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Some Recent Changes in Rural Living Which Have Psychological Implications *

By WILLIAM H. DREIER

Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America told the American Farm Bureau Federation in Chicago last December, "A few years ago our Department of Agriculture entitled its yearbook, 'Farmers in a Changing World.' That was a good title, but I think a better one would have been 'A World of Changing Farmers.'" As teachers and instructors of students from rural communities we are part of this world of changing farmers here in the United States.

Since the time and example of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, the best teachers have known about the environment in which they have worked and have used it in their teaching. Many changes in rural life are interesting from a psychological point of view as they influence the student and his learning.

The changes in rural life I will consider are those changes in the farm population and in rural community living which have some psychological implications.

Teachers and psychologists interested in the problem of preparing teachers for rural community schools are concerned about the children in the farm population. We recognize with Kolb and Brunner that "Children are most characteristic of rural families: in fact, they are the most distinguishing thing about rural society itself. The country produces children, the city consumes them. This is one of the fundamentals in rural-urban relationships. It is at the basis of rural to urban migration and its many attendant and necessary readjustments." (3, p. 210)

For as many years as records have been kept we have known that rural families, especially farm families, have been larger than urban families. The birth rate in the United States declined up to the time of World War II. In fact between 1920 and 1930 the birth rate in rural areas was decreasing faster than in urban areas. (4, p. 100) This may be explained by the major decline in the urban birthrate that came before 1910. Since World War II, however, both rural and urban birth rates have increased and reached a peak in 1947. The 1948 rates were still far above those of the 1930 decade. (7)

This increase in the number of children in the farm population

* This paper is written from material the author presented to a Rural Education discussion group of the A.A.C.T.E. meeting at Atlantic City on Feb. 25, 1950

during the last decade is well illustrated by figures from Orange Township, a rural farm community near Iowa State Teachers College. In 1915 a social survey of that township listed 211 children between the ages of 5 and 21 years. (9, p. 184) Last year the Black Hawk County Superintendent and Board of Education made a survey and reported 255 or an increase of 21 per cent in the number of school children between the ages of 5 and 21 years. (1)

That the country still produces the children which will populate the city may be further illustrated by computing the replacement rate for rural-farm males aged 25 to 69 years. This rate is computed by determining the number of rural farm males who can be expected to reach their 25th birthdays and the number between the ages of 25 and 70 that can be expected to die or to retire. This rate for the United States as a whole during the 1940 and 1950 decade was 167. (8)

The replacement rate gives an indication of the youth who could be spared from the rural-farm population — 67 for every 100 who replace older men. The rate was lowest in the Pacific Coast States, 123, and highest in the South Atlantic States, 192. It is important that teachers not only know that farming as an occupation has changed but they must also realize these changes which are taking place in the size and composition of the farm population.

Twenty and 30 years ago most educators and psychologists accepted the findings of mental and educational tests which rated farm children some distance below the average of children in general. Leaders in rural education and rural sociology could not accept the conclusion that farm children and farm people were an inferior mental group.

With the help of these criticisms, and with the advancement of measurement techniques and other psychological developments it can be stated in 1950 that there is evidence to show that farm children in general are like town and city children. Both will vary greatly from place to place and school to school. (2, p. 95)

It is recognized that most of the present day tests will reflect differences in environment, quality of the school in the community as well as differences in native mental ability. For these reasons farm adults make low average scores on many written tests of verbal ability. We know that when average years of education of any farm group is compared with almost any other non-farm group, the farm population considered will have fewer years of education. In 1940, for example, the rural youth on the farm between the ages of 20 and 24 averaged nearly one year of high school

compared with nearly 3 years of high school for youth in hamlets and villages and 4 years of high school for youth living in urban areas.

Along with this change, and lack of change, in the level of education of the adult farm population, there have been changes in rural attitudes and thinking. Here the question is not so much whether or not changes have taken place, but, rather, what are the directions and extent of changes?

