinces not many decades ago men had the opportunity to build a modern utopia in very reality had the governments chosen the better way. A new country with fertile soil for hundreds of square miles, vast resources of timber and minerals, wonderful water power, seemingly inexhaustible supplies of coal—all this lying like a clean slate to be written on as the government of the country willed.

That we had no genius to write the story on that clean page, is our misfortune, that it should have been written by what the literary world calls "pot boilers" is perhaps partly our own fault—we were too supine, too careless into what hands we allowed this power to drift and on our own heads lies the burden. To-day some among us realise

to the full that all these bad things have been done, that it is difficult almost impossible to undo them, and that the question which lies before us at the present time is how to reconstruct a really worth while rural life on the top of this badly built foundation.

Before we can reconstruct, we must however clear away, we must take to pieces the old building, putting aside for future use such parts as are sound and good, but discarding all that is rotten or unsound. Then we must gather together our best builders, and each individual of us with patient endeavour must co-operate with those builders, carrying the stone, placing the mortar, carefully, unselfishly giving of our best to construct an edifice that will stand four square to the buffeting of time.

We need spiritual building as well as material; when you gaze at the exquisite workmanship of the ancient churches and cathedrals of the old world, you see the soul of the craftsman shining through his handiwork. Material thought and hands alone could not have designed and wrought those wonderful temples for an age old faith.

What we need to do to-day is to survey the whole field of our rural life, discover what is wrong, what is good, what should be retained in our reconstruction scheme, what discarded.

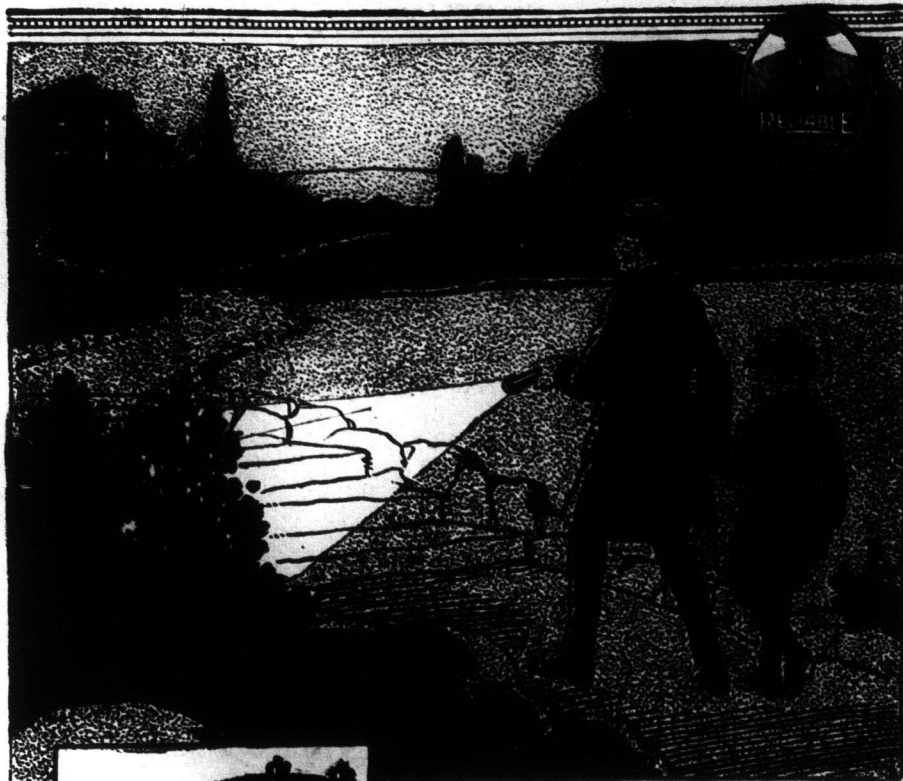
We have to endeavour to educate the public to the real conditions on the farms; to remove the feeling one meets so often in the cities of almost jealousy of the supposed extraordinary wealth and prosperity of the farm people.

Our daily press it seems is almost past praying for, it is the property of various propagandists and truth no longer shines from its pages; part of this propaganda seems to have been instituted to show the farmer to the world as a heartless profiteer, as rolling in the laps of luxury, spending his summers touring the country in luxurious automobiles, and his winters in sunny climes far from the rigours of our western prairies. A certain amount of this propaganda has been driven home so well that it has stuck in the minds of those ignorant of real conditions.

The other side of the picture is hidden; the war was not necessary to teach us the value of camouflage. But those of us who know see that other picture, whole districts where people have been hard put to it to buy food and clothes to get through this last winter, who must have seed given them to put into the ground next spring or starve; people whose condition is so desperate in their waterless waste that neither banks nor loan companies dare help them. Their condition of course if described in the press would be a poor advertisement for our country, it might do something to retard another boom period which our monied interests are looking to, and being an efficient business people we all join hands with the governments and the Canadian Manufacturers Association in propagating a "Campaign of Optimism."

One of the foundation stones of our reconstruction work must be the substitution of truth for propaganda. Those of us who know reality, who look truth squarely in the face, who have battled with conditions, fought against the elemental forces of Nature, hail and drought, frost and tempest, who have seen the hard penurious days, the unpaid slave labour of so many farm women and children, cry "Halt!" to a policy which proposes to place our soldiers on the soil with a millstone of debt around their necks, and a ton weight of taxation for the purpose of bonusing our manufacturing industries on their heads; a policy which gives these men this load to carry with a paternal government blessing as disguise, and tells them to "go to, quit themselves like men and make a living!"

If our rural life cannot be reconstructed these men have no bright prospect before them, for the future does not look too rosy for even the unencumbered agricultural people.



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