

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMBARGO ON FARMING

UP to the present we have been discussing distribution, the conditions which prevail in the marketing of food, and the effect of the many monopolies which have forced themselves into this field on the cost of living as well as upon agriculture. From this point on we shall consider production; why there is not more food produced; why men do not go out to the land; why boys and girls drift to the city with no compensating drift back to the farm. This is, of course, the most important question. For the United States could feed itself and almost feed Europe if our opportunities were utilized as they should be, or as they are in some parts of Europe.

Many persons have come to the conclusion that the decay of agriculture is inevitable, that we cannot check the drift of people to the city, a drift that has been going on all over Europe as well. They say the city is so much more attractive than the country, it has so much more to offer that people will, of course, go to the towns. There are some, too, who feel that society really gains by the change that is going on. There can be little real life in isolated groups. The city is the civilizing agency,

and the world will advance more rapidly when the detached farm is gone and some new form of agricultural organization takes its place. And such persons believe that the solution of farming is through wholesale production and the organization of agriculture along modern industrial lines. The food we need should be produced by specialization, by gangs of men working as in great manufacturing plants, the farms being operated by large companies or under socialistic or semisocialistic organization. Under such an arrangement one farm would be devoted exclusively to dairying, another to the raising of poultry, another to truck-gardening, and the large estates of the West and South to wheat, cattle, cotton, tobacco, and large-scale plantation production. It has been estimated that with agriculture organized as is industry 20,000 men could feed 2,000,000 people, and that millions of farmers could be released to other lines of activity.

It is, of course, a very wasteful system under which men remain on the farm all the year round when their working period is only six or seven months. There is also a waste in the raising of diversified crops on each farm. It requires far more labor per unit of production than would be necessary for large-scale production. Moreover, under existing conditions the individual farmer is unable to own tractor ploughs, machines for planting and harvesting, the use of which labor-saving devices would be possible

if farming were organized as is industry on large units of land in which individual ownership were merged as it is in the trusts and corporations.

It is possible that some such organization will be the ultimate form of agriculture when individual property has given way to collective ownership. But such an organization is a long way off, and the working out of such large-scale farming will only come after efforts have been exhausted to redeem agriculture along lines with which we are familiar.

And before we abandon the old organization of agriculture, or condemn the farmer for leaving the land we should be satisfied that he is really leaving the farm from choice, and is not being driven from it by conditions that can be corrected. And there is evidence enough that men really want to be farmers, and that they will go to the land by millions if it is made reasonably easy and profitable for them to do so. But they must have some hope that they will be able to make as decent a living as they can in the city, and that they will not lose the results of their efforts through exploitation by the many predatory interests that surround the farmer and make agriculture the precarious industry that it is.

Even without such assurance millions of men remain in the country under what are almost intolerable economic conditions. There are 5,000,000 agricultural workers or farm-hands in the United States whose position is certainly far from attrac-

tive. They work long hours, they receive relatively low pay, they have few of the comforts and pleasures of the city.¹ There are also 2,354,676 tenant farmers, and the life they lead and the precarious returns they receive are not such as to lure men to farming or to retain boys and girls on the farm who have been reared in tenant families.

Men not only remain on the farm under the most difficult economic and social conditions, but three centuries of experience proves that the hunger for land is probably the most powerful economic motive known to man. It is as operative to-day as it was in the days of our grandfathers. In the years just before the European War several hundred thousand farmers moved from Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and the northwest into the undeveloped regions of western Canada. They were drawn by the free or the comparatively cheap land of a new country. And it is free land that has been the attraction that has peopled America from the beginning. It was this rather than religious or political liberty that lured the English, the Scotch, and the Irish, the Germans and the Scandinavians to this country from the first colonists in Massachusetts and Virginia down to the pioneers who filled in the Western prairies after the Civil War. Generation by generation the sons of settlers, the discontented

¹ See *Report of Commission on Industrial Relations*, vol. 1, p. 320, and vol. 10, pp. 9059 *et. seq.*

from the cities, and the immigrants from Europe moved westward on to the virgin lands awaiting their settlement.

