

**Two Essays on Country Life  
in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**

by

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## Preface

By the time Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission, an enormous immigration, supported by rapid developments in transportation and communication, had settled the vast areas of North America's farm and ranch land. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the end of the American frontier at a meeting of the American Historical Association. At the turn of the century, pioneer settlements on the heartland were into their second and third generation and more remote corners of the nation were in final stages of occupation. Trends toward urbanization were already underway.

Within a couple of generations, the fruits of the 1862 enactments of Homestead, Land-Grant College, and Department of Agriculture legislation, had been reflected in agricultural productivity and quality of rural life. The Hatch Act in 1887, by supporting agricultural experiments and education, further enhanced rural development. Farm settlement had risen above subsistence and was producing growing markets. Yet, many challenges remained in rural areas. Farmers, among others, were exploited by ruthless, often corrupt, industrial giants.

The agrarian uprising of the 1870s and 1880s pushed the fraternal Grange and a widespread cooperative movement toward the more militant Farmer's Alliance. As the Alliance declined, its banner was taken up by the Farmer's Educational and Cooperative Union. Freight rates, farm prices, and interest rates were economic issues that promoted the rise of populism and eventually reforms such as the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887, and the Sherman Anti-trust Act in 1890. Roosevelt asserted that economic conditions of his time called for strong government control of trusts and he acquired a reputation as a "trust buster." Meanwhile, industrial and commercial centers were attracting rural labor and talent.

Cities were growing and in ways not always uplifting. Impacts of massive immigration from Europe complicated the problems of rapid growth in urban areas. The problems of cities were reflected in concerns about rural to urban migration. Problems of crowding, crime, labor exploitation, moral decay supported a latent agrarian fundamentalism that underscored the need for enhancing the attractiveness of rural life and living.

Another significant public policy area in the Roosevelt era was conservation. The American Forestry Association was initiated by private citizens in 1875. John Muir inspired an interest in America's natural resources. Yellowstone Park in 1872, The Forest Reserve Act of 1891, Reclamation Act of 1902, and creation of the Forest Service under Gifford Pinchot in 1905

are few examples of an extensive, diverse land policy in America in the times leading up to the Country Life Commission. Indeed, the national resource policy was the subject of the 1908 White House Conference on Conservation in May, followed by the June creation of the National Commission on Conservation chaired by Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot, who served also on the Country Life Commission, was influential in selection of its chairman, Liberty Hyde Bailey.

When the Country Life Commission was created, many of the post-Civil War issues of agricultural development, rural settlement, public lands, natural resources, and nation building had been addressed. The report of the Commission was presented in a new context of population, technology, and international relations. But the report was presented by a president leaving office to a congress indifferent or hostile to its recommendations. No organization or institution had been left with the responsibility to carry out the recommendations. The Commission's legacy was about to be buried.

However, under the leadership of one of the Commission's members, Kenyon Butterfield, the concerns of rural America were reexamined by a small group, largely educators. They addressed the problems of rural life in the light of another social, technical, and political environment, then still in the turmoil of World War I. In 1919, at a conference in Baltimore, they created the American Country Life Association.

Generations succeeding the Country Life Commission were bridged by the ongoing American Country Life Association. And each generation faced a new set of problems—or old problems in a new setting with new challenges. Each year for over half a century, annual proceedings would report on changing themes, changing perspectives.

The two brief essays that follow describe: 1) the American Country Life Association's mission and legacy; 2) a mid-century effort to create a new Country Life Commission. The essays are independent and can be read separately, but, in places, they cover some of the same ground with different emphases.

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## **Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission and The American Country Life Association**

Until 1900, rural meant farming or ranching, and vice versa. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned 20<sup>th</sup>, concerns about education, conservation, and quality of life began to intrude on strictly economic conditions and policies. Telephone, rural free delivery, and roads began to relieve rural isolation. Criticism of schools called for reform in standards and methods of education. Muir and Pinchot delivered the message of conservation to the then fully settled nation. Rebellion against railroads, the financial system, and agricultural markets enveloped both farm economy and rural living.

But rural to urban migration in the early 1900s began to shrink the role of rural in the economy. Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission of 1908 marked a cleavage between the strictly commercial aspects of agriculture and the quality of life and resources in open country America. After World War I the distinction of issues relating to country life and commercial agriculture continued to grow.

Two organizations portray the differences, and connections, between the business of farming and the condition of rural people and resources. Both the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and the American Country Life Association (ACLA) were formed in 1919-20. Both have a Cornell connection. But there the similarities end. The AFBF was created as, and remains today, a bricks and mortar pyramid of economic interests in agricultural production and marketing. The ACLA was a loosely strung, collegial, gathering of expressive personages representing broad range of country life interests. The causes and concerns of the ACLA outlived the organization. AFBF lives on.

The ACLA was a product of its times, times changed, and the descendants of the extinct ACLA now support organic farming, push conservation easements, and oppose large feedlots. How well are the rural disadvantaged, small farmers, environmental stewards, and defenders of open land and endangered species, served by their agents? And for how long?

### **The End of Frontier and Rise of Progressivism**

To fully comprehend the ACLA lesson we need its context in the country life movement of the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Closing the frontier, developing railroads and roads, regulating trusts, and conserving public lands were but a few of the changes wrought in a progressive political environment, the time of Teddy Roosevelt.

In 1876, the hundredth anniversary of the Americans' statement against British rule, the combined tribes of the northern plains made their statement of resistance to American rule at Little Big Horn. The Indians achieved a pyrrhic victory. In 1890, a year after the two Dakotas entered the Union, the massacre at Wounded Knee completed the ethnic cleansing of North America. In April of 1889, the first of the "runs" of white settlement in Oklahoma had heralded the occupation of lands previously reserved for Indians; in little more than a decade all their territory was occupied by whites, and in 1907 Oklahoma became a state. Immigration, farming, and politics flourished in the region.

Meantime in the East, a natural disaster had a profound influence not only on agriculture of the Ohio river region but on the economy of the Mid-Atlantic. In 1889, the heavy rains that caused the famed Johnstown flood also washed out the financially faltering Chesapeake and Ohio canal. The canal was never linked to the Ohio river and Washington, D.C. on the Potomac never became the intended major port of entry to the Atlantic seaboard.. Canal repair was not viable in the face of competition from the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. The C and O canal's demise, and its replacement by the railroad, heralded the revolution in transportation.

The technology of transportation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was driven by the railroads. The technology developed early in the century, contributed substantially to the movement of goods and troops during the Civil War. The decade of the 1880s showed the massive growth in railroad construction, an average of over 7000 miles per year. By 1916, America had 254,000 miles of main track operated by 1400 companies. Developmental chaos gave way to standardization. Small startup companies gave way to massive consolidation, and concentration of power and wealth. When roads replaced spurs and small volume lines, the miles shrank to 220,000 miles and the number of companies to 600 by 1960.

The creation of immense concentrations of wealth and power in the railroad empires of James Hill and Cornelius Vanderbilt at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century parallels the wealth concentrations from the computer/information entrepreneurship of Bill Gates and Michael Dell at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the anti-trust violations by Hill in Northern Securities have a familiar ring in today's world of information and communication industries.

By 1900, the mechanical, chemical, and biological foundations for the agricultural revolution had been laid, productivity was increasing rapidly, and human labor was being replaced or enhanced by animal and mechanical power. By 1890 most horse technology was in place, soon to be modified then replaced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1890s power technology was supplemented with developments in fertilizer, insecticides, medicines.

