The Problem of the American Farmer

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DURING the last three years I have watched the incoming tide of immigrants as it passed through Ellis Island from Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, and central Europe, and wondered, with many other Americans, why it was that on their arrival in this country the peasants of Europe abandoned the only calling with which they were familiar and flocked to the cities and mining-camps. Three quarters of our immigrants go into industry, while those who go to the land frequently drift back to the cities in a few months. It is not that there is not land enough, for if America were peopled as densely as are many countries in Europe, we could sustain ten times our present population. To-day the population of the United States is only 30 for each square mile. In Belgium it rises to 671 a square mile; in the United Kingdom to 382; in Switzerland to 237; in Italy to 318; in France to 191; in Denmark to 178; and in Austria to 224.

Thinking that possibly the immigrants did not know of the farming opportunities, I gathered together 150 Italians who were ready for admission. I told them of opportunities in the agricultural regions, with wages at from thirty to fifty dollars a month, and then requested a showing of hands of those who would go out as farm-laborers if the opportunity were offered them. Out of the group less than a dozen responded. I made the same proposal to a group of Greeks, and only a handful of them were willing to go to the land. Yet almost all of these men had come from farms or small villages and were familiar with agricultural life.

The attitude of these aliens reflects the attitude of the American people. They are abandoning the farm. The State Board of Agriculture of New York

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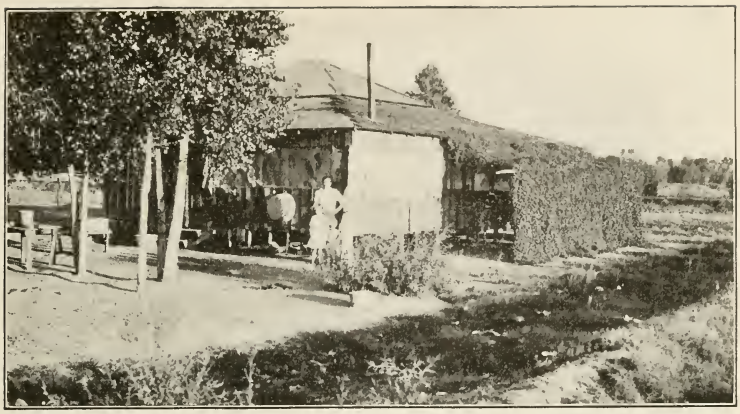
recently announced that out of 22,000,000 acres of land in that State only 8,200,000 or thirty-seven per cent., is being cultivated, and that of a total population of over 10,000,000 persons only 375,000 are agriculturalists. It is said that less than one third of the cultivable land in the country is properly tilled at all. Tens of millions of dollars are being spent by the federal and state governments to encourage farming and maintain agricultural colleges, and yet a large proportion of the boys trained for farming seek other employments. There is a constant drift of boys and girls from the farms to the cities, and no compensating drift from the city to the country. The population of our cities is growing year by year, while the number of persons engaged in the production of food is relatively, if not absolutely, diminishing.

What is the matter with farming? Why does the farmer abandon the land or let it to another? Why the shortage of food in the most fertile land in the world? Surely these questions are susceptible of answer.

I am satisfied that the current explanations of the decadence of agriculture are inadequate. I do not believe that men leave the farms willingly or that they will not go to the land if it is made profitable to them to do so. Hundreds of thousands of our people from the middle West moved into Canada before the war, and thousands of applicants present themselves whenever an Indian reservation is opened up to settlement. Moreover, there are millions of farmers who are tenants, and five millions more who are agricultural workers. This is proof enough that men, even under the most unsatisfactory conditions, are willing to remain on the land. All over the country tenancy is increasing very rapidly, and along with it a rapid rise in the price of land. The working of farms is passing from owners to tenants. Taking the country as a whole, farm tenancy increased from 25.6 per cent. in 1880 to 28.4 per cent. in 1890. In 1900 it jumped to 35.3 per cent., and to 37 per cent. in 1910. In the latter year there were 2,354,676 tenant farmers in the country. In some States tenancy is becoming the rule. In Iowa the number of tenants shot up from 23.8 per cent. to 37.8 per cent. in thirty years. In Oklahoma, from 1900 to 1910, it increased from 43.8 per cent. to 54.8 per cent. In Alabama the increase in thirty years was from 46.8 per cent. to 60.2 per cent., while in Texas the increase from 1880 to 1910 was from 37.6 per cent. to 52.6 per cent. From 1910 to the present time the increase in tenancy is even more rapid than in previous years. In some counties in the West