Carle Zimmerman has written, "We are not clear in our minds as to the nature of the farmer and his basic personality. On the one hand he is the noble tiller of the soil and on the other he is the greedy person who is responsible for the continued extremely high cost of living." (10, p. 348)

In addition to this question about the basic personality of the 1950 farmer, we might ask another that was raised by our local county superintendent of schools, Harold Hartman. I talked with him about recent changes in farm life, and he said, "Country people around this county certainly live more like city people than they did 20 years ago. I wonder if they think the same way?"

The similarity of present day rural and urban thinking was examined recently by the State College of Washington. Three hundred seven rural and urban women students and their mothers were questioned. The study compared differences in opinion that exist between rural mothers and daughters, rural and urban mothers, and rural and urban daughters toward various aspects of marital and family adjustment. In their summary the authors, Sheeley, Landis and Davies, state, "In general, this study indicated that there are greater differences of opinion between mothers and daughters of both rural and urban groups than there are between rural and urban mothers or between rural and urban daughters. In other words, successive generations are more likely to evidence differences of opinion than are rural or urban groups of a given generation." (5, p. 23) This is only one study, but I believe most psychologists would agree that there is less difference now than there was 30 years ago between rural and urban attitudes.

Four changes in the farm population which have occurred during the last 30 years have been listed. 1. The size of the farm family is decreasing, but indications are that for many years to come some farm youths will have to migrate to larger population centers. 2. The farm population averages more years of education than before, but there remains a wide distance between the average years of school completed by rural and urban youth. 3. Rural

groups are found not to be inferior to the general population in their intelligence, although farm people still have fewer opportunities to develop their abilities to the fullest extent. 4. The changes in agriculture as an industry have brought about changes in the thinking and attitudes of many farm groups. There may be greater differences in thinking between farmer grandfather and farmer grandson than between farmer son and his urban brother.

Additional changes in rural living which must be considered as important from the psychological point of view, are found in the community life and in the farm homes. Before 1930 most farmers saw very little of their farm home or farmstead with their kerosene lamps. When the farmer was able to see his home, he acquired new motivations and certainly some new needs. The home and community life of nearly every farm in the country has been changed as the number of farms with electricity increased from 9 per cent in 1930 to nearly 80 per cent in 1950. (6, p. 18)

The last thirty years have brought about changes in the leadership and in the organizations found in the rural community. Referring again to the 1915 survey of Orange Township, we have an illustration of the extent to which leadership in the rural schools has changed over a period of 30 years. In 1916-17 the township had 8 one-room schools and 8 teachers. Each of these teachers had some college work, and they averaged over 6 years of experience in teaching. In 1948-49 the survey made by the superintendent and county board of education reported that the 12 teachers in the one consolidated school now in Orange Township averaged less than 3 years of college education and less than 3 years of experience. (7) This increase of about 2 years of training over a 30 year period illustrates that the professional training of rural teachers has increased during this period of time about the same number of years as has the education of the general public.

It is probably safe to say that the psychological as well as the sociological changes in rural life during the last 30 years have been greater than any period of 50 or 100 years in the history of agriculture. Now more than ever before the farmer's livelihood depends less on his back and more on his brain. This has released more of the farm population for urban and non-farm occupations and has meant that the farmer could more frequently leave his farm for additional education, recreation and relaxation. He has found many of the things he wants in nearby villages and towns. Indeed the very growth of villages into towns has enhanced the interdependence of farming and non-farming people.

In conclusion it can be stated that during the last 30 years many people living in rural areas have changed their behavior patterns in order to satisfy their basic needs and wants. An attempt has been made in this paper to show how these changes have helped rural people achieve economic security, satisfy their gregarious wants, develop feelings of personal worth and enjoy more of the pleasant things of life. The college instructor and his colleagues will have a better understanding of their students from farm homes if the psychological implications of recent changes in rural communities are known.

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