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The Farm Page

Rural Life in Alberta

By MRS. LEONA B. BARRITT

Being an address delivered at the convention of the Social Service Council in Edmonton.

(Continued from Last Week)

In Alberta, during the same period, the urban growth had been to the rural roundly as 7 to 4. Now what does this mean? Briefly this—city congestion, less production, higher cost of living, more unemployment. In other words we are adding that much more to the already difficult problem of the city. Should not the rural problem then be a real concern of city dwellers and of the nation at large and not merely a matter of ready-made prescription growing out of the sheerest ignorance and presumption, as it so often is—but one for earnest investigation and co-operation? There are other reasons also why it is to the National interest to preserve a strong rural life. We are told that from the 5% of our rural boys—the girls are only beginning to be a factor—who got a high school education, comes the amazingly large percentage of the nation's successful business and professional men. Further I read that families of city dwellers die out in three generations if the stock is not replenished with fresh blood from the country. When God created man He placed him in a garden to dress and to keep it, and to have dominion over the beasts of the field, and God walked with man in the cool of the day. In the evolution of our civilization, such as it is, cities became necessary—but for the very selfish reasons I have mentioned, if no others, it is a matter of vital concern to the cities and the nation at large that a strong rural life should be built up.

Factors That Militate Against Rural Life.

Now what are the factors that militate against rural life? There are four—the economic, the educational, the social and the religious. To the first I shall refer very briefly. Along with Labor the farmer has been the underdog. He has been the victim of exploi-

tation by elevator companies, packers, machine companies, wholesalers and retailers; and he has been discriminated against by legislation directed by the big interests. In a state of society in which the motto is "Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost," the farmer and laborer happened to be the hindmost, and the inevitable happened. Farm men and women, farm boys and girls were slaves. Naturally people of any spirit will not tolerate such conditions for their children, even if they must endure them for themselves—and the drift cityward began, sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse. Today we think we see the dawn of a better day breaking. Our motto as organized peoples was "Organization, Education, Co-operation." When we found that those by themselves were not sufficient we added a new word, "Legislation—and we precipitated a landslide that left us breathless. All that we ask is a fair field and no favors, in spite of the newspapers. Real democracy is on trial in a Labor-Farmer government; and if any man or body of men in Canada should have the prayers of a righteous people for guidance and wisdom it is Mr. Drury and his colleagues in Ontario, and our farmer and labor representatives in the Federal parliament. Just here let me state that I would rather belong to the United Farm Women of Alberta, or its sister organizations in the other provinces, or to a Labor Union than to any other women's organization in Canada, if these were mutually exclusive; for these first have their roots in economics, and we are building from the base upwards, instead of from the top downwards.

The Educational Factor.

Closely allied with the economic problem and perhaps if anything a stronger factor is that of education. The minister of education not long since made

this statement: "The greatest problem we face in the Province of Alberta is that of education, and that of rural schools is the greatest in the Province." We have the short term school, the permit teacher, too frequent change of teachers even with good salaries, and too many immature teachers. The rural school is looked upon as the training camp for the city school, where logically it should be just the opposite—for the one-room rural school is much the more difficult proposition, both from the number of grades and the practical absence of any supervision. Moreover it seems to be a weakness of inspectors that when they find a teacher of exceptional ability they immediately try to place him or her in a town or city. One such gentleman of my acquaintance gave himself away. The teacher in question was reluctant to leave the district for an opening in Edmonton, and in disgust he said to her "If you stay here you will marry a farmer." For rural schools we need rural-minded inspectors, trained to a proper appreciation of rural life—but heaven help us, when and where are they to be found? 95% of all rural children get all their education in the public school. It would be interesting to know just what percentage of these young Canadians reach Grade VIII, but I'll hazard a guess that less than 10% ever pass the public school leaving examination. In Alberta I understand that it is something like 7%, while approximately 2% take High School work, and 1% university. And rural boys are not the only sufferers. A survey made in Edmonton this year revealed the fact that most of the boys leave school at Grade VIII, and if this is true of Edmonton, it is liable to be true of Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Wetaskiwin and other towns and cities.

That being true, should not the school course be made as complete as possible? But you say is it not? I say no, it is not. That public school curriculum is based on the assumption that those taking it will continue through High School and college—in other words, it is framed for the 3% to 10% instead of the 95% to 99%.

Let me read to you a word or two of criticism of Canadians taken from the New Statesman, London. "He (the

Canadian) has ceased to believe in anything except sound horse sense. He will have lots of intelligence, that small boy, when he grows up—oh lots and lots of it. He will be able to groom a fact with any man. But attempt to indi-

cate to him that beyond facts lies something else; hint to him (if you can) that while a fact is just a fact and nothing more, the something else may be everything there is—and then, as you small boy himself would say, 'You are up against it good and solid.' You well talk to a blind man about color or to a stone-deaf woman about sound as talk to your Canadian of an idea. If you live in Canada, and have an idea that you can't turn into its own weight in dollar bills—be careful. The whole point about Canada is that there aren't more things than are dreamt of in her philosophy. Her philosophy is 'sound horse sense; and that you can't get past.'