The period 1898-1919 was a time of economic prosperity, including agriculture. Sparked by the Ford Model T in 1908, the transportation revolution continued with nationwide roadbuilding. Trucking developed, railroads adapted and consolidated. Radio and telephone began to connect people and enhance commerce. It was a time of great industrial growth, mergers and creation of giant trusts. It was a time for great fortunes, labor exploitation and reaction. Following the Spanish-American War, WWI, and construction of Panama Canal, the United States became a leading political power among nations.

Before the birth of the 20 century, agriculture had become restive. The benign Granger organization made way for the populists and militant Farmers Union in 1902. Farmers were becoming a smaller part of the economy and society; and their shrinking position began to focus

their attention. In 1880 farmers represented about half (49%) of the labor force. By 1920 farmers were only 27 percent of the labor force. United States went from debtor to creditor nation. Government became an important player in US agriculture. The Department of Agriculture, formed in 1862, achieved cabinet status in 1889. Research was expanded with the 1889 Hatch Act to extend the experiment station system. The Morrill Act in 1890 was created to develop an extension education system.

This period of technological, political, and social progressivism is easily identified with Teddy Roosevelt, reformer and rough rider. His thoughtful, activist leadership, while sometimes lacking in diplomacy, helped bring about major changes in public policy and outlook. A thumbnail view of his role in the transition to the 20<sup>th</sup> century explains how and why the Country Life Commission and later the American Country Life Association, were formed. George Mowry's *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (pp. ix, xii) describes the man and his times:

“The first dozen years of the twentieth century were important ones for the development of modern American society. They marked the birth and growth of the so-called progressive movement, a social quest which, in its broadest aspects, attempted to find solutions for the amazing number of domestic and foreign problems spawned by the great industrial, urban, and population changes of the late nineteenth century...

We can see now that he [Roosevelt] ushered in a ... fourfold revolution : in the relation of government to the economy; in the relations of the different elements of the economy—capital, labor, and agriculture—to each other; in the relation of the United States to the rest of the world; and in the social and economic thought about these and related matters. This revolution has gone on, not without challenge but without serious interruption, to our own time...”

Roosevelt's progressivism uplifted and energized the Republican party. Taft had been Roosevelt's chosen successor but for a variety of reasons, including the lead-footed conservatism of party leadership, Roosevelt had a falling out with Taft and his administration. Roosevelt bested Taft in the 1912 election but split the Republican party enabling Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats to win the presidency.

### **The Country Life Commission**

The short, vigorous term of the Country Life Commission was, in many ways, the last hurrah of Teddy Roosevelt's administration and a culmination of progressive reforms that turned the century. Roosevelt formed the Commission in August of 1908 and its report was completed January 23, 1909. The President, in turn, presented the report to Congress February 9, 1909.

Under the chairmanship of Liberty Hyde Bailey, the members of the Commission (Kenyon Butterfield, Gifford Pinchot, Henry Wallace, Walter Page, C.S. Barrett, and W.A. Beard) conducted separate studies in their specialties, held 30 hearings in all regions of the United States, sent 550,000 questionnaires to rural people, and solicited the results of schoolhouse meetings held on December 5 throughout the nation.

Completing the work of the Commission in such a short time was a remarkable feat. Despite (or perhaps because of) the extremely short life of the Commission, its report contained

substantive recommendations. Those recommendations reflected many of the sought-after reforms of the period, and, with adaptation, would be appropriate today. From an extensive list of rural conditions in need of correction—schools, roads, parcels post, sanitation, farming technology—the Commission noted three “movements” needed to bring about “permanent reconstruction”(Hearings 1958, p.91):

“1. *Taking stock of country life.* There should be organized...under government leadership, a comprehensive plan for an exhaustive study or survey of all the conditions that surround the business of farming and the people who live in the country...

“2. *Nationalized extension work.* Each state college of agriculture should be empowered to organize as soon as practicable a complete department of college extension, so managed as to reach every person on the land...

“3. *A campaign for rural progress.* We urge the holding of local, state, and even national conferences on rural progress, designed to unite the interests of education, organization, and religion into one forward movement for the rebuilding of country life....”

The “movements” recommended by the Commission, particularly the third, created the bases of the American Country Life Association formed a decade later, after World War I.

The most significant feature of the Country Life Commission report and recommendations is the orientation toward education and provision of services to rural people, but without government intervention in the market for farm products. The strongest recommendations concerning the market are for the expansion of farm cooperatives. Roosevelt, in his transmittal to Congress, states that “The object of the Commission on Country Life therefore is not to help the farmer raise better crops but to call his attention to the opportunities for better business and better living on the farm...it is not within the sphere of any government to reorganize the farmers’ business or reconstruct the social life of farming communities. It is, however, quite within its power to [call for] public attention to the needs and facts.”

The Commission report helped to clarify the dividing line between the romance of farming and country life and rank commercialism of production agriculture. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, urban life began to offer qualities of living not readily available to country people. Furthermore, a growing economy built on rapid developments in technology of transportation, communication, and energy created huge accumulations of wealth and wide disparities of income, wealth, and well being. Trustbusting raised public consciousness of economic power, inequalities, and exploitation. Farmers, for example, felt exploited by railroads and financial establishments. In both quality of life and in economic well-being farmers were feeling disadvantaged, or so, at least, according to their spokespersons.

The cause of disadvantaged rural people was articulated with a powerful mixture of agricultural science and agrarian romance by a community of reformers, mainly educators or journalists. William Bowers in his study of the country life movement, 1900-20, compiled a list of 84 prominent reformers involved with rural affairs. They had rural backgrounds; only three were born in big cities, perhaps not too surprising given the population composition of the time. However, they held 70 bachelors degrees, forty masters, and 25 doctors of philosophy, medicine, and science. Four had only a public school education and two of them studied law and were

members of the bar. Bowers (1974, p.34) notes:

“...leaders of the country life movement were generally nonfarmers and urbanites. Furthermore, they were well-educated, economically secure, middle class people who seemingly had little in common with agriculturists....[their] interest in country life matters came largely from their concern with the diminishing position of agriculture...and they affirmed with pride that its most cherished values and institutions were uniquely shaped by rustic antecedents...the farmers’ individualism and independence made them morally upright, simple, and contented, while their close association with nature caused them to be more healthy, virtuous, and religious than others.”

The agents or representatives of the rural populace were predominately connected with academic or clerical institutions. Their perspectives of the concerns of the rural disadvantaged very likely influenced their view of the nature of, and solutions to, the problems.

Context warrants mention of Roosevelt’s concurrent Commission on Conservation of Natural Resources, headed by Gifford Pinchot who was serving simultaneously on the Country Life Commission. In March of 1907 the Inland Water Commission had been created to study water transportation, but it also revealed broader problems in natural resource conservation. Following a White House Conservation Conference, Pinchot’s Commission undertook a systematic study of mineral, forest, water, and soil supplemented by local commissions in 41 states and reported in January 1909. As they had for the Country Life Commission, Congress failed to follow through. The National Conservation Association, a private body, was formed in 1909.

### **The Farm Bureau**

The formation of the American Farm Bureau Federation in 1920, helped to redefine the agrarian movement. It began an organizational separation between commercial agriculture and the remainder of a shrinking rural America, an increasingly urban, industrialized, and internationalized America.

The AFBF arose in part as an extension of reforms supported by the Grange, Farmer’s Alliance, Farmers Union and other organizations. Among their concerns were education, which the AFBF molded to its particular purpose. That purpose was to educate farmers in improved farm practices, better farm marketing, and successful farm business. Progress in farming included the adoption of methods developed in experiment stations and demonstrated by extension agents and model farmers.

