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The Meredith Publications

It would have been a bit difficult to imagine that "Uncle Tommy" Meredith's wedding gift would result — a short quarter of a century later — in an Iowa publishing house whose publications travelled into every State of the Union, whose circulation totaled in the millions.

And it would have been just as difficult to believe that the nineteen-year-old newlywed — whose wedding "Uncle Tommy" commemorated with his rather remarkable gift — in the little more than half a century of life vouchsafed to him, would rise to become one of the nation's leaders in government, agriculture, and business.

It is rather necessary to tie together the publications and the life of Edwin Thomas Meredith from the time when, as a sixteen-year-old boy, he came to Des Moines to matriculate in Highland Park College, until the day of his death thirty-six years later. They are inseparably woven. Mr. Meredith, for all the time he spent in public life, was inseparably bound to the company he founded — to the publications he created, nursed, and brought to success.

Ed Meredith left his father's farm near Avoca, Iowa, when he had completed the work offered by the little one-room rural school. As a student at Highland Park College, he waited on tables for a time,

then started to work for his grandfather — well known in middle Iowa as “Uncle Tommy” Meredith — the violently partisan publisher of the *Farmers' Tribune*, a county farm paper whose purpose was to serve the cause of Populism.

The *Farmers' Tribune* was not what could be called a success. It could not even be called a business. It approximated charity, for “Uncle Tommy” had kept it alive for many a year by the simple expedient of adding, each year, to his capital investment. “Uncle Tommy” could afford to humor his hobbies: he was a well-to-do retired farmer.

In the *Tribune* plant, young Ed Meredith was general assistant to everybody. He helped in the print shop, helped in the composing room, helped in the office. He learned a great deal about a great many things associated with the workings of a publishing company. And before Ed had finished his first year at Highland Park College, “Uncle Tommy” asked him to spend all of his time on the *Tribune*. “Uncle Tommy” was getting old. Soon Ed was book-keeper, then he helped conduct the correspondence, then sold advertising.

When Ed was nineteen, he married, and “Uncle Tommy” gave to the newlyweds this dying paper, the *Farmers' Tribune*. Ed Meredith and his wife had no capital, no resources — nothing but an unquestionable belief in Ed Meredith's ability, a tremendous amount of enthusiasm, and the swift energy that translated vision into actuality.

Ed told his mother that the days were gone in which the *Farmers' Tribune* had been a county farm paper, that he proposed sending a sample copy of it to every farmer in the State of Iowa. His mother thought her son was crazy. But the champion of Populism was turned into a non-partisan farm paper, with a circulation State-wide in extent. In a small way, the *Farmers' Tribune* became a paying proposition during the years following 1896. Meanwhile Ed Meredith had visions of a greater farm paper — a publication whose influence would extend beyond the boundaries of a single State. He was even then turning over in his mind the idea upon which *Successful Farming* was founded.

An important element in Meredith's genius as a publisher was his ability to sense what people of the upper Mississippi Valley wanted in a farm journal. He realized that American agriculture was not national in character, that soil and climatic conditions made various types of agricultural practice necessary in different sections of the country. He saw the farmers of the South growing cotton and tobacco, he recognized that on the Pacific coast an orchard type of agriculture was rapidly developing. Different from both of these was the dairy and truck farming of the East. And still different was the diversified farming of the Middle West where corn and small grains were grown and fed to cattle, hogs, and sheep. The farm magazine which concentrated its editorial comment on the problems of one type of

agriculture ought to be most successful, and of all regions the Middle West seemed to hold the best promise for that kind of journalism.

Such were the ideas upon which *Successful Farming* was founded in 1902. All of the editorial space was devoted to the problems of the diversified type of agriculture as practiced in the Ohio, upper Mississippi, and Missouri river valleys, and to the problems of the midwestern farm home. Mr. Meredith had recognized that there could be no separation of the farm home and the farm business. Agriculture is a mode of living.

“Herewith we present our readers with the first copy of *Successful Farming*”, wrote the editor in the introductory paragraph of Volume I, Number 1. “There is plenty of room for a live, up-to-date farm paper whose object is the discussion of farm matters employed in making farming a success. We intend to live up to the title of our paper by sending to our readers each month such information as will be helpful to them in carrying on the many duties, on the farm and about the home. We want our paper to stand for successful farming in the truest sense of the word and shall strive in the different departments to discuss in a concise and practical manner the various subjects under consideration. Discussions, inquiries and contributions are solicited. In this way we can get acquainted with our readers and better see their needs.”

Friendly, practical, concise *Successful Farming*

was launched in the spirit of helpfulness. The *Farmers' Tribune* was sold two years later, so that Mr. Meredith could devote all of his time to the publication of his own creation.

In a period when "truth in advertising" was not generally emphasized by papers of this type, the editor of *Successful Farming* announced: "We believe that every advertisement in this paper is backed by a responsible person. But to make doubly sure, we will make good any loss to paid subscribers sustained by trusting any deliberate swindler advertising in our columns and any such swindler will be publicly exposed." That appeared at the top of the editorial column of the first number. Not long afterward, the guarantee was made even more positive: "If you purchase any article advertised in SUCCESSFUL FARMING, whether you buy it of the local dealer or directly from the advertiser, and it is not as represented in the advertisement, we guarantee that your money will be returned to you."

Paid advertising was not accepted in *Successful Farming* until the paper had a circulation of 100,000 — a circulation large enough to command an advertising rate of fifty cents the agate line, seven dollars the inch. Tobacco and liquor advertisements were refused, as they had been by the *Farmers' Tribune*, and Mr. Meredith was in the van of those who fought the bad advertising practices of the cure-all nostrum makers. He refused to carry their advertising in the columns of his papers.



