

AUGUST 6, 1924

CHAPEL HILL, N. C.
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

VOL. X, NO. 38

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Entered as second-class matter November 14, 1914, at the Postoffice at Chapel Hill, N. C., under the act of August 24, 1912

SMALL-SCALE FARMS IN FRANCE

XXXIV—THE FARM WOMEN OF FRANCE

A final measure of the farm civilization of a country is the lot and fate of the women and children in the farm homes. If they are overworked beasts of burden—just critters as the kneefarmers of Europe say—then the farm civilization of that land is poverty stricken beyond redemption. Or what is even worse, it is cursed with the self-imposed poverty of pinching parsimony. Describe in detail the farm homes, the tasks that are turned over to the women and children indoors and afield, the presence or absence of home conveniences, comforts and luxuries—books, magazines and newspapers, musical instruments and music, electric lights, telephones, running water, waste disposal systems and the like—the look of hopefulness or blank apathy in the faces of the women and the children, the sickness ratios of the family and the death rates of infants and children, and you have a graphic, photographic picture of the farm civilization of a country.

Signs of Knee-Farming

Whatever lifts the level of the farm home lifts the nation; whatever depresses the farm home dooms the social order it supports. It is a matter worth considering, because under modern conditions our own small-scale farmers are moving little by little toward the low estate of the kneefarming peasants of the Old World countries where the farm burdens rest in the main upon the backs of the women and children. Signs of it appear in our tobacco patches, in our cotton fields in the chopping and picking seasons, in our truck and fruit areas everywhere, in the cranberry bogs of New Jersey and Wisconsin, and the sugar beet farms of the West. And the native farm women of America will not bear it without revolt.

The cityward drift of country populations in more than half the states of the Union is largely the result of impossible living conditions in our farm homes. The small-scale farmers of Denmark found a way of escape (1) in ownership farming, (2) in self-feeding farm systems, (3) in the abundant use of small labor-saving machines, (4) in business machines created by cooperative effort, and (5) in community-culture organizations and enterprises. The result is farm homes on the highest possible levels of happiness and hopefulness for the women and children. And I see no other way of escape for the small-scale farmers of our southern cotton-tobacco belt.

If the women and the children of the farm homes live happy hopeful lives then the persistence and the progress of the country life of the nation is assured. But not so otherwise. Goldsmith's Deserted Village was a farm village, you know—a farm village in a land where factory systems, transportation, trade, and banking developed big cities and destroyed agriculture, a land where wealth accumulates and men decay. Said a yeoman farmer to me at the Royal Cattle Show in Islington in 1909, "England's a paradise for pigs and a hell for humans, town and country."

The French Farm Women

With these things said, let me remind my readers of the contrasts I exhibited a little while ago between the farm women of Denmark and the peasant women of Germany. I have never seen farm homes better equipped with conveniences, comforts, and luxuries than the farm homes of Denmark. There is perhaps no happier life for country women and children anywhere else on earth. But the lot of the women and children on the peasant farms of France, like the lot of the peasant women of Germany, offers a sad contrast to the life of the farm homes of Denmark. The women and children on French farms work just as hard as the peasant women and children of Germany. Like the German peasant woman the French farm woman is a wife and mother, a housewife and cattle keeper, a field worker, draft animal and beast of burden. And in every farm region of France they work as I

never saw women work even in central and south Germany. For instance, instead of picketing their dairy animals like the Danes and leaving them to graze alone, an old woman or a young girl in France will have charge of two or three cows and follow them about in the pastures and along the roads all day long in any and every kind of weather. I saw literally thousands of women and children stalking the cows, sheep, geese, and goats in a steady downpour of rain that lasted all day long all the way from Strassburg to Paris. No umbrellas, no rain coats, no gum shoes in sight anywhere. Only weather-soaked shawls protected their heads and shoulders. Only wooden shoes or sabots saved their feet from the mud and puddles of water. It made me shiver to look at these drenched figures in their lonely vigils.

