

The Need for Community Social Centres

And the Steps Being Taken to Establish Them in Ontario—An Interview With A. McLaren

A COMPARATIVELY new feature of the summer work at the Ontario Agricultural College is the School of Rural Leadership recently in session. This school was organized a couple of years ago with Mr. Y.M.C.A. as director. At the close of last year's session those in attendance, mostly rural ministers and rural work, formally expressed their interest in the permanent advancement of rural social standards. In the early part of this summer, four local conventions were held under the auspices of the new provincial organization. At the Alvinston convention, in Lambton county, 1,750 people were in attendance; at Whitby, in Ontario county, 450 people; at Russell in Renfrew county, 1,250 people; and at Otterville, in Oxford county, 2,100 people.

"These local conventions are an extension of the summer school idea," explained Mr. McLaren, "and then an editor of Farm and Dairy met for a chat at the College Y.M.C.A. headquarters." "We can't expect a great many people who are interested in rural work to come to our summer school here for 10 or 12 days. We are going to take the summer school to the people. We plan eventually for 12 of these local conventions, which will cover all Ontario so thoroughly that no one need go more than 50 miles from home to take one in. Their special object this summer was to people the community idea and get people together, discussing community needs and methods of attacking them, and to emphasize all round community life—home, church, school and business organizations. It was our special hope that the meetings this year would lead to the formation of a community social centre at each gathering place. In these social centres people would meet together to discuss anything and everything with no restrictions. Really there is only one place where we see an immediate opening for the formation of a social centre at Otterville, they have a committee working on the problem."

A Meeting Place the Starting Point. "The starting point for all rural work is such a community social centre where people are free to get together," continued Mr. McLaren. "If you have a bunch of people widely distributed and with ideas that differ, progress will be made. It is when people get together and crystallize their varying ideas that they begin to work. The first requirement is a place to get together."

"What part do you consider the government or its officials should play in the community life movement," we asked. "My idea is that it is the government's part to guide and investigate," replied Mr. McLaren. "For instance, the paid government official has the time and the means to investigate a particular good position to give advice to local committees. I would emphasize, however, that the government's capacity in the movement must be purely an advisory one. He must exercise no controlling influence. In mapping out courses of study too, the government should be prepared to furnish literature, as, for instance, when an economic subject is under discussion all of the best literature dealing with that subject should be made available."

Mr. McLaren then took a long look into the future and sketched his ideals for the development of the rural social centre movement. "I would like to see eventually a provincial convention with each of the rural social centres represented," said he. "At such a convention we could get together the best speakers in America who were specially qualified to deal with such subjects as we would discuss. At this convention would be represented also other farmers' organizations. For instance the United Farmers of Ontario. After a leading speaker had given his views on any one subject the various organizations represented in the convention could then meet in separate committees to embody in resolution in form their views on the subject which had been discussed. The various committees would then come together again to present their views and debate the subject. If the various elements in the convention could come to a point of agreement they could then embody their conclusions in a resolution that would attract national attention and influence legislation. My idea is that all rural organizations requesting representation in such a convention could have it. Such a convention, too, would give the farmers' aims and objects and their ideas a great deal of publicity in the city press, which would tend to prevent misunderstanding between city and country people. I also have in mind that there is a place for a school, privately conducted, where instruction could be given on rural subjects, the central course being on rural economics and sociology."

Too Much Organization?

"Is there not a danger of too much organizations?" we asked. "I grant you there are too many organizations now," said Mr. McLaren, "but they are not reaching or benefiting the farmers. In our survey in township, we found that there were 40 different organizations in the township but there was only one farmer in the township who was a member of a farmers' club and one member of the U.F.O. Of the 40 organizations, only one was really for the benefit of the women. Most of the organizations were fraternal and church societies, all springing from a desire for social community life. The social centre would be a meeting place for all organizations and managed by a committee from all."

"In my ideal community centre," concluded Mr. McLaren, "there would be a big meeting every quarter, one organization being responsible for the program for one night. In these four quarterly meetings the program would cover all aspects of community work. Then the farmers' club would hold its weekly or monthly meetings, the other organizations would hold their meetings and of course there would be a literary or debating society, meeting every week."

Mr. McLaren's views are in agreement with the views of all others who are interested in improving the farmers' position, economic and otherwise, to at least this extent—that nothing can be done until rural people are induced to get together and talk over their problems.

"Common Diseases of the Digestive Organs of Horses and Cattle," is the most recent bulletin from the Ontario Agricultural College. Its author is Dr. J. Hugo Reed, Professor of Veterinary Science at the college, from first to last it is a simple, understandable exposition of the symptoms and treatment of the digestive disorders which, at some time or other, are a problem to all stockmen. Some common-sense observations are made on feed and care, which are preventative of digestive trouble. This 40 page bulletin may be had on application to the Department of Agriculture, Toronto, Ont.

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