Do you wonder at that criticism? How can you expect him to know anything of the something else that may be everything there is, when he has never been introduced to the wonders of his own body and brain even—and there is more than 90% of him. Wouldn't you expect him to laugh at the idea of the music of the spheres when he has never heard of either or atmosphere, vibrations or their interpretation in his own brain as sound, light and color; when he never saw the smallest experiment in electrification, much less led to wonder at the mystery of the telegraph and telephone; when the marvellous power of mind, whatever that is, over matter, almost equally mysterious, has been taboo. Eyes has he, but he sees not, ears has he but he hears not, and a brain has he but he perceives not, nor wonders not. What to him are Plato and the swing of the Pleiades, what the long reaches of the gulfs of song, the rift of dawn, the redrawing of the rose, when the book of nature interpreted by science has never been opened to him nor the aesthetic cultivated in him? And stolid and stunned to ideas he will remain just so long as our school course is what it is.

But, you say, we must see to it that a larger number get High school education. Exactly. And if an investigation were made, I believe this would be found the chief reason for city drift and absentee landlordism. Because of our poor schools, and especially the difficulty of getting a High school education, which necessitates the rural child leaving home at the very time when it is most necessary that he or she should be under parental or other good supervision, parents sell or rent their farms and move to town. And generally speaking, those boys and girls who go to the towns and cities for an education are lost to rural life forever.

Let us look at that High school course. Now I know I am rushing in where angels might fear to tread—but what will the pupil have when he or she is through? The scholarship required for elementary school teaching, matriculation for the university, or the foundation necessary for the ordinary business course, and he will spend a lot of valuable time, and money as well, in acquiring knowledge that he will never have occasion to use—or at least the subjects are taught in such a manner that he would have to take another course before he could know how to apply that knowledge. Now that curriculum is the work of the professional educator. What does Industry and Agriculture say? A changed and revitalized School Course, strong schools, compulsory education to the age of 16, continuation part time education to the age of 18, in industry, government vocational schools where cultural as well as vocational work is given, and in agri-

culture, attendance at an agricultural school for those who intend to live on the land. But we are demanding a different kind of agricultural school from what we have at present, where students are scattered through a small town or village, often with very poor accommodation, and paying \$9 a week for room and board. We want residential schools, where pupils are under the supervision of strong, cultured men and women instructors, where there is student social life, and where board and room are supplied at cost. We believe that this sort of education would raise the standard of rural life in one generation to a degree only dimly realized by the most optimistic. Governments say the thing is a dream, a vision of idealists. Sympathetic educators say that owing to economic conditions three-fourths of the parents are obliged to take their children out of school before the age of 16 is reached, and that therefore our ideal is impossible of attainment. Industry and agriculture say that economic conditions must be so readjusted that these things shall be possible, and that it is their intention that the vision shall become a reality. May God speed the day that ushers in that new social order.

Of the social life as an attraction, I shall say only a few words in passing. It used to be said that the great majority of the inmates of Brandon asylum were the wives of farmers. Those of us who have experienced the deadly monotony of the life in those bad old days will not wonder at that. One great difference between a new country and an old is that in the older country the social machinery was running smoothly years before we were born. In a new country we have to create the machinery. It is a strange experience, and it takes stern stuff. There are good souls who live in the past and who consider life on the prairies a waste of existence. There are others of us who dry our eyes with the corners of our aprons, burn all our bridges behind us, and set to work to carve out a social life for ourselves and others with the same zeal that we fashion a home in the wilderness—and the home is the easier task. Farm women's clubs and the motor car have transformed the life of the rural woman as no other agency ever did, and today there is no excuse for stagnation. We owe a duty to our young people—and the rural woman who today sighs for the flesh pots of Egypt deserves our commiseration more than our sympathy. There will always be those who having no resources in themselves are attracted by the distractions that the city offers. They are no benefit to the country, and no acquisition to the city.

The Religious Factor.

When we come to the social life of our young people it is quite a different matter; and I shall deal with the church life under this head. When I was Secretary of the United Farm Women I sent out a questionnaire to the locals of the U.F.A. and U.F.W.A. in order to ascertain conditions as regards recreation, church attendance, Sunday school attendance, religious teaching in the home, and the views of the rural people as to how these conditions might be improved. To this questionnaire I received 142 replies, from Athabasca on the north to the southern boundary, and from Alaska on the Saskatchewan boundary to the C. & E. railway. Speaking generally the only recreation was dancing and pool playing in the village; 20% of the pastors mentioned had at-

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