Agricultural Co-operation In Ireland

By CLARENCE POE

III.—The Twofold Problem of Business Organization.

In Castlecomer also is located the "Valley of the Deen Co-operative Agricultural Society," an organization of farmers effected for the purpose of saving money on the purchase of "seeds and manure"—everybody over here says "manures," when referring to commercial fertilizers. It started several years ago with one hundred members. It now has two hundred and eighty, and does an annual business of about $2,500 in fertilizers and implements (mainly fertilizers, for the farms over here are too small to make profitable use of extensive farm machinery); $1,250 in seeds, and $1,600 in feed stuff.

The Society charges 5 per cent profit on purchases—the profits, less $50 a year salary to the secretary, becoming the property of the members; and of the entrance fee of $5, only fifty cents has been called for. The society owns two manure spreaders and two spraying machines for the joint use of all the members—an illustration of the idea of co-operative ownership of expensive farm machines which is becoming quite popular over here. Sixteen thousand Irish farmers are members of such agricultural societies as this, and the members not only save much money on their purchases, but they have become interested in fertilizer subjects and have come to insist upon purer seeds and upon fertilizer brands more suited to special crops and soils.

A few years ago, Mr. Ward, the secretary, told me, the farmers took any fertilizer that was put up in bags and smelled strong enough, but they have now grown far "keener," as the British phrase has it, and in consequence their fertilizer money is much more wisely spent. In the case of the Valley of the Deen Society—and I suppose the same thing is true of the other agricultural societies—every member takes one $1.20 share in the general "Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society" of Dublin, to which reference ha salready been made, and through which all orders are placed.

I have referred briefly to the work of the Co-operative Creamery near Ballyragget, and the Poultry Society there; the Co-operative Agricultural Bank there, and its fellow at Castlecomer; and the Agricultural Society for the purchase of goods at Castlecomer. This list, however, does not exhaust the forms of co-operative endeavor in the county of Kilkenny and other parts of Ireland. For the first time the farmers' wives and daughters are being organized, and there is a branch of the "United Irishwomen" at Ballyragget which has already done some notable work.

What the "United Irishwomen Are Doing."

Through arrangements made with the I. A. O. S. and the Department of Agriculture, experts are sent to these women's societies to give instructions in domestic science, cooking, nursing, dressmaking, sanitation, poultry work, gardening, and to help the women as members of the poultry and dairy societies, as well as in organizing country amusements, local fairs, flower shows, concerts, dances, rural libraries, etc. In some cases prizes are given for the best kept gardens and the most attractive homes. The annual membership fee in the "United Irishwomen" is sixty cents, and one of the most striking features in it, as in the men's societies, is that Catholics and Protestants — even Catholic priests and Protestant ministers—forget their religious differences in a united effort for community betterment.

Organizations That Pay.

It will be seen from all this that the agricultural societies in Ireland are very business-like. Each society works for a definite purpose, yet all are clubbed together through a common membership in the I. A. O. S., to whose support all local branches contribute.

When I asked Secretary Anderson how they managed to kepe the farmhow they managed to keep the farmply by showing them that it pays." If farmers and farmers' wives get 30 per cent more for their eggs by working together through poultry societies; and six cents a pound more for their butter by forming co-operative creameries; and are able frequently to double a year's profits by being able to borrow needed sums from co-operative banks; or save $2 or $3 a ton on fertilizers by ordering in a body, one is not likely to hear much of the old, old story: "Farmers won't stick together." In Ireland they do stick and they do succeed. Because of this fact, they feel a new dignity for themselves, and the State and the Nation feel a new respect for them. As a result of Sir Horace Plunkett's movement and the power of the agricultural organizations, a Department of Agricultural and Technical Instruction was created for Ireland with an anual income of nearly $12,000,000—an instance of their new-found political power. As Sir Horace says: "I do not know how it is in America, but at home I have observed that, when legislation affecting any particular interest is under discussion in Parliament or elsewhere, those who speak on behalf of that interest are listened to with an attention strictly proportionate to the organization of those they speak for —not political organization, but business organization."

Organized Selling—the Most Important Form of Co-operation.