One feature of AFBF foundations is the extension work of Seaman Knapp with the “Farmers Cooperative Demonstration Work” of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1902. Knapp brought his long agricultural experience in New York, Iowa, and Louisiana to the problem of boll weevil depredations in Texas, emphasizing the importance of learning by doing.

USDA developed cooperative agreements with state agricultural colleges to support the demonstration work. By 1912, there were 858 agents in the South and similar projects had begun in the North. W.J. Spillman of USDA’s Office of Farm Management created the North’s first regular county agricultural agent in Bedford county, Pennsylvania.

The local farm organizations that gave rise to the county agents took a variety of forms and took support from a variety of sources, often financial and commercial interests who saw their



own success tied to the successful farmers. The term “farm bureau” began as the agricultural “bureau” of the Binghamton, New York, Chamber of Commerce and spread as the county organizing unit, later “crystallized” into State organizations. The bureaus were tightly networked the county agents, Land-Grant colleges, USDA, railroads, industry, and commerce. The Farm Bureau orientation from earliest beginnings has been toward the business of commercial farming.

In 1914, by the Smith-Lever Act, the extension model based on cooperative agreements between USDA and the states was expanded to a broad range of instruction, demonstration, and publication to benefit agriculture, home economics, and rural living. The Cooperative Extension Service, funded and supported at the local, state, and national level became a unique educational institution. It and similar agreements for research, education, marketing, and land use has provided a local presence of USDA nationwide throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ties of Extension and the Farm Bureau remain today.

### **The American Country Life Association**

Congress failed to support the 1909 Country Life Commission recommendations and the Department of Agriculture disposed of many of the Commission’s records. Nevertheless, the country life movement continued and many of their reform measures did result in significant programs. The Smith-Lever Act in 1914 substantially aided the development of the State extension in Land Grant colleges and the system of county agents for farm and home improvement. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 supported vocational training in agriculture and home economics. While much of the spiritual and cultural elevation sought by the reformers may have been bypassed in favor of the cold cash farm production and household management features of the educational program, improvements were made in farming and rural life.

#### *The ACLA Origins.*

The reformers were not satisfied, and the American Country Life Association was formed at a national conference held in Baltimore, MD, April, 1919, a decade after the Country Life Commission report was issued. Actually, much of the groundwork was done at a meeting in Washington, DC in November, 1917. At the Baltimore conference, the organization was called the National Country Life Association and by the next meeting November, 1919, it had become the American Country Life Association.

World War I and vastly improved transportation and communication systems played important roles in the massive rural-urban migration. Soldiers, sailors and their families became personally aware of a larger world than their rural home communities. Even those who returned to farming were more keenly aware of national and world markets. An era of relative prosperity enabled farmers and rural people to invest in machines and methods to increase their farm’s profitability and improve their homes and quality of living.

Migration, while enabling the expansion of the size and profitability of remaining farms, created changes in rural business and community institutions. Rural churches, schools, and social organizations were depopulated. David Danbon, in his insightful history of rural America, noted: “...urban-based educators, religious leaders, social scientists, philanthropists, and other public figures...were concerned that so many bright people were leaving the countryside that it would become blighted, with severe consequences for the nation.” The leadership of the country life

movement was concerned that rural life and communities were destined for steep decline unless major reforms were undertaken. Perhaps because most of this leadership was either university or church supported, the solutions were largely educationally or spiritually oriented.

Kenyon Butterfield, who served on the Country Life Commission, was a prime mover in the first conference of the American Country Life Association. He served as ACLA's president from its founding through 1928, thereby becoming its longest standing principal officer. Indeed, his leadership strongly influenced ACLA's mission and orientation. He was a highly regarded educator, president of Massachusetts Agricultural College, and acknowledged leader of the country life movement. In his article in the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Gerald Vaughn extensively documents Butterfield's involvement in rural church affairs, and his close relationship to Wilbert Anderson, his pastor in the First Congregational Church in Amherst. Throughout the entire life of ACLA, national church denominations played an important role in the policies and leadership of the organization. Joseph Ackerman, former Director of the Farm Foundation, for example, served as president of ACLA in 1947 and 1948, and coauthored the book "Town and Country Churches and Family Farming." The last president of ACLA, Osgood Magnuson, was employed by the Lutheran Church.

Despite many of ACLA's moral and spiritual biases, its policies and programs were frequently directed to earthy economic and social problems, passionately if not always rationally. Conference themes included rural health and sanitation, recreation, government, planning and road building, education and information. ACLA stressed social improvement and community development.

#### *Two Generations of ACLA.*

ACLA lived as an organization a bit over half a century, i.e., about two generations. Its first generation was an extension of the country life movement in the era of President Theodore Roosevelt's administration. Mission and missionaries were products of the Country Life Commission. The first generation oversaw a post-World War I transition from a rural to urban nation, economic prosperity and depression. The second generation, following World War II, faced a new America with rural electrification, interstate superhighway system, G I Bill educational democracy, Social Security extension to farmers, and civil rights. Chemical enhancement of farm productivity yielded pollution and outrage by environmentalists.

In the decade following WWII, ACLA was struggling to find itself as were the rural communities and institutions it was seeking to serve. Plunging farm numbers and the reciprocal enlargement of farm size were the leading features of a restructure of agriculture. Villages and their small businesses deferred to regional centers. Schools consolidated. Medical services concentrated in large towns. Greater distances among farms were closed with improved roads and communication, but pockets of poverty and some social, if not geographic, isolation remained.

By the end of the 1950s, ACLA recognized the radical changes taking place in agriculture and the rural countryside. The Association, perhaps sensing its impotence in the face of new problems, pulled together to lobby for a Second Country Life Commission. Hearings before the Subcommittee on Family Farms of the House Committee on Agriculture were held in July, 1958. Testimony was led by Roy Buck for ACLA. Other ACLA members testifying on behalf of their organizations included, for examples, Condon for National Education Association, Jackson for

Grange, Mueller for National Lutheran Church, Vizzard for National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and Wileden for University of Wisconsin Department of Sociology.

A letter from Ezra Benson, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, intoned some praise for ACLA's intentions but then repeated the Budget Bureau's lack of substantive support for a Second Commission. With the 1962 change in administration, ACLA reexamined their proposal for a Second Commission. Despite several efforts by ACLA to gain support in Congress and the administration over the years 1958-65, the prospect of a Second Commission eventually faded and died. In the words of chairman of the ACLA committee for a Second Commission, *Prairie Farmer* editor Paul Johnson,

“...changing agricultural and rural community scene and the many different approaches to our rural problems have raised serious questions as to whether such a commission should now be established...my recommendation [is] that we...study other approaches to the problem of making rural America more articulate and consider other types of strategy for assuring our town and country communities of their proper place in the nation's affairs.”

The Kennedy administration arrived in a period of restive politics. Striking farm workers and the commodity withholding actions of National Farm Organization drew from the more aggressive methods appearing as civil rights behavior in urban areas. National attention in the 1960s was directed to space flight, cold war and Cuban missile crises, riots by blacks, urban development, and the “War on Poverty.” Rural life concerns were not ignored but other problems received higher priority.

#### *The People Left Behind*

In the early 60s, while prospects for a Second Commission faded, ACLA undertook a self examination, revealing in its conference minutes the need for change in its purpose and methods. In 1965, the Gunlogson paper, which envisioned rural life through the country town, began a search for ACLA's revival. In 1966, a task force was created. The task force announced that the “main objective...of the ACLA is to improve the form and performance of local government in order to provide adequate services to people living in the countryside.”

