

The Back-to-the-Lander

A Discussion of a vital problem rapidly becoming more serious as the war nears the end

By Peter McArthur

DEAR Mitchell: Your letter was the biggest surprise I have had since the cow bit me. It was just as unexpected and seemed every bit as unnatural. Of all my old friends you are the last I should have thought of as a back-to-the-lander. You are a city man by birth and training and I simply can't imagine you in farm surroundings. I can't imagine you cleaning out the cow stables or spending a rainy afternoon patching bags and mending harness. I associate you with Big Business, luxurious clubs and first nights at the opera.

Yet that is hardly fair. I have every reason to know that you are broad-minded and public spirited. This makes your decision to buy a farm and work your own land seem imperative. If your analysis of the situation makes it seem imperative that you should undertake the work of food production the outlook must be as serious as I have long thought it to be. For this reason I shall try to answer your various questions as seriously as possible—if you will pardon an occasional outburst of frivolity, due to our associations in happier times. Like Justice Shallow with Falstaff, I have "heard the chimes at midnight" with you in the big cities, but if you are now interested in "land and beebes" I must give you the best information I can command. As you say, I have been through the back-to-the-land movement from Broadway and The Strand to lot seventeen, first connection, Alfalfa township. I should know something about it—though what I know may not be very valuable to anyone but myself. However, I shall do the best I can.

The Will to Produce

First let me deal with your own personal problem. You are about the only type of city man who can undertake the work of production at the present time in a helpful way. You have capital and the will to produce. If you use your customary good sense and do not try to do the actual work of farming yourself there is no reason why you should not make a satisfactory addition to the world's food supply. But if you want to help in a practical way without losing money it will be necessary for you to avoid the many pitfalls that beset the rich man who undertakes to run a farm. Therefore, listen and perpend.

When you finally decide to make a start at farming it will be advisable for you to "first catch your farmer." Farmers no longer go with the land as they did in the brave days when Horatius Flaccus set the simple life to rag-time or when Marcus Cato was president of the Grain Growers in ancient Rome. In those times a farmer—that is, a farm laborer—was part of the livestock and men who posed as real farmers were land-owners and slave-owners who were handier with a blacksnake whip than with any other agricultural implement. While their poems and bulletins on farming make good classical reading and parse beautifully, they are hardly a safe guide for a man who feels that it is his duty to go in for greater production in this time of need.

When I remarked above that you must first catch your farmer, I meant it. No matter how willing you may be to milk the cow with the crumpled horn she would undoubtedly give you what parliamentarians call a "six month's hoist" the first time you smuggled down beside her and tried to arouse her maternal instincts. She wouldn't "give down" for you. Similarly with the horses. I doubt if they would haw or gee for you in an intelligible manner and I doubt if you could unharness them without unbuckling every strap and hanging it up separately. But the cities are full of excellent farmers who have gone wrong. They were attracted by the lure of the cities and left the one occupation for which they were fitted to seek their fortunes in the streets. They are pining to get back to the land, but they have wasted their substance and have no capital with which to make a start. I know that these people exist, for scores of them

have written to me during the past few years. I also know some who got the necessary backing and promptly made good on the land. They are not scientific farmers of the kind that the average back-to-the-lander reaches for, but they have had farm experience and can "reason with an impenitent mule" in words of one syllable that he will understand. They have had their lease in the city and are willing to work hard to get established on the land again with their families. If you advertise for a man of this kind your greatest difficulty will be to make a wise choice from the many who will apply.