Ambushed Homes

It is not easy to get into either the peasant or bourgeois homes of France. The German peasants live in villages with their farm animals under the same roof, but their homes open wide on the streets. The French peasants also live in farm villages but their farm buildings form squares set close together behind the high walls that line the roadways. An occasional window opens outward and frequently only a slit in the high outer wall serves to indicate the homes behind the barricades of stone that line the streets. The peasant life of Germany is open to the eye. The little children play together in the streets, and the housewives gossip between whiles in folksy fashion around the front doors. Not so in France. A walk down the street of a French village is like moving along between the stark walls of a little Rocky Mountain gorge, and the silence is almost as funereal. The family life of the French peasant is as concealed from neighbors and strangers as old King Tut ever was in his tomb. The Danish peasant homes are open to all the world, with the lath strings hanging on the outside, and a rare warmth of welcome awaits neighbors and strangers alike. If you get into a French farm home—peasant home, middle-class home, or chateau—you must be certificated by the ambassador of your country, viced by the minister of agriculture or some other minister of state, and then viced by the prefect, the sub-prefect, and the sous-prefect, clear down the line from some almightiness at the top to some little tin god at the bottom. For France is a complicated hierarchy of fonctionnaires, reaching from the minister of state through countless grades to local midgets in the public service. Richelieu made it so four hundred years ago, and so it is today with no essential change anywhere. And France is fonctionnaire France. You are not allowed to forget that fact for a single minute. Without fingering a long line of red tape, you would get into a French farm home at the risk of your life.

No Neighborhoods in France

But with all the diplomatic manoeuvres and flourishes properly attended to, the French home opens to you and the lord of the house is proud to receive you and show you everything he has in the farm square; that is to say the barns, the farm tools and utensils, the supplies of food and feed stuffs, the wonderful variety of farm animals, the rabbit warrens and the dovecotes, and last of all the sitting room where a meagre fire burns in a small grate or glows in a charcoal brazier. The living room is usually the only room in the house you get to see. It is the only room open to strangers or even neighbors. I say neighbors—the word has almost no significance in France in peasant or bourgeois circles. Neighborliness is almost unknown no matter how long the next door family or the other dwellers in the farm village may have lived in close proximity during one or a dozen generations. The living room is a catch-all space devoted to the things the family uses and handles constantly in the daily life of the farm. The kitchen and dining room,

VITAL NEEDS

What is most needed in this country is the inculcating of the right ideals in the mind of youth, a stern parental discipline, a respect for authority, a willingness to shoulder responsibility and face the facts. Moral beauty, moral courage, strength of character, an appreciation of real values, and the backbone to draw a line and walk by it are the things that will redeem the country and the race. When these are supplied the little symptoms of decadence and moral degeneracy that we mistake for mountains of evil will fade away as by night.—Laurinburg Exchange.

if there be such a separate room, adjoins it on one side, and if there be a parlor or what the Danes call a drawing-room it opens out of the living room on the other side. If you are taken into the parlor you have a chance to look at the medals and blue ribbons the farmer has won in departmental or national contests. There may be other things in the parlor that remind you of its name but the peasant is wholly bent on showing you his parchments and diplomas, blue ribbons and medals. It is rare for anybody outside the family circle to get a look into the bedroom quarters of a French peasant home.

Why Home Life is Hidden

And there are reasons for the hidden life of the French peasant family, reasons why the family life is shut in and safe-guarded from curious prying eyes, why the family life is removed from the gaze of fellow villagers as well as from strangers. And here we come to a characteristic distinction between the peasant life of Germany and the peasant life of France. The peasants of both Germany and France are small-scale farmers. In both countries they work their wives and children to the limit in the business of farming, both are thrifty to the core, instinctively so, but here the likeness ends. The German peasant saves but what he saves is not money mainly. His savings are at once converted into producing properties—a little more land, another farm animal, a new wagon, a new farm tool of some sort. And during the year and after their savings went into building brand new farm houses, putting new roofs on old farm houses, and paying off of debts in cheap money. The German peasant's dream is to get fixed comfortably for bigger business as a farmer. His pride is to have more farm animals and a larger manure pile in front of his house.