Perhaps more important to ACLA as an organization, the task force recognized the need for “a small national office with a director...” and administrative resources. They saw the need for funds. They recommended building “positive relationships between local and larger political units.” ACLA began to see that the virtues of good country life require more than revelation. Organization, connections, staff, and money are needed to further the social, academic, and moral virtues of country life. By the mid 1960s ACLA had the glimmering of organizational success.

Then came President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, which not only were not opposed to ACLA but were directed precisely to the problems concerning ACLA. The Rural Poverty Commission preempted ACLA's task group mission. ACLA's momentum was lost, and its focus on local government was reasserted at the national level. The Rural Poverty Commission saw rural problems as an extension of larger national issues. The preeminence of the Commission's report “The People Left Behind” is revealed by Jim Hildreth's extensive quotations from the report in his 1968 presidential address to ACLA.

Despite the prominence of “The People Left Behind” at its time, most of its recommendations, in the words of Browne and Swanson, “...were ignored by federal policymakers. Congress has continued to disappoint rural advocates by its inaction since the 1972 Rural Development Act...” “Rural development” is a curiously ambiguous inheritor of many of the intents of the country life movement addressed more through economic than cultural policies.

ACLAs effort to redefine itself through creation of a second Country Life Commission failed from lack of USDA support, and a diluted effort in Congress. The second, and fatal, reason for failure resulted from the ironic appearance of “The People Left Behind,” ironic because it echoed ACLAs platform of over 60 years. Meanwhile, the Viet Nam war and its domestic fallout, moon and Mars landings, information and biological technology, environmentalism, and other concerns left ACLA a baffling collection of new issues. Issues taken up by other groups and organizations.

### **Critiquing ACLA**

What can the story of ACLA teach us about organizations, particularly organizations furthering noble causes? Why do groups such as ACLA succeed or fail? At the philosophic or academic level, even the meaning of success or failure can be debated. Here we mean simply survival or cohesion. Many of the good works championed by ACLA and its members came to pass. In contrast to a century ago, country living today is not *per se* disadvantageous. The quality of life in rural America, however, is no longer in surveillance by ACLA. Why?

In the face of countless possible answers, to say nothing of ways to ask the question, let us pursue Mancur Olson’s “strategy to search for stark and simplifying propositions.” Perhaps less formal than Olson’s academic approach, identifying some elements of the ACLA condition will explain its demise. These elements include: *purpose(s)* clarity, consistency, and continuity; *organization structure*, commitment, accountability; *membership* size, composition, motivation; *instruments* of activity such as power, money, information, endorsement.

ACLA faced no threatening opposition of purpose. After all, who could oppose better health, education, and communication for country people? Annual conferences were the primary activity of the ACLA; each year they would adopt a theme usually focusing on one or a few urgent concerns. These conferences gathered persons of like minds and positions, so the challenges of opposing views and proposals were often lacking. Indeed, the conferences tended to emphasize concerns and neglect programs or actions. With rare exception (such as the 1958 Second Country Life proposal) did the organization, as such, undertake an action. Leadership and management of ACLA was essentially volunteered by persons employed or involved with occupations and causes perhaps related to, but nonetheless located in, other organizations or agencies. Likewise, staff were affiliated with other organizations and either donated their time or were nominally reimbursed for expenses. Connections to other organizations were personal with little accountability to ACLA that, in any event, had no instrument of power other than perhaps moral standing, largely unrecognized. Compare ACLA with the Farm Bureau. The AFBF grew from a national network of local bureaus, which, in turn, cultivated commercial and educational institutions. The county agent worked closely with farm bureaus and with farmers focusing primarily on farm production and marketing. The first president of AFBF was a farmer who had been a demonstration agent, among other things. Farm Bureau philosophy and

organization faced vigorous competition from other farm organizations. Although off and on again supportive of many ancillary causes, including ACLA, the Farm Bureau remained focused on commercial agriculture, particularly larger and economically successful farm enterprises.

In the AFBF, issues were defined sufficiently for differences to arise, stakes were evident, and power struggles could erupt; e.g., January 2000 debate on farm concentration resulting in replacement of the president of Farm Bureau. Such a struggle would have been unthinkable in ACLA.

The purposes of ACLA taken from bylaws and, more importantly, from papers and declarations at their conferences were often individually clear. Taken collectively, over time, however, the purposes were ethereally general and widely diverse. Roosevelt's stated purpose in creating his commission was to provide a list of recommendations for legislation, each bill of which would tackle a specific problem such as health, education, roads. ACLA, modelled after the Commission, then, had many missions requiring either an immense, departmentalized organization or a selection and focus on one or a few of the purposes. Paul Johnson said of ACLA's diversity:

“We believe in farm people and their great mission in the building and preservation of America...But we are also proponents of many diverse and sometimes conflicting causes and points of view.”

In early years, ACLA may have kept some focus through the singular leadership of Butterfield. More likely, the organization never acquired the scale and resources needed to support a broad, diverse action program.

The management and staff of ACLA were volunteers, persons employed by other organizations, entities, or agencies. Commitment, therefore, was a reflection of interests of other organizations whose business and concerns lay elsewhere. Support was modest, always tentative, and in the nature of grants or one-way transfers. In short, ACLA had little currency with which to negotiate with supporters and members, attendant and potential. Management and staff reward and accountability was largely internal, that is feelings of duty, value, and priority, with occasional recognition by the membership. From records it is apparent that ACLA was served by many dedicated, committed, selfless individuals. However, the level and composition of staff was not remotely commensurate with the broad mission and many purposes of the organization. By contrast, the AFBF had, and has, a large staff of full time professional organizers and lobbyists. They are a continuous, not just annual, source of information and pressure.

As Bowers, Danbom, and others have noted, the members paying the ACLA dues and attending the ACLA annual conferences were primarily an educational, institutional elite. Their concerns about rural poverty, inadequate schools, and poor health services were on behalf of others, not their own person or family. The ACLA was an umbrella of agents, most commonly departments of churches or universities. Farm organizations, variably, and USDA usually had some representation. Unlike, say the Farm Bureau, ACLA was not underpinned with a network of farmers, service employees, rural businessmen, or persons with a direct financial stake.

When, late in its life, ACLA began to recognize its inability to accomplish many of its cherished goals, it developed a program of actions, and a budget for full time staff. In 1966, a task group under the leadership of E.W. Mueller and R.J. Hildreth proposed a program that would raise its annual budget from \$4300 to \$110,000, still modest in terms of ACLA goals. The fund

solicitation process brought forth a number of innovative suggestions, enlargements, reductions, and alternative plans but, in the end, no resources sufficient to compete in the world of worthy cause enterprises.

ACLA held its last conference, July 1976, in Morgantown, West Virginia. It died with its president, Osgood Magnuson, and became a footnote to Teddy Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life.

### **Legacy and The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

A generation passed. In March, 2000, the "Rally for Rural America" was held on the Mall in Washington, D.C., "to provide a wake-up call to alert members of Congress and the Administration to the perilous state of the rural economy, and to advocate for policy changes that benefit farmers and ranchers and rural communities." Education. Rural Health. Conservation. Fair prices for farm products. Revitalization of farm families and rural communities. Prayer services were held, celebrities performed, speeches were made. Key members of Congress appeared.

The new century has lost its grandparent's rural America. Not to mention the other changes that have taken place, space has changed. The problems of *isolation* have been so successfully overcome that now space is sought to provide *insulation*. Suburbanites, in their desperate search for living room, clean air, and a little green, have devoured farms, forests, and grasslands, thus destroying the very qualities of environment most eagerly sought. Indeed, a whole set of rural problems emerges from the proximity and relation to cities. Rural America, or what is left of it, resides in what is now an urban nation.