ON THE YUMA RECLAMATION CLAIM, CALIFORNIA

where more recent censuses have been taken farm tenancy had risen above 70 per cent., and was close to 80 per cent. of the total. As compared with this condition, France is a nation of home-owning farmers, while in little Denmark, the country which has developed agriculture into an exact science, only ten per cent. of the farmers are tenants, and the number is being rapidly reduced.

The reports from States like Texas and Oklahoma read very much like the stories of Ireland in the days of the famine. They show that the tenants are largely American-born whites; that the whole family works upon the land; that their united efforts keep them barely above the poverty-line, and that the tenants are indifferent and ignorant. They do not send their children to school; they exhaust the ground as quickly as possible, and then drift on to another farm.

Here is discouragement enough to drive these farmers from the soil; yet despite all these difficulties, there are 219,000 agriculturalists in Texas alone who are willing to stay on the land as tenants, while Oklahoma, Iowa, and many other Western States are but little better. Now, tenancy is not only bad for the tenant; it is destructive of agriculture. Tenancy destroys ambition, enterprise, hope. Ultimately it drives the tenant from the land, as it did in England and Ireland. From the time of John Stuart Mill down to the present, political economists have condemned tenant-farming as destructive of farming and the farmer as well.

Herein is one explanation of the decay of agriculture in the United States. Nearly forty per cent. of our farmers are tenants. Along with this, the public domain of the nation is gone. There is no more free land. Land values have gone up in consequence. The value of farming land in the United States increased one hundred and eighteen per cent. in ten years' time. It has acquired a speculative price, and is held at so high a figure that buyers can make a living, if at all, only by the hardest kind of application. This has made it difficult for the man with a little capital to become a farmer. This is true not only in the East; it is true in the West as well, where the great estates carved out of the public domain, sometimes of a million acres in extent, are being cut up into small holdings and sold to immigrants and workers from the cities. Instances have been reported to a California commission of men who had accumulated from two thousand to five thousand dollars and who had purchased worthless farms, only to lose their entire savings because they could not meet the annual payments. They paid from one hundred to three

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hundred dollars an acre for land that was not worth one third that sum. One instance was reported of a colony of Russians whose members had invested $150,000 in worthless hard-pan in a Western State, while great numbers of persons have been lured into the reclamation projects of the Southwest, which are so inhospitable and hot that women are able to live there only a portion of the year.

I have in my possession reports of individual men who have been induced to invest all they possessed in land on which they worked for two or three years and realized less than two hundred dollars a year from it; of men who had responded to some alluring advertisement, and had lost the accumulations of ten or twenty years' labor in a worthless investment.

This by no means exhausts the explanations of the decay of agriculture or the drift of population from the farm. Inability to dispose of crops; the lack of organized marketing facilities; the protest against railroads, commission brokers, and middlemen, and the feeling on the part of the farmer that if he produces a large crop it may rot in the fields, and that if the crop is short the profits which should come to him are taken by the speculators. It is this feeling that lies back of the Non-Partizan Movement of farmers, which had its birth in North Dakota a year ago and swept the State at the last election, and is now expanding into South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, and the far Western States. This Non-Partizan Movement is a political movement, its platform being the public ownership of grain-elevators, of terminals and slaughter-houses, of state credit to the farmer, and of adequate protection against the fraudulent grading of wheat, and such control of the packing-houses and cold-storage plants as will give the farmer a secure market for his produce.

The Western farmer insists that he wants to farm, that he has no desire to go to the city, but that economic conditions over which he has no control are making it increasingly difficult for him to make a living. It is this that is driving him and his children into the city, just as it is the incoming immigrant.

The fact is, agriculture is breaking down. The old order of things really ended ten or twenty years ago, and a study of land monopoly, of tenancy, of farm credits and marketing conditions confirms the farmer's complaint. Strangely enough, that which has happened to America has happened to other countries, including

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Australia and Canada. But America is almost the only agricultural nation that has not recognized these facts or the necessity of a new agricultural program. We are almost the only people who have not begun to work out a constructive policy for placing people on the land under proper conditions and for the protection of the farmer from exploitation after he has gone there.