The French peasant is not thrifter than the German peasant but he saves for altogether another purpose, and he will slave and starve both himself and his family in order to accomplish that purpose. That is to say, what he saves is money. What he hoards is money. He hoards it like a miser. He fingers his savings like Silas Marner. His joy is in counting over his francs or his securities. If he turns his money alose at all he wants a state bond for it or a municipal bond or an industrial stock or a lottery ticket. He counts his wealth in land to be sure, but above all he counts it in francs, stocks and bonds, and least of all in home comforts. Pinching parsimony and sordid miserliness are ingrained peasant traits. Hoarding money is occasional among Danish farmers, it is well-nigh universal among the peasants and the bourgeois farmers and villagers of France. With this difference, the home comforts and luxuries of the middle class farmers and town dwellers in France will usually be ample or even ostentatious, but never so unless the family is on the safe side of solvency. No matter what happens, whether he have much or little or nothing to eat or wear, or whether the wife and children live on scraps and go in rags, the French peasant must always be at least "one brave sou" ahead of the game. It makes the peasant nature of France hard and cruel as death itself. The women and children suffer unspeakably both in their home life and in their field work, but they have been bred to dire deprivations during countless generations, and even the Hindoo devotee finds his bed of tacks tolerable at last.

Home Ownership the Rule

The peasants of France have been home-owning farmers from the earliest days of feudalism until the Tennis Court oath of the Commons at Versailles. Upon the terms of feudal tenure, to be sure. They were taxed, harassed, degraded, and goaded into savagery by their feudal overlords and the state, but when the pent-up wrath of centuries exploded in the French Revolution they owned right around one-fourth of the arable land of the realm. Today they are something like one-half of the entire population and they own about four-fifths of the improved farm lands of France. Farm tenants or metayers as the French say, are few—less than twenty percent of all the farmers the state over, against forty-five percent in North Carolina. The ratios run highest in the grain and livestock areas. The farm laborers are still fewer and their lot in the villages of the middle-class farmers is lower than that of our country negroes at home—so much lower in food, dress, manners, and morals that an American rubs his eyes in amazement. Or so I found it on the nine-hundred-acre farm of the best or reputedly the best farmer in northern France. And by the way, this hobereau or country squire owns one of the estates that once belonged to the Count Girardin who sheltered Rousseau at the Hermitage in the Montmorency Forest just before the French Revolution.

The change from feudal tenures to fee simple deeds in land ownership is a fundamental fact in the social structure of France. It is the one lasting result of the French Revolution. The varying forms of government since Napoleon's day, the stubborn resistance to priestly domination in politics and the rapid rise and fall of ministries are all episodes in recent French history directly related to the majority vote of home-owning farmers who hoard money, who are frightened out of their wits by the dwindling worth of their securities, and the diminishing exchange value of their dividends, who dread increasing taxes even more than they fear death itself. When their francs fell from twenty cents to four cents in purchasing power, and they faced Poincaré's twenty percent increase of taxes, then whoever knew the soul of France knew that another volcanic upheaval was at hand. Clemenceau knew it. Said he, "The French love La Patrie, but increase their taxes by a single sou and you have a revolution on your hands." What the French peasants crave is security and peace in the possession of their small properties. If they crave anything else I did not discover it in a five-months' sojourn among them. These insured, they will tolerate with carelessness any form of government whatsoever. Liberty, equality, and fraternity are words of sentimental sound and fury signifying little or nothing in France, and nobody knew this fact any better than Napoleon.