The Right Kind of Partner

Get an able-bodied man of good character who is sincere in his wish to make a home for himself in the country. Make a partnership agreement with him by which he can gradually buy out your share. This will make it a matter of personal interest to him not to get you too deeply implicated. It will be all very well for you to consult an expert about buying a good farm, but if your partner is a sensible man he will be your best advisor about the stock and equipment you will need. As he will have half the price charged against his share of the earnings he will be careful. He will need a good team and all the common implements, but if he is the right kind of man he will be ready to contribute the necessary amount of muscle and industry to make the venture successful, without buying all the expensive labor-saving devices on

the market. Most of the rich men who undertake farming invest so heavily in equipment they fasten an overhead charge on the venture that makes it impossible to farm except at a loss. I have known a well-meaning man to fasten an overhead charge of \$2,000 a year for interest alone on a farm of one hundred acres. Such men measure their success by the smallness of their losses rather than by the size of their profits. One of them once exclaimed to me exultingly: "Why, I lost only \$800 last year!" Men of this kind have beautiful farms, equipped to the minute, but they need as good a bank account as if they were keeping a yacht in commission. Notwithstanding this, I have known city men to invest so wisely that they got a return on their money that would be considered satisfactory in a manufacturing business. At the same time their farming partner prospered and gained a foothold on the land. As you might imagine, "horse sense" is especially useful in farming. At the present moment I can give you instances of city men who have invested money in farming and are producing food each year that will feed hundreds of people, and they are doing it at a profit. They contributed capital and business ability while their partners contributed hard labor, thrift and industry. In my opinion, it is only by forming a partnership of this kind that a city man without experience can get back to the land if he wants to make his home in the country, or if he wishes to do his duty in the way of food production at the present time.

There are exceptional cases where city-born men have become good practical farmers, but in order to succeed on the land a man should really be born there and become accustomed to the farm routine as a boy.

Work of Two Generations

It really takes two generations to get people back to the land. Even in the pioneer days the older people who came to the country seldom made good farmers, but if they had families the boys quickly became accustomed to farm work and methods. In many cases the fathers and mothers suffered every hardship while trying to establish homes, but their children took hold in the right way and prospered.

When you ask if I think there is any hope that people in any large number will return to the land you raise what is, perhaps, the most troublesome problem of the immediate future. About the gravest problem that confronts humanity at the present time is the need of increased food production. Even before the outbreak of the war the depopulation of the rural districts was causing alarm and the war has made a bad case infinitely worse. Even when peace comes it is not at all likely that many of the released soldiers will go to the land. Those who have been studying this problem report that it is doubtful if even the soldiers who have been drawn from the farms will return to the land. When men leave the fields for any purpose it seems hard to get them back. They taste the adventure and more exciting life of the cities and cannot endure the quiet routine of the farms. The soldiers will find it hard to settle down to that lonely life after the excitement and companionship of the camps. So I am compelled to say in reply to your question that I do not think there is any immediate hope of an important movement of the people back to the land at the present time. In the first place the people do not want to go back to the land, and, in the second place, they couldn't go if they wanted to. There are always exceptions, of course. I know that many city men of country birth who have failed to establish homes for themselves in the city would be glad to go back to the land if some capitalist would help them to get started on a business basis. In the present crisis steps should be taken either by the government or by patriotic business men to see that all men of this kind are enabled to get back to the land where they can aid in the work of production. They can be used effectively and can do much to relieve the situation. They are the only men who are really anxious to go back to the land.

Force Necessary

The attitude of the mass of city laboring men is voiced by a remark made by one of our best-known labor leaders. He said:—

"City laborers will not go back to the land unless they are forced."

Naturally the only force that can be brought to bear on them would be economic pressure. An attempt to conscript them for the work would arouse instant opposition. Only the grim realization that food for themselves and their families is the most important thing in the world will drive city laborers to the land. The laboring men will not make the change while there is anything left for them to cling to in the cities.

But if poverty forced the city laboring men back to the land they would not have the necessary money to get started. They would be forced to work as day laborers and if they went in any numbers farm wages would go down so that they could hardly make livings for themselves and their families. If we reach a point where people are forced to go back to the land the problem of private ownership will at once become acute. As such a point would not be reached without an industrial collapse that would deprive labor of the means of subsistence in the cities, it is obvious that no back-to-the-land



"The task of making the world safe for Democracy will almost inevitably settle down to the prosy business of seeing that Democracy gets three square meals a day."

Continued on Page 10