Denmark was the pioneer in a new agricultural policy fifty years ago. Denmark has been followed by Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Norway, Sweden, Italy, and the Australian states. Since the war broke out nearly all of the warring nations of Europe have worked out more or less comprehensive agricultural policies, all following substantially the same lines, and all looking to financial and other support from the state. And all of these projects include cheap credit, long-term loans, and the purchase and sale of land for farming purposes by the state.

As long ago as 1903, Great Britain undertook a solution of the Irish question by the subdivision of the great estates owned by the English gentry. In thirteen years the Government has expended $550,000,000 in the purchase, subdivision, and settlement of 9,000,000 acres of land, or about one third of the total area of Ireland. An unhappy, poverty-stricken country has been converted into a nation of contented land-owners. It is expected that by 1920 tenancy will have almost ceased to exist, at virtually no cost to the empire. The money appropriated for the purpose is being repaid by the purchasers in instalments, with interest. A royal commission for England and Scotland is now engaged in making a census of estates, and is framing a law under which land will be subdivided and sold to returning soldiers at the close of the war.

In the five years prior to the war Germany appropriated over $200,000,000 in buying and preparing farms for settlers. Waste land was reclaimed. In the years prior to 1907 the number of holdings under five acres in extent increased by 316,678, while in the same period holdings over one hundred acres decreased by 20,744. It is said that in the neighborhood of three quarters of the agricultural land in the empire is now in small holdings. This work is carried on under a settlement commission. Even the great estates in East Prussia, Posen, and Pomerania are being parceled out, much as was done by Stein

and Hardenberg a hundred years ago. Speaking of this policy, the official report on land settlement says:

The existence of such large landed estates [as those of East Prussia] not only hinders the national progress of the peasant class, but, greatest evil of all, it is the principal cause of the diminishing population of agricultural territories, because the working classes, finding no chances of moral or economic improvement, are driven to emigrate to the great cities and manufacturing districts. Scientific researches also prove that small farms nowadays are more profitable than large, above all small live-stock improved farms, the importance of which for the nutriment of the people is constantly increasing.

In 1913 the German government provided for the compulsory purchase of 70,000 acres of land. Speaking of the areas which were subdivided, it was stated, "Where formerly there had been at one end of the social scale a few rich landowners, often non-residents and exercising an undue political influence, and at the other end a large number of poverty-stricken and discontented peasants and farm laborers, there is now a great middle class of society, devoted to the Empire for what it has done for its members.

In the last ten years the Russian Government improved and equipped farms for 3,000,000 settlers. It contracted in the United States for millions of dollars' worth of farm machinery to be delivered after the war, so that homes could be provided for the returning soldiers. As long ago as 1893 New Zealand realized the evils of land monopoly and farm tenancy. The first experiment was very successful, in three years' time the number of people on a single estate having been increased from forty to one thousand. During the twenty years from 1893 to 1913 New Zealand appropriated $65,000,000 for buying, subdividing, and settling large estates. During these years the agricultural population grew more rapidly than that of the cities, and in twenty years' time it doubled. When the present war began, New Zealand led the world in the per capita value of its agricultural exports.

The same policy has been followed by other Australian states. Since 1909 over 3,000,000 acres of land have been bought, subdivided, and sold to settlers, and over $40,000,000 has been loaned to the colonists by the state. Speaking of the results of this settlement policy, the Premier of Victoria, in his budget speech in 1914, said:

The settlement policy is a demonstrated success. Over large areas in widely separated districts more than ten times as many families are settled comfortably under attractive social conditions as were there five years ago, and they are obtaining returns from their holdings that even less than five years ago were regarded as impossible. The demonstration that families can be fully employed and obtain a comfortable living on from 20 to 40 acres of irrigable land not only insures the financial success of our investment in irrigation works but gives a new conception of the ultimate population which this state will support and the agricultural wealth it will produce.

