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Building From the Ground Upward

STARTING at the top to build has killed more co-operative movements than all other mistakes combined. We have preached it over and over again that we must start at the bottom of the ladder to climb and that co-operation must be a growth. It can never be established in its larger meaning until there are thousands of successful local co-operative units in operation, for under the larger system, the local units (local distributing warehouses) must be depended upon as links in the chain, as the only means accessible to co-operative members, for the individual member must come in personal contact with a part of the system in his own neighborhood. Right along this line Editor Poe, of the Progressive Farmer, makes the following timely comment under the quotation, "Despise Not the Day of Small Things":

"Now what are the practical beginnings of such a spirit of co-operation and brotherhood as I have suggested? It seems to me that they lie directly in the matter of getting better farming methods and better marketing methods right in your own neighborhood and right with the farmers whose land adjoins yours. The sort of co-operation that means simply taking stock in some big State-wide, South-wide, or nation-wide so-called enterprise is never going to save us, is never going to make real co-operators of us.

"The plain truth is, that such enterprises just now are more likely to keep us from ever becoming co-operators. In co-operation, as in everything else, we must crawl before we can walk, and we must puzzle out our A B C's before we ever try to spell 'baker' or 'incomprehensibility.' So these big schemes, if tried too early, are likely to prove failures—in some very striking instances, have already proved failures and have sorely set back the cause of co-operation in all such communities. We should not attempt these big enterprises before we have first learned the principles of co-operation in smaller ones, before we have first discovered by experience what men are capable of managing co-operative enterprises, and before we have the big chain of local enterprises to back up the greater ones. In co-operative business, as in other business, the only sure way to succeed is to take the man who has been faithful over a few things and make him ruler over many! take the man who has succeeded notably with a township enterprise and put him in charge of a county enterprise, and take the man who has wrought well for a county and let him serve a State."

Like its predecessors, the Farmers' Union has wasted many efforts in trying to build from the top downward. Reference to minutes of various State and national conventions will disclose the fact that we have had an abundant variety of attempts not only at State-wide, but nation-wide co-operation and without exception all such efforts were huge failures. After much wasted means and wasted effort in fruitless attempts of that kind the organization is beginning to find itself and is getting down to the "day of small things." Hardly a week passes now without the incorporation of some new local Farmers' Union enterprise.

How the A. & M. College May Help

WE NOTED with pleasure, a few weeks ago, that a member of the A. & M. College force at Raleigh proposed to assist farmers in buying better horses direct from the Middle West. This is a step in the right direction. If the College will enter that field it will establish a closer relationship with the farmers and greatly increase its efficiency and usefulness. It has done splendid work as far as its activities have been extended, but here is an opportunity for this splendid institution to bring producer and consumer closer together. In last week's issue of Rural New Yorker, Mr. M. Floyd, of Texas, refers to the wonderful achievements of the Kansas State Agricultural College since it established the "college exchange." Mr. Floyd says:

"For many years farmers have looked somewhat askance at the State agricultural colleges, contending, with some show of reason, that the 'book farmers' were not in full sympathy with the pressing needs of the real soil tillers. One of the most just criticisms of these institutions has been that they devote all their energies to the increasing of production without paying any attention whatever to the problem of profitably disposing of farm crops. Every year thousands of tons of agricultural products are allowed to rot in the fields for want of a remunerative market, and in the face of this condition farmers have very reasonably contended that their most pressing need was not to know 'how to produce more'—important as that is—so much as it was 'how to sell more.' While farm products are rotting in the fields and orchards many people are actually suffering for want of these very same products; thus we see that this marketing problem is simply a question of bringing producer and consumer together. To do this in the most economical way possible and at the same time demonstrate clearly to the taxpayers that at least one agricultural college was alive to the most vital problems of country life the Kansas State Agricultural College a few years ago organized an exchange through which buyers and sellers might easily get in touch with each other. At first only corn and hay were handled, but the idea proved so popular that during the first season apples were added to the list and more than 350 carloads have been sold through the college exchange."