No hardship was severe enough to halt the movement and no tales of suffering and privation deterred the colonists of the East or the immigrant from crossing the continent. The settlers suffered from cyclones and tornadoes. They lived through cropless years in dugouts and hastily constructed shacks. They suffered from drought. Their cattle perished. They had no companionship and few of the comforts of life. Their children had no educational opportunities; there was no means of communication and few visitors relieved the monotony of existence. Yet the lure of free land was stronger than any hardships. It filled in a continent. In a few years' time the great stretches from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific slope were divided into homesteads and peopled by the Anglo-Saxon race. Even the "Great American Desert" was not so desolate as to be able to defy the land hunger of the settler.

Such is the magnetic power of the land. It defies all obstacles. It lures, as does the quest for gold. It attracts the Anglo-Saxon, the Teuton, the Latin, and the Slav. The experience of America and Australia, the more recent experience of Canada, the peopling of the reclamation projects, even the settlement of human beings in the

Imperial Valley of California, where the heat is so terrible that women can live there only a portion of the year, proves the hunger of people for the land.

But the free land of the West is all gone. It has passed out of the hands of the government. No longer do the open prairies, unfenced and unowned, keep down the price of land. No longer does a free homestead to be had for the asking free the would-be farmer from the necessity of being a farm-hand or a tenant on the land of another. The age-long movement of people toward the setting sun came to an end about the close of the last century when the remaining Indian reservations and Oklahoma were thrown open to the landless of the earth.

The enclosure of the public domain ended the first great era of American history. It marked the close of an era in the history of the world. For the enclosures of the free land ended the freedom of choice enjoyed by the city worker, it ended the freedom of choice of the would-be farmer, in a sense it ended the freedom of the western world. And when the free land was gone, all land began to have a monopoly price irrespective of its real value. It acquired a speculative value. No longer was land desirable only because of its greater fertility or nearness to the city. All land now had a scarcity value, a value due to the fact that all of

the land was privately owned. Then the price of land began to rise. It rose with great rapidity. A million incoming immigrants increased the demand, not only for land, but for food as well. And this increasing demand upon a limited supply affected all land values. It has been especially operative during the past few years. Fifty years ago land in Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas was held at from \$3 to \$5 an acre. Today it is held at from \$100 to \$300 an acre. In Texas it is the same. In California land which a generation ago could be had for the asking is held at from \$500 to \$1,000 an acre. The farming land in America is held at a higher price than it is in England. Only in such intensively cultivated countries as France, Holland, Belgium, and Denmark is the value of agricultural land equal to that in the central states of America.

Even in the East the price of land is prohibitive to the would-be farmer. Only by the most intensive application can he make enough to keep up payments and make a decent living. Frequently he loses his whole investment through failure to meet the charges against him.

This speculative price of land is one explanation of the decay of agriculture and the failure of farming to keep pace with our needs. The earth is closed against the would-be farmer. The man of average capital is unable to buy or to make a living

on the land at the price which he has to pay for it.

The rapidity with which land has increased in value in recent years is indicated by the census returns. In 1900 the farming land of the United States had a value of \$13,058,007,995. A decade later it was valued at \$28,475,674,169. In ten years' time farming land increased in value by \$15,417,666,174 or 118.1 per cent. The value of the land per acre increased 108.1 per cent. During this period the increase in farm acreage was but 4.8 per cent., and the number of persons engaged in agriculture but 11.2 per cent. The increase in the value of agricultural land was not the result of increasing acreage under cultivation, nor yet in the number of farmers. The increased value was a monopoly value, due to the enclosure of the free land, and the increasing pressure of population upon the soil. It is an "unearned increment," a social value due to the necessities of society and the increase of population.

The cheap land of our fathers has disappeared just as the free land of our grandfathers disappeared a generation earlier. And dear land places an embargo on farming. It explains the drift to the city. It drives the sons of farmers away from the country. They cannot buy land. It is held at a price beyond its economic value. And men are unwilling to become tenants or agricultural laborers

when they can make more money and enjoy greater comforts in the city.

This is one obstacle to agriculture. This is one explanation of why we do not produce more food. The earth is closed against labor.

Men in the mass are always trying to satisfy their needs along lines that are easiest. By something like telepathy they know of the avenues of effort that are most remunerative even when those opportunities are in far-away Alaska. And the end of the centuries-long movement to the land, which has been going on since the discovery of America, is not wholly due to the attractiveness of the city or its comforts and pleasures; it is due rather to the fact that the land is now closed against the worker by the speculative prices that act as an embargo against him.