A Despised Occupation

Agriculture is the most despised occupation in France. I heard this statement on every hand, and it is easy to see that it is a fact. The farmers are despised, dreaded, and cajoled by the politicians who are themselves held in light esteem. The farmers are despised by the wealthy classes whose interest in country life is mainly in game preserves, shooting boxes and the gay parades of the hunting season; or in preserving, restoring, and maintaining the ancient chateaux as priceless treasures of art and beauty. But the French nobles who live on their country estates the year around and farm from sheer love of agriculture are as few today as they were in Arthur Young's time. He found ten in the seventeen eighties, in four trips that took him into every province, and I found eleven in 1923—among them the Marquis de Vogue and his son the Count Francois who head the French Society of Agriculture with its one and a half million members. Such men as these are few and rare but they are worth more to France than all the French Ministers of Agriculture in the last hundred years.

And the French farmers despise themselves. They suffer from what Freud the Austrian psychologist calls an inferiority complex. The evidence

lies in their sullen mien and sensitive, fierce assertion of equality—an attitude and humor that demands and receives punctilious courtesy in the market places and the army service alike. What they lack is what the Danish peasants have, namely a worthy personal pride in themselves, their families and their homes. The privacy of a farm home in France must be respected. It cannot be invaded without risk. Behind its walls the family lives as it pleases, without let or hindrance. It is their sacred right. How they live is nobody else's business. And not always but commonly the French peasant family pleases to live like pigs in a litter,—all for the sake of hoarding money and owning interest-bearing securities. They live in thousands in caves like the troglodytes of twilight times. There are today miles of cave dwellers along the Cher river near Loches in Touraine and elsewhere in France as in Arthur Young's day, and in these holes in the limestone bluffs the peasants ripen their cheeses and rear their children in foul damp atmospheres today exactly as they did a thousand years ago, regardless of appalling death rates.

A Dwindling Population

But the rights of privacy are no more stoutly maintained among the cave dwellers than in the peasant homes of the better sort in France. As a result birth rates are low and death rates are high. By nineteen fifty the excess of births over deaths will be zero, and recruits for the army and navy will have disappeared. The French are aware of it and mightily disturbed about it, but nothing can be done in rural health promotion and disease prevention because the farm homes are sealed and steeled against invasion. Feeble beginnings in public health work in country areas are evident in only three of the ninety-odd departments of France. I mean health work of the sort that is common in American states. Free clinics and dispensaries are common for the sick in many or most country towns in France, but home sanitation and hygiene are almost unknown. So because of the sacred rights of the French family to live in such concealment and privacy as it pleases. This same sealed privacy in French family circles defeats such work as an army of home demonstration agents does in America. The work of such public servants is unthinkable in France. It would be regarded as unnecessary and unspeakably impertinent. There is no need of it; we have nothing to learn more than we already know, said a French official sent to investigate this movement in the United States.

Speaking of the low birth rates of France, I may add that my conclusion singles out one of many contributing causes as being primarily responsible for it. Namely, the marriage of convenience, the canny purpose of which is to lift the contracting families in the social scale, to strengthen their business connections, and to increase their political influence. All of which turns upon the ability of the family to make the daughter tempting with the largest possible dot and the son tempting with the largest possible marriage portion. The fewer the children the greater the chance to advance the family in marriage contracts. For two children the French father and mother must accumulate two fortunes. If there be three children, a third fortune must be made. The wilful limiting of births is therefore the rule, especially in the middle class and aristocratic circles, but less so among the peasants because children are distinctly an asset in small-scale farming. Thrift is therefore the rule in France among all classes, and among the peasants it easily becomes pinching penury and sordid self-imposed poverty.

The reader may have intimate glimpses of French peasant homes in Balzac's *The Peasants*, Zola's *The Soil*, Roupnel's *Nono*, and Guillaumin's *The Life of a Simple Man*—all of them in English and all in the seminar library of Rural Social Economics at the University of North Carolina.

The most hopeful farm civilization in Europe is that of the Danes. The country homes are convincing evidence of it. The farmers of America are poor in many areas, sometimes mortally poor, oftentimes poor because they are trifling and thrifless; but if the country civilization of any county of North Carolina were as sordid as it is in France, as steeped in the self-imposed poverty of pinching parsimony, I should feel like sitting down in sack-cloth and ashes.—E. C. Branson, Tours.