Going further into details of the Kansas plan Mr. Floyd explains:

"To demonstrate clearly how the plan works, let us take the case of a feeder with a bunch of fattening steers in the pen near Topeka. It is of prime importance of course, for him to secure his feed as cheaply as possible, for right on this point hinges his possible profit or loss. So instead of securing his feed from a dealer in the city this feeder communicates with the Agricultural College, stating exactly the kind and quality of feed he wants. When this inquiry reaches the college Mr. J. H. Miller, director of the Extension Department, who has charge of this work just at present, turns to his files and quickly ascertains what farmers in the feeder's territory have the kind of feed stuff called for, and places the feeder in communication with them. Thereafter the business is transacted directly between buyer and seller. The college makes no charge for its service and very naturally, as the middleman is entirely eliminated, the buyer gets his feed at a very satisfactory figure, while the farmer receives more than he could have secured on his local market. This work so far has been carried on by the college without any appropriation to pay for same, consequently the work has been done by a few of the willing officials without extra pay; but in the near future a competent man will be placed in charge of the work and allowed to give his whole time and attention to it. It is then the intention to handle produce of all kinds and organize local co-operative exchanges throughout the State and through these and the central exchange at the college a vast volume of business can be handled. Then it can no longer be said that the Kansas State Agricultural College is not alive to the pressing need of better marketing methods.

"How anxious the buyers and sellers are to get together has been demonstrated by the success of this exchange; and of all the plans

for bringing producer and consumer together this is probably the most promising because it can be started with such little trouble and expense. Every State agricultural college in the Union might well follow Kansas' excellent example."

It occurs to us that there never was a better field in which agricultural colleges might appropriately carry its work to farmers and never a more opportune time to adopt this practical economic idea than now.

"Who Gets the Farmers' Profits?"

THIS is the question that engaged the attention of the "National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits" at Chicago last week. Peter Radford, President of Texas Farmers' Union, said: "We are getting only thirty cents a bushel for potatoes which sell for seventy-five cents and \$1.00 here." Warren Foster, of Massachusetts, gave it to the conference this way:

"Potatoes we raise on truck farms in Cumington, Mass., are rotting in the fields," said Foster. "In Worthington, a town practically contiguous to Cumington, they sell for \$1.50 a bushel. There seems to be need for co-operation between East and West."

While that conference was being held farmers in Florida were refusing to haul cabbage to the station because they couldn't get but three dollars a ton for them, while at the same time Florida cabbage was being sold by retail dealers in North Carolina for \$70 a ton! Here's another extract from the report of the Chicago conference which makes interesting reading. It is a part of a paper submitted by the President of the University of Tennessee:

"While some progress has been made in teaching farmers how to grow more crops," the paper reads, "little has yet been done to aid him in getting fair prices for his produce. To illustrate the gross injustice of our present marketing system, I may point out the fact that at Laredo, Texas, in our onion growing district, one day a short time ago, onions were sold for two cents a pound; the next morning Laredo onions were sold in the open market at Austin, Texas, at fifteen cents a pound. In this transaction, as you will see, the commission man, the public carrier and the retail dealer divided 650 per cent of the price paid to the grower.

"Again tomatoes were sold one day at two-thirds cents each in Palestine, Texas, and the next morning were sold at Austin at five cents each.

"In each of the instances cited the producer received only thirteen per cent of the final selling price, while eighty-seven per cent was divided among the railroads and the sellers. The glaring injustice of such a system is made more apparent by a comparison with the results of co-operation in marketing farm products in Denmark. In that country, the co-operation society handles, sorts, according to size and packs eggs for three and one-half per cent; shipping and selling cost for 4 per cent, leaving the farmer 92 1-2 per cent of the final price paid by the consumer.

"The need of co-operation in securing cheap money for the farmers in the Southwest is as great as the need of obtaining larger returns for his produce. In many places in Texas and Oklahoma the farmer is yet obliged to pay interest of from 10 to 25 per cent and even these rates are better than buying on time from the country merchant. In some sections without banking facilities, credit from the country merchant is the only resource."

This "National Conference on Marketing" was the first one of the kind ever held in this country. So far as any direct results are concerned the conference will not be worth anything. Constructive co-operation must begin among the rank and file with small groups of men who live in the same locality. But conferences of this kind are worth something in an educational way. The greatest trouble with big conferences is the tendency to drift into a dreamy proposition to ask the "government" to lift us out of trouble. And the politicians and dreamers are always on hand to manipulate the conference and conventions, if possible. Co-operative self-help isn't a governmental proposition. It depends upon voluntary co-operative efforts.