Because America is an urban nation, it is not surprising that most rural problems are simply variants of the same problems found in cities and towns. Support services for an aging population, for example, are much the same for people in urban and rural areas, but the means for, and costs of delivery in remote or less densely settled areas differ. The same for health services; few health problems are unique to rural areas, but timely delivery and availability of highly specialized services can be a problem.

Education in sparsely settled areas presents special problems of teaching staff, facilities, transportation, and student development. Distance learning can fill important niches in a broad educational program but cannot substitute for basic educational institutions. Technology and transportation enable greater access to cultural, artistic, entertainment activity but great opportunities remain for rural areas. Charitable and special interest organizations often lack the scale and resources to cope with large or persistent problems.

Rural areas continue to present great challenges in economic development. Employment alternatives to agriculture are key ingredients for the improvement of, indeed salvation of some, rural villages, towns, and communities. Nevertheless, agriculture, forestry and their complements are the mainstays of rural economies and the regions they support.

Moreover, the owners and operators of farms, ranches, and forests are stewards of a very large share of the nation's land. Agricultural and forest land represents 95 percent of the land surface of America. Of the 2.3 billion surface acres, for example, about 900 million acres are "land in farms" owned by 1.9 million farm operators plus another 1.4 million nonfarmers. About 1 percent or less of America's people are caretakers for about 40 percent of the land. Depending how corporations are counted, forest lands may be the responsibility of an even smaller

percentage of people. The basic, first order, care of the land and other natural resources is in the hands of a small number of land owners.

Problems of rural areas are not without the attention of vast number of organizations and individuals. The Center for Rural Affairs, Lyons, NE, for example, was to be the next host to the expiring American Country Life Association in 1977, and is still going strong. The Rural Policy Research Center, centered in Columbia, MO, is an umbrella organization with researchers in 67 universities and many other institutions and agencies. Smaller, more tightly focused organizations such as the Leopold Center in Ames, IA, provide unique attention to particular issues as they arise. New organizations such as the International Association for Society and Natural Resources (2001) are formed to accommodate new concerns and approaches.

Rural problems have evolved as have the institutions to address them. Theodore Roosevelt, through his Commission on Country Life a century ago, and his Commissioner, Kenyon Butterfield, with the American Country Life Association a decade later, confronted rural living, learning, playing, growing, communicating, working, issues as presented at the time and anticipated in the future. What's different? What's the same? Is it time for a Centennial reexamination of what is becoming and what is to become of rural America?

### **Bibliographic Note**

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For detail on the American Country Life Association, the prime resource is Proceedings of the Association, Nos.1&2 in 1919, then annually to 1976, except for WWII years 1941,42,43. For the Association in context of rural America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century see my book, *American Country Life: A Legacy*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2003.

For further flavor of the turbulent period for rural America and public policy add two books: H.C. Taylor. *A Farm Economist in Washington 1919-1925*, University of Wisconsin, 1992; and Olaf Larson and Julie Zimmerman. *Sociology in Government: The Galpin-[CC]Taylor Years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1919-1953*, University Park PA: Penn State Univ Press,

2003. Henry Taylor, Charles Galpin, and Carl Taylor all served as officers of the American Country Life Association.

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G.Wunderlich, 2004

### **Teddy Roosevelt's Silent Echo: The Second Country Life Commission**

*In 1958, Congressional hearings for a second Country Life Commission invoked Theodore Roosevelt's concerns for the condition of rural America when he formed the first Country Life Commission in 1908. The link between these Commissions—one retired, one aspired—was the American Country Life Association, an umbrella organization evolved from the first Commission. America's midcentury social and economic transformations called for new institutions, and the struggle for a second Commission was an answer to that call.*

#### **Introduction**

Students of the Country Life Movement are familiar with Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, and its landmark 1909 report. Fewer students are aware of an American Country Life Association (ACLA), formed by one of the Country Life Commission's members. Still fewer students realize that the ACLA nearly managed to resurrect the Country Life Commission 50 years after its first incarnation.

Rural America, like the rest of the nation following World War II, was undergoing massive technological, social and geopolitical changes. Agricultural technology and capitalization shifted people and power between rural and urban societies. Interstate highways, air travel, television, the GI Bill, and home improvements changed life styles for many and widened the gap between those with and those without. The world represented by the American Country Life Association was undergoing a social upheaval embroiled in civil rights actions and cold war politics.

The ACLA serves as metaphor for rural institutional change. The membership struggled mightily over its role in a changing world. In the search for guiding principles, the Association conceived the vision of a Second Country Life Commission. The vision did not materialize as expected.

### **The First (Roosevelt) Country Life Commission**

President Theodore Roosevelt transmitted his Country Life Commission report to Congress on February 9, 1909, less than a month before leaving office. Had the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment moving the presidential inauguration from March to January been in effect at that time, it is likely the report would never have come to light.

Amiable, easygoing William Howard Taft, while sympathetic to many of Roosevelt's policies, had neither the energy nor inclination to vigorously initiate progressive programs. Almost immediately in his new presidency, Taft's attention was diverted to struggles in Congress over tariffs and income/inheritance taxes. The split between the Roosevelt and Taft administrations culminated in Taft's dismissal of Gifford Pinchot as head of the Forest Service, following an interdepartmental fight over hydropower sites in national forests. Country life issues went unattended. The Commission's report, in fact, met with hostility in the Department of Agriculture.

Creating the Commission, then preparing the report, was something of an organizational and production miracle. After much of Roosevelt's soliciting and arm-twisting of persons to serve on the Commission, the chosen chairman, Liberty Hyde Bailey, declined to serve. Only Roosevelt's great consternation and pressure from Pinchot caused Bailey to relent and, on August 20, 1908, the Commission came into existence.<sup>1</sup> The Commission was charged with producing a report by January 1, 1909, that is, in less than 5 months. To supplement available facts, a half million questionnaires were sent to persons on rural free delivery routes and others, who returned about 150,000. Rural leaders were contacted. Farmers held meetings in district schools and reports from 200 of such meetings were supplied to the Commission. The Commission held 30 hearings across the nation, and individual members made their own inquiries, finalizing a report on January 23, 1909.<sup>2</sup>

The 1909 Country Life Commission report contained a review of "the most prominent deficiencies" such as farmer disadvantages in the market, lack of training and education, inadequate transportation, depletion of soils, poor leadership, and hardships of farm women. Many remedies were proposed, such as improved parcel post and postal saving banks; creation of a highway engineering service; reduced disadvantages for farmers in taxation, credit, and transportation; a system of surveys of agricultural regions; education; and control of corporations and speculation. The Commission recommended:

- 1) Taking stock of country life, including comprehensive surveys of rural life with Federal and state governments and educational institutions to understand rural problems and design solutions;
- 2) Developing a national system of extension work for improving not only farming but all interests of rural life;
- 3) Campaigning for rural progress including national, state, and local conferences, with cooperation of religious, educational, medical, communication and other organizations.

Because the Commission was unable to fully exploit all the data collected for its study and report, much information was not included and remained unused. Unfortunately, Chairman Bailey allowed the circulars [questionnaires] to fall into the hands of Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson, who had become antagonistic to the Commission's work and some of its

membership. Many of these circulars were destroyed.<sup>3</sup> In the 5 months available, not all information sources could be accessed nor processed, especially as Congress had not authorized the \$25000 Roosevelt had requested to do so. Only 2000 copies of the final report were published as a Senate document. Congress forbade any further activity of the Commission.