This other distinctive feature of agricultural co-operation in Ireland should also be noted: that success has been achieved not simply in buying supplies at reduced rates, but in selling the farmer's products on profitable terms. This is the point at which most of the agricultural organizations in America have failed. "The organized purchase of goods," said Secretary Anderson quite correctly, to me, "is only the A B C of co-operation. It is when you come to the organized sale of your products that you are up against a serious proposition." It is, indeed, the most difficult form of co-operative endeavor, but it is what we must undertake if our farmers in the South, and in America as a whole are to gain the prosperity to which they are entitled.

Ireland as an Example for the South.

And all that I have written in this and my other Irish articles, it goes without saying, has been set down simply for the purpose of suggesting examples for our own people to follow. Why should we not have just such co-operative agricultural banks? Just such capably managed poultry societies? Just such a system of co-operative creameries, producing half the export butter of our Southern States as they produced half the export of butter in Ireland? Why not such farmers' societies owning expensive farm machinery like threshers, steam tractors, corn shredders, pea threshers, etc., etc., in common for the joint use of all the members? Why not special organizations of farm women for taking courses in cooking, sanitation, dress-making, poultry work, and for working together for better schools, prettier homes and a richer social life?

Making American Farmers' Societies More Business-Like.

Here is one criticism the Irish leaders make of our farmers' organizations in America—that they are too general, and indefinite in their purposes; they are not sufficiently business-like and practical. And, on the whole, does not the criticism appear to be just? We need and must have general organizations like the National Farmers' Union, and I think the Irish farmers lose by not having something more nearly equivalent to it; but each local Union ought to have some definite business purpose. Perhaps the best plan would be to have the farmers in each township organize for meeting once or twice a month to organize independent co-operative banks, creameries, poultry societies and other co-operative clubs, except in cases where all the members wish to join in one line of endeavor, in which case the enterprise can be conducted in the name of the Union as a whole.

How Profits Are Divided.

I shall be glad to answer, so far as I am able from my observations, and interviews, and the literature I have accumulated, any question about this Irish movement that our Progressive Farmer readers may ask. It has interested me so greatly, and is so full of suggestions for our own people, that, while this article has already grown long, I cannot refrain from mentioning a few other features before concluding. For one thing, Sir Horace Plunkett has insisted from the beginning that agricultural business combinations must be conducted along somewhat different lines from commercial business combinations. On this point he says:

"We recognize that where farmers combine it is not a combination of money only, but a combination of the elements of the entire business and of personal effort. The share-holders in the co-operative society participate in control equally, irrespective of the number of shares held. But the profits are divided in this way: The first 5 per cent is paid on the capital stock, the balance being divided among participants in the project in proportion as they contribute to the profits. In a creamery, for instance, the suppliers and the workers each get out of this balance so many cents in the dollar's worth of milk supplied or of work done. Here the first essential of stability and success is assured. The interests of all the participants in the venture are harmonized, and it becomes the aim and object of all to contribute their utmost to its success."

Sir Horace also points out that getting together for business purposes has also led the farmers to join hands in many movements for "mutual, intellectual and social improvement"; and that the stimulus of organization often leads a dormant, backward and unprogressive community to show a progressivenes and enterprise in its organized capacity which is nothing less than amazing.

Better Living the Goal of All Effort.

"Better farming; better business; better living"—Sir Horace Plunkett and his associates have gone far toward the realization of their threefold program. They brought into existence the Department of Agricultural and Technical Instruction which has taken over their main work in helping the farmer to do better farming; they have established the various co-operative societies which have made the farmer a business man—a wise manager of values as well as a wise producer of them; and their latest organization of United Irish Women is an emblem of that era of better living—more beautiful homes, better schools, a richer social life and the production of an environment in which human beings may be happier and more helpful—which is the proper goal of all our striving.

Dublin, Ireland.

What He Considered the Best Part.

"Walter, did you give your brother the best part of the apple, as I told you to?" asked the mother.

"Yes, mother,' said Walter, "I gave him the seed. He can plant 'em and have a whole orchard."—Selected.

What He Didn't Like.

A horse dealer was trying to sell a horse afflicted with heaves, and said to the prospective buyer: "Hasn't he a fine coat? Isn't it a dandy?"

"His coat's all right, but I don't like his pants."—Selected.

Our subscribers who raise sheep will be interested in the offer of Chatham Manufacturing Company, of Elkin, N. C. (See page five) to exchange their fine blankets for wool.