FROM A PAINTING BY R. W. GRAFTON

EDWIN THOMAS MEREDITH

The policies adopted early in the life of *Successful Farming* are still part of the Meredith Publishing Company's book of rules. True it is that farming methods have changed — the tractor has come, the combine is cutting harvesting costs, automobiles and hard surfaced roads have linked the farmer and his family with the town — but the fundamental problems remain as they were thirty years ago. The size of the magazine has grown, the circulation has leaped, the advertising revenues have increased enormously, but the present policies still comply with the original declaration.

Not long after *Successful Farming* had proved to be successful Mr. Meredith began to plan a companion magazine that would serve the home lovers of town and city as *Successful Farming* served mid-western farmers. His object was to print a paper that would devote all of its editorial space to the multitude of problems that faced the home-maker. There were many magazines that helped the housewife, but husbands and fathers are just as interested in developing the home as are wives and mothers. Most home magazines serve equally well the wife that lives in an apartment and the one that lives in a house. His magazine would have a wider appeal. Home building articles would be practical for average people.

Ten years after the establishment of *Successful Farming*, a small advertisement appeared in that publication asking for subscriptions to a new maga-

zine. Circumstances interfered with the plans, the war came along, Mr. Meredith was drafted into the service of the national government, serving on the Board of Excess Profit Advisors, as a member of the Industrial Conference, and finally as Secretary of Agriculture in 1920 and 1921, so that it was not until the summer of 1922 that the first issue of *Fruit, Garden and Home* made its appearance. Two years later, the name was changed to *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Mr. Meredith and his associates aimed to develop a circulation totaling in the millions, but friends in the publishing business and in the advertising field frankly asserted that hopes were running away with judgment. For *Better Homes and Gardens* carried not one line of fiction, not one line of fashions. How could such a publication reach a circulation in the millions?

On January 1, 1926, *Successful Farming* passed the one million mark. For years, its advertising rate had been based on a circulation guarantee of 850,000. And it was just two years later that *Better Homes and Gardens* passed the one million mark. Here was a strange phenomenon in the publishing world—a magazine dealing with only one subject that grew in the course of six years to a circulation that exceeded a million. In 1929, the circulation guarantee was 1,150,000; in 1930 it was 1,375,000.

The fact that *Better Homes and Gardens* was a specialized magazine made its growth even more

unusual. Editorially, the magazine carried only stories of gardens, of home building, of interior decoration, child care and training, foods, and books. There was so very little that could attract the family that lived in the apartment — that could appeal to the single man or the single woman unless he and she were planning to be married very soon. For *Better Homes and Gardens* believes in the individual house for the American family, believes in the family community of interest. It is edited with the object of interesting every member of the family. Both *Successful Farming* and *Better Homes and Gardens* are crusading periodicals; not “crusading” in the common use of the word, but crusading in the fact that they have definite objectives which they keep constantly in view.

When Ed Meredith was a boy on the farm, he was given a pig — a pig so sickly and runty that there was no excuse for putting it into the feed lot. He bottle-fed the young porker, cared for it, fattened it, and grudgingly sold it. A small incident, a passing matter to the father, but an incident that later had a great influence on a national movement.

Successful Farming was concerned with the movement of farm-reared boys and girls to the city. It believed that no definite means were being widely promoted to interest the farm boy and girl in farm life. The sickly-pig episode of Mr. Meredith's boyhood remained in his mind, and years later gave impetus to what is now the national Boys and Girls

Club movement. A \$200,000 loan fund was established from which the farm boy or girl could borrow money to buy the pig, the calf, the seed, or whatever it was that interested him. The money from the loan fund enabled the farm boy to have property rights, to possess something of his own. *Successful Farming* asked only that the parents sign the note as evidence of their consent to the venture, that the county agent sign the note as evidence that the boy or girl was identified with the local Boys and Girls Club organization, and that one or two of the local business men sign the note as evidence that the money would be spent for the purpose for which it was intended. It was specifically stated in the note that no financial obligation was incurred by any of the signers except by the boy or the girl.

Within three months of the foundation of the loan fund, more than ten thousand separate negotiations had been started and most of them had been completed. Nor did the influence of the loan fund stop with those who borrowed from it. Hundreds of letters were received during the first three months alone, saying that because the parents or the local banker had seen the offer, the boy had been given his animal or had been permitted to borrow the money from the local bank.

Successful Farming felt, too, that rural education needed help. Country schools were teaching agriculture, though satisfactory textbooks were not available. Agricultural practice was changing too rapidly.

In this emergency a well qualified teacher was employed to prepare each month a series of lesson plans that would help rural school teachers. These lesson plans, based on *Successful Farming* as a textbook and printed in the form of a monthly magazine, "Rural Schools Bulletin", are mailed free to school teachers on request. Fifty thousand teachers, each year, avail themselves of this service.

Better Homes and Gardens recognized the necessity of interesting the younger generation in the home and the garden. In 1929 it started the establishment of Junior Garden Clubs of America — laid out the method of organization, the club work, and the club programs. Within a year, there were more than six hundred clubs with a membership of ten thousand. The Junior Garden Clubs have divisions that interest children four, five, and six years old as well as boys and girls fifteen and sixteen years of age. It has its publication, "The Junior Garden Club Supplement", its awards, its activities.

It was but twenty-eight years ago that the young Ed Meredith founded *Successful Farming*. It has been only eight years since the first issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* appeared. When E. T. Meredith died on June 17, 1928, his two publications had a combined circulation in excess of two and a half million. He had built in Iowa one of the largest, most respected publishing firms of the nation.

PETER AINSWORTH