Nevertheless, the Commission report was a remarkable achievement. In the words of historian Ellsworth:

“...the Report was a masterpiece in the only way that ultimately matters. A half century later, prominent farmers, educators, ministers, and legislators implored Congress at Hearings to create another Country Life Commission which they hoped would be as effective as the first one.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the difficulties surrounding their report, the work of Roosevelt’s Commission was not without eventual successes. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created a national system of extension education. The Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 put vocational education into high schools. Transportation was given a boost by the Federal Aid to Roads Act of 1916. Rural credit was expanded by the Federal Reserve Banking Act of 1913 and the Federal Land Bank Act in 1916. Other improvements in public health, agricultural marketing, transportation, and education were consistent with the Commission’s recommendations.

The Commission’s difficulties with Congress and the Taft administration underscored the split between Roosevelt’s progressive and Taft’s conservative wings of the Republican party. That split resulted in the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and passage of much of Roosevelt’s progressive program.

### **The American Country Life Association**

In November, 1917, Kenyon Butterfield chaired a meeting of 17 leading educators, church representatives, and USDA officials at the University Club in Washington, DC. to address problems of rural education, health and sanitation, homemaking, country planning, local government, and the social and economic well-being of rural people. It was a closed meeting, held without fanfare midway through America’s involvement in World War I.<sup>5</sup> A committee, to be chaired by Butterfield, was formed to create an organization for improving the condition of country life in the spirit of the Country Life Commission report.<sup>6</sup>

From the Butterfield committee’s preparations, the First National Country Life Conference was held in Baltimore, Maryland, on January 6-7, 1919. That Conference begat the National Country Life Association, soon renamed the American Country Life Association. Subsequent conferences—their agenda and discourse—formed the structure and mission of the new Association throughout most of its life. Committee structures followed from areas of concern: family, health, education, social services, government and legislation, social life, morals and religion, communication, cooperation, and international aspects of the country life movement.

The ACLA envisioned itself an umbrella of interests across a broad spectrum of rural life. ACLA emphasized social life over, but not to the exclusion of, economic aspects of rural development. Following the end of World War I by less than 2 months, the First Conference carried an appropriate theme, “Country Life Reconstruction.”

President Theodore Roosevelt died at his home in Oyster Bay, Long Island, on January 6, the first day of ACLA’s first Conference. The Association passed a resolution honoring him and

recognized his role in creating the Country Life Commission.

ACLA's first officers were Kenyon Butterfield, president; Warren Wilson and Edna White, vice presidents; and Dwight Sanderson, secretary-treasurer. Butterfield would be re-elected president of ACLA for the next 10 years, and later was named an honorary president until his death in 1935. As a member of Roosevelt's Country Life Commission,<sup>7</sup> Butterfield linked it to the organization (ACLA) that sought to launch a second Commission half a century later.<sup>8</sup>

For over half a century, ACLA was a forum for addressing the problems of rural communities and people. Its umbrella quality permitted widely divergent views to coexist. It remained politically and ideologically neutral as an organization, but ferreted out concerns of particular importance to rural people. The three major farm organizations—Grange, Farmers Union and Farm Bureau were represented throughout ACLA's run, although ACLA was dominated more by educators than activists. Extension was always well represented. The mainline churches also were represented and active.

Work of the committees and the almost entirely volunteer staff centered on the annual conferences, most often hosted by Land Grant universities. Also, during the first half of the Association's life, a lively monthly called *Rural America* informed subscribers of developments in country life and carried articles from Calvin Coolidge,<sup>9</sup> Franklin Roosevelt,<sup>10</sup> Henry A. Wallace,<sup>11</sup> Grant Wood,<sup>12</sup> and a great range of other scholars, activists, and citizens. The ACLA flourished during the bleak 1920s and 1930s, but by the onset of World War II, rural America had greatly changed and the Association began rethinking its role and needs.

World War II and its aftermath presented the Association with a new order signalled by the GI Bill, farm technology, the cold war, migration, medicine, interstate highways, television, and the Great Society. Conference themes reflected new problems, or reiterated persistent ones. "The Years Ahead in Rural Living"(1950) recognized "New Aims in Rural Life"(1955). "Rural Families with Low Income"(1956) anticipated "Our Concern for the Disadvantaged in Town and Country Society "(1963). The tenor of such conferences predated, and perhaps facilitated, the formation of the President's Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty in 1966.

The ACLA held its last Conference in Morgantown, West Virginia, in 1976. With its 55<sup>th</sup> conference, "People, Land, and Energy" ACLA suspended its own synthesis of ideas for improving the quality of rural life.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Second Country Life Commission**

The struggle of ACLA with its mechanics and its mission reflected a larger uncertainty in national policy.<sup>14</sup> Economic, technological, and political changes worldwide were redefining the national identity in the 1950s much as Theodore Roosevelt's era had witnessed America's earlier emergence. The ACLA forums on themes such as "Rural Life in a Changing World," "Home and Community Responsibility in a World of Tension," and "An Appraisal of Our Changing Rural Communities" reflected agriculture being swept up in national and international turmoil.

From the end of WWII through the Korean conflict, ACLA addressed a wide range of problems and concerns about rural America, but wavered in its focus. Its forums reiterated the Association's traditional concerns of education, health, social well-being, church, migration. The ACLA leadership appeared aware of this lack of focus. Then, at ACLA's October, 1953, Board of Directors meeting<sup>15</sup> in the Memorial Union at Iowa State University, Don Pielstick<sup>16</sup> proposed

that the Association recommend to President Eisenhower creation of a Second Country Life Commission. His modest suggestion sent ACLA on a decade-long odyssey for new national outlook on rural America.

At the Board of Directors meeting during the 1954 conference at Michigan State University, the idea of a Presidential Commission was discussed.<sup>17</sup> It seemed a way to provide focus, energize political forces, and direct national attention to rural issues. In 1955, a committee, chaired by Joseph Ackerman<sup>18</sup>, recommended to the ACLA conference attendees that subcommittees be formed to design segments of the proposal for the Second Commission, and that the draft proposal be presented to the membership of ACLA in 1957 or 1958.

At the business meeting of the 1956 ACLA conference at the University of West Virginia, the committee dutifully reported, but the matter was merely turned back to the Board of Directors without meaningful action.

By 1956, ACLA was reinventing itself and investigating emergent issues such as pockets of persistent rural poverty. At its 35<sup>th</sup> conference, themed “Rural Families with Low Income: Facing the Problem,”<sup>19</sup> Ed Bishop-- who, a decade later, became the Executive Director of President Lyndon Johnson’s Commission on Rural Poverty--spoke.<sup>20</sup> Bishop anticipated new programs, and to some extent his own role in shaping them, by asserting that “failure to improve the levels of living of a large number of low-income families has resulted in extensive criticism of current policies and programs and in demands for new programs.”<sup>21</sup>

Also at the 1956 conference, Don Paarlberg, Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, recalled Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission and ACLA’s inheritance of that calling. He spoke hopefully of the new experimental Rural Development Program.<sup>22</sup>

A new committee, chaired by Milo Swanton,<sup>23</sup> was instructed by ACLA President Arthur Wileden to draft the proposal for the Second Commission. That proposal was presented to the membership of ACLA at its 36<sup>th</sup> conference, July 1957, at the University of Missouri. It contained a lengthy justification, six objectives with economic, social, and spiritual “areas of concern,” and fairly specific recommendations on composition, structure, and procedures of the Commission.<sup>24</sup> The membership voted support.