The land-settlement policies of all these countries are substantially alike. They provide for the purchase of land by the Government or the use of the public domain. The land is divided into holdings which can be cultivated without the aid of other labor. The size of the holdings depends upon the nature of the soil and the kinds of crops produced. Applicants for farm ownership are examined to ascertain their fitness and general moral worth. The would-be farmer is required to make an initial deposit of possibly ten per cent. of the total capital outlay as an assurance of good faith. The farm, when sold, is equipped with a dwelling and outbuildings, with such cattle as may be necessary, and sufficient working capital for one year's operation. Usually the farmer is not required to pay interest on the capital cost for several years. Then from three to four per cent. interest is charged, and one per cent. additional for the ulti-

mate extinguishment of the debt in thirty or forty years.

Usually the state coöperates with the farmer by providing advice and supervision from experts or from the agricultural colleges. Efforts are made to locate the farmers in a colony or village, so that the settlers will have some social intercourse. Schools are provided, and recreation as well. Farmers are aided to organize coöperative buying and selling societies, so that they can acquire goods at cost and sell in the best markets.

The state-aided settlements in all these countries have been a success. They have not proved a burden to the tax-payers in any country where the plan has been carried out. In some instances they have earned a profit. Under the stimulus of ownership the farmers have built better homes. Owning only sufficient land for a single man to cultivate, they have brought a larger acreage under cultivation. They have improved their live stock, have purchased more labor-saving machinery. They have piped water to the dwellings and developed irrigation projects. The number of live stock has been so largely increased in New Zealand—and the same is true of other countries—that the farmers amortize their loans in a shorter time than that provided by the state. The Canadian commission says of the New Zealand experiment:

> Throughout the country a higher and better civilization is gradually being evolved. The young men and women who are growing up are happy and contented to remain at home on the farm and find ample time and opportunity for recreation and entertainment of a kind more wholesome and elevating than can be obtained in the city.

When the war is over, it is safe to assume that most of the countries of Europe will turn their attention to the intensive cultivation of the land. England will endeavor to feed herself instead of being dependent upon America and Denmark. The Russian revolution will open up hundreds of millions of acres of land to the peasants of that country. Germany will undoubtedly extend the colonization projects successfully started before the war. Canada was already experimenting with this policy as well as with the taxation of land values to break up large estates, and will seek to lure settlers not only from Europe, but from the United States. Even Mexico has worked out an agricultural program in some of her states patterned upon the experiments in Europe. All the world will compete for able-bodied men in order to meet the burdens of this war and to reëstablish their industry and life. And partly in anticipation of these conditions, the State of California has created a state colonization commission which is projecting a big program for the colonization of home-owning farmers in that State. Legislation has been enacted, and an appropriation of $250,000 has been made with which to buy a large tract of land. The federal farm-loan board is to be asked to coöperate in the development of a colony as described above. It is planned to purchase 10,000 acres of land, and with the aid of experts to determine the size of farms, the kind of agriculture to be adopted, the character and grouping of houses and farm buildings, and the educational, recreational, and coöperative agencies that can be developed in connection with it. The state university is coöperating in the project. It is planned to limit the right of settlers to speculate by restricting the right to sell their purchases. The individual farms, fully equipped, are estimated to cost about $5000, to be paid for by the owners within fifty years' time, with interest at the rate of four per cent. A minimum capital of about $1500 is to be required from each applicant, a large part of which is to be used as working capital.

A similar measure, known as the Crosser Bill, is now before Congress. It looks to the creation of a rotary fund of $10,000,000 for the purpose of developing farm colonies, the farms to be either sold or leased to settlers under terms similar to those provided in the California measure. Public lands and reclamation projects will be used for the purpose. It

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has been suggested that the money deposited in the postal savings-banks should be used, and as the payments by settlers come in from year to year, that the fund be rotated, and that new colonies be opened in different parts of the country to serve as experiment stations for States or private persons that are willing to carry out similar projects.

The state-aided farm colony plan does not fully meet the agricultural problem. It does not solve the difficulties of marketing or of transportation. It does not provide cold-storage warehouses or terminals. Nor does it insure cheap land, which is essential to successful agriculture. It does, however, lend the aid of science to agriculture. It does provide education and direction by experts. It offers very cheap credit. Most important of all, ownership awakens ambition and hope. It insures permanency of tenure. It aims to reëstablish conditions similar to those which peopled America with land-hungry immigrants in the days when land was to be had for the asking, and places agriculture on a firmer foundation of security than that which now prevails.