In October, 1957, ACLA’s executive committee met in the Federal Extension office of E.W. Aiton to plan a meeting with Agriculture Secretary Ezra Benson in November. ACLA hoped Benson would present its proposal for a Second Commission to President Eisenhower.<sup>25</sup>

On November 25, 1957, delegates from ACLA met with Secretary Benson. The Secretary seemed favorably disposed to the proposal, but remained noncommittal. He said the proposal would “need the support of many different groups” implying that the proposal at that stage was politically impotent.<sup>26</sup> ACLA President Roy Buck, Vice President E.W. Aiton, and Secretary E.W. Mueller also met separately with Dr. Gabriel Hauge, an economic advisor to President Eisenhower. Mueller called that meeting “helpful and encouraging,” but no more.

The year 1957 was stressful for the nation. *Brown vs. Board of Education* challenged educational institutions, and Federal troops policed the integration of Little Rock schools. The Civil Rights Act was passed. Congress undertook investigations of concentrations of economic power in several industries. Farm price and income problems following the Korean War plagued the agricultural sector, and the Soil Bank from the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1956 was implemented.

Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States simmered over conflicts in the Middle East. The Soviet Union launched Sputnik I just before the ACLA meeting with Secretary Benson, and Sputnik II just after the meeting. In short, ACLA's proposal for a Second Commission on Country Life faced enormous competition for Presidential or Congressional attention.

In June 1958, Secretary Benson responded to the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Harold Cooley, with a reference to S.3596, a bill "to establish a Commission on Country Life."<sup>27</sup> The Bureau of the Budget did "...not see any clear need for creation of a Commission on Country Life at this time. The duties of the Commission already appear to be vested in the Department of Agriculture."<sup>28</sup> Benson favored the objectives of the Commission, but went along with the Bureau of the Budget.

Hearings on companion bills to establish a Commission on Country Life<sup>29</sup> were held by the Subcommittee on Family Farms of the House Agriculture Committee on July 8 and 9, 1958. The proposed Commission, with 25 members chosen by the President and Congress, would return a report in 2 years and then expire six months after that. Fact finding and problem identification were primary objectives, as was investigating the connectedness of urban and rural livelihoods and living. In his testimony on behalf of the legislation, ACLA President Roy Buck emphasized the changes in rural conditions:

"...there was a time when you could almost denote country life with agriculture.

And this was certainly true 50 years ago when the first commission was appointed....There are farmers and it still is largely the background of the country community, but there is also a place of residence and a place of making a living for millions of other people who are only indirectly related with agriculture."<sup>30</sup>

In the fall of 1958, Rep Brooks Hays of Arkansas, one of the champions of the Second Commission, was unseated. ACLA directors sought Hays' advice on how they should reintroduce legislation to the new Congress. The Board also asked Dr. Buck to write to Don Paarlberg, then Special Assistant to President Eisenhower, to see if he could influence the 1959 budget to include funding for a Second Commission. Paarlberg was an ACLA member at the time, and was generally supportive of ACLA's program and approach. Privately, he may have supported the proposal. However, his response to Buck indicated that the administration's position was unlikely to be favorable:<sup>31</sup>

"Thank you for your letter. I had thought, too, about the defeat of Brooks Hays and the consequent loss of his support for your proposal.

I think that you are on the right trail in working with the Congress on this matter...The present position of the Executive Branch, of which you are aware, resulted from [an] extensive review, and I would doubt that circumstances have sufficiently changed to recast this position..."

The proposal for a Second Commission on Country Life continued to garner support in Congress with another round of hearings in May, 1959.<sup>32</sup>

At ACLA's July 1959, conference, President Buck cited the hearings in the House (the Senate had not yet held hearings).<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, ACLA turned to other endeavors such as the support of interns with the International Cooperation Administration and ACLA representation at the White House Conference on Children and Youth. The Association tracked a bill by Senator

Karl Mundt to create a Commission on Small Towns. Still, in the early 1960s ACLA was struggling to refine its objectives and secure needed financial and organizational support.

The ACLA concluded that their strategy to bring the Commission into being simply was not working.<sup>34</sup> A committee for redrafting the proposal was created, and a new proposal was prepared and presented to the members.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the early 1960s at ACLA meetings and conferences, members held to the need for a second Commission. Meantime, the proposal as being retooled even as new initiatives were undertaken, many under the rubric of rural development.

President Lyndon Johnson declared War on Poverty in his January 1964, State of the Union Address. After much civil strife and legislative lurches, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by Congress and signed by the President. By August 1964, the Equal Opportunity Act was passed and the Office of Equal Opportunity created to address problems in employment, welfare, and public services. Mass Transportation, Wilderness Preservation, and Land and Water Conservation Acts were passed. The Viet Nam war escalated.

By 1964, the social and economic pretext for a Second Commission on Country Life had been pre-empted by other public programs. Attention had been diverted to war and re-elections. Between 1960 and 1964, ACLA committees had been active in reviewing the earlier proposals. Some Congressional activity on the Second Commission continued to engage ACLA as late as 1963.<sup>36</sup> Paul Johnson, chairing a last ditch effort, noted that “Civil rights legislation and other matters have made it inopportune to mount a strong drive for such a Commission...” recommending “that we set aside or abandon the commission idea and study other approaches to the problem of making rural America more articulate and consider other types of strategy for assuring our town and country communities of their proper place in the nation’s affairs.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, ACLA’s 10-year effort to create a Second Commission on Country Life ended.

It would be wrong to brand the second commission effort a failure. The ACLA and its member organizations had reshaped their thinking about the issues confronting rural America. How much of that reshaped thinking went into public policies and reforms is impossible to assess. However, on September 27, 1966, President Johnson signed Executive Order 11306 creating the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. That Commission was charged with a comprehensive study of, among other things, “trends in American rural life...unemployment and underemployment and retraining in usable skills...adequacy of food, nutrition, housing, health, and cultural opportunities...rural migration, adequacy of community facilities and services...,”<sup>38</sup> all items that might have been lifted directly from the ACLA workbook. The odyssey for a Second Commission on Country Life did not end exactly as planned but members of ACLA could take great satisfaction in the report “The People Left Behind” issued in September 1967, by the Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth recalling that 50 years earlier, in 1909, Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission completed its entire investigation and report in five months. Ellsworth argues that the birth of the Commission was long in coming, referring to Roosevelt’s association with populist Watson in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1901 luncheon with Horace Plunkett.<sup>39</sup> Even though Roosevelt and Liberty Hyde Bailey did not become personally well acquainted until 1907,

Bailey's reputation was substantial and his work was familiar to Roosevelt. Probably the principal agent in engineering the Country Life Commission was Gifford Pinchot, who, through a long trusted relationship, moved Roosevelt to create the Commission and select Bailey as its chairman. Such expeditious completion of the report was, most likely, due to Roosevelt's decision not to run for reelection.

Had the Commission not completed its work before the end of Roosevelt's term, the report would never have seen the light of day. Had Bailey not relented and agreed to assume the chairmanship in August 1908, the Commission likely would never have existed. Had Bailey not succeeded in persuading Roosevelt to appoint his friend, Kenyon Butterfield, to the Commission he, Bailey, would not have accepted chairmanship.

And had Butterfield not subsequently created the American Country Life Association, its efforts to create a Second Country Life Commission in 1958 may not have been assumed by any other organization.

Again, a single event may have determined the fate of the Second Commission. Don Paarlberg, a member of ACLA, left his position in the U.S. Department of Agriculture to become Special Assistant to the President. He left just 1 month before the special committee of the ACLA met with Agriculture Secretary Benson, at which the proposal for new Commission was politely rejected. Had Paarlberg remained in his position as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture just a little longer, he might have been persuasive in supporting the creation of the Second Commission.<sup>40</sup>

#### **Endnotes**

1. Other Commissioners were: Henry C. Wallace, Editor of *Wallace's Farmer*; Kenyon Butterfield, President of Massachusetts Agricultural College; Walter Hines Page, Editor of the *World's Work* in New York; Gifford Pinchot, Chief Forester of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; Charles Barrett, President of the Farmers Union; William Beard, Editor of *Great Western Magazine* in California.
2. The Commission and its operation is described in great detail by Clayton Ellsworth in his article, "Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission" *Agricultural History*, 34 (4), 1960, pp. 155-172.
3. Olaf Larson and Thomas Jones, "The Unpublished Data From Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life," *Agricultural History*, 50 (4), Oct 1976, p. 586. A portion of the circulars was not destroyed; data were archived at Cornell and results reported in their article.
4. Ellsworth (1960), p. 169.
5. November 16-17, 1917. Minutes recorded that "no publicity through the press be given the proceedings of the two sessions." Appendix in Proceedings, First National Country Life Conference, Baltimore, MD, January 6-7, 1919, p. 175.
6. A more complete treatment of the history and patrimony of the Association can be found in: Gene Wunderlich, *American Country Life: A Legacy*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2003.



7. Butterfield played a crucial role in forming the first Commission. Indeed, Bailey held as a condition of accepting chairmanship of the Commission that Butterfield be named a member. Years later, Bailey recalled: "I said, if I serve on this Commission, I must have Butterfield." Liberty Hyde Bailey, *Some Reminiscences of the Development of the American Country Life Movement*, Mimeograph of talk at Rural Ministers' Family Camp, August 19, 1943, Tompkins County Recreational Camp, NY, p. 3.

8. Liberty Hyde Bailey was President of the American Country Life Association in 1931. He was assisted by Vice Presidents Charles Galpin and Mrs. C.W. Sewell. Benson Landis served as Secretary of the Association from 1929 to 1941.

9. "Fundamentals of Cooperative Marketing," February 1925, pp. 3,9.

10. "A New Rural Planning," October 1931, pp. 7-9

11. "Farm Tenancy Today," January 1937, pp. 3-5.

12. "Revolt Against the City," February 1937, pp. 3-7.

13. However, legally, the ACLA still exists. Under the laws of the State of New York, the American Country Life Association, Inc., is a "Domestic Not-for-profit Corporation" with a status of "active." The Association was incorporated under the laws of the State of New York in 1924 and has so remained. *De facto*, ACLA ended with its last conference in 1976, somewhat ironically, the year the Homestead Act was repealed, with provisions for Alaska to 1986.

14. Changes in both mechanics and mission were reflected in revision of the Association's constitution and bylaws in 1950.

15. Handwritten notes of the ACLA secretary and printed version of Director's meeting minutes in the Proceedings of the Association's 32<sup>nd</sup> conference (1953).

16. Director of the Department of Town and Country Church, National Council of Churches of Christ. His proposal recorded in assembled minutes of Secretary-Treasurer, Board meeting, October 5, 1953. At a February 1954, meeting in Washington, DC, representatives of the Department of Town and Country Church, American Country Life Association, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and Federal Extension Service discussed the state of rural life but postponed action on the Second Commission in favor of further discussion "with other agencies."

17. Proceedings of the 33<sup>rd</sup> conference of ACLA, East Lansing, MI, Sept. 15-17, 1954, p. 78.

18. Other members of the committee were S. Janice Kee, Paul Miller, E.W. Mueller, Don Pielstick, and Irwin Will. Proceedings of the 34<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, State College, PA, July 12-14, pp. 77-78.

19. July 9,10, 1956 in Morgantown, WV.
20. President Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty with Executive Order 11306, September 27, 1966. The Commission's report, "The People Left Behind," was issued September 1967.
21. Charles E. Bishop, "Clarifying the Problem," Proceedings of the 35<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, Morgantown, WV, July 9, 1956, p. 6.
22. Don Paarlberg, "Facing the Problem" Proceedings of the 35<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, Morgantown, WV, July 9-10,1956, pp. 27-33. In January, 1954, President Eisenhower had directed USDA to conduct a study of low income farmers. A 44-page report, "Development of Agriculture's Human Resources," was released in April 1955. A pilot program in rural development was initiated by USDA in 1955.
23. Other members of the committee were Roy Buck, Paul Johnson, David Lindstrom, Paul Miller, E.W. Mueller, and Irvin Will.
24. Proceedings of the 36<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, University of Missouri, July 15-16, 1957, pp. 93-98.
25. Assembled minutes of ACLA secretary, October 3, 1957. Author archives.
26. Following instructions from the Board of Directors, December 3, Rev. Mueller drafted a letter seeking support from organizations with ties to ACLA. Letter to Radio Farm Directors (repeat to others) December 14, 1957, assembled minutes of ACLA.
27. Sponsored by Sen. Ralph Flanders of Vermont.
28. Letter to Cooley from Benson, June 24, 1958. The Bureau of the Budget is now the Office of Management and Budget.
29. 85<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess, HR 11844, sponsored by Brooks Hays of Arkansas, and HR 12239 sponsored by Albert Quie of Minnesota, bills to establish a Commission on Country Life.
30. Hearings on HR 11844 and HR 12239, House Committee on Agriculture, 85<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess, 1958, Serial DDD, U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 38.
31. Letter to Roy Buck, President of ACLA, from Don Paarlberg, Special Assistant to the President, December 5, 1958. Archives of Wisconsin Historical Society.
32. Hearings were held on HR 5012, HR 5022, HR 5517, at which Roy Buck, Brooks Hays, E.W. Mueller, and others testified. Hearings of Subcommittee on Family Farms, "Country Life Commission," House Committee on Agriculture, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., May 6-7, 1959, Serial T, U.S. Government Printing Office.

33. The National Council of Churches of Christ in America, for example, sent a resolution to ACLA in support of the second Commission. Assembled minutes of ACLA Board of Directors, November 30, 1959. Others, including churches and church organizations, cooperative associations, state departments of agriculture, the National Education Association, libraries, Grange, and the Farmers Union sent letters to ACLA or congressmen. The Farm Bureau was officially neutral, but clearly favored the position of the administration, at least until 1961. Archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society.
34. Assembled minutes of ACLA Board of Directors, November 28, 1960. Author's archives.
35. "A Proposed Pattern For a Presidential Commission on Country Life," an exhibit in assembled minutes of the ACLA Board of Directors, July 10, 1961, and printed in Proceedings of the 40<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, July 11-12, 1961, Washington, DC, pp. 99-102.
36. See Report of the Committee on the Presidential Country Life Commission by Chairman Milo Swanton in assembled minutes, and printed in Proceedings of 42<sup>nd</sup> conference of ACLA, Raleigh NC, July 9-10, 1963, pp. 65-66. No new legislation had been in the House, and a bill by Hartke of Indiana, S.1967, was not heard in scheduled hearings.
37. Proceedings of the 44<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, 1965, report of Board meeting, p. 101.
38. President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. *The People Left Behind*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 1967, p. vi.
39. Ellsworth (1960), pp. 155-6.
40. Paarlberg later returned to USDA to be Director of Agricultural Economics. As Director, he addressed ACLA in 1970: "USDA and Rural Development," Proceedings of the 49<sup>th</sup> conference of ACLA, Arlington, VA, July 14-15, 1970, pp. 19-22.

