

Agricultural Co-operation in Ireland.

1.—Twenty Years of Agitation and What it Has Accomplished.

By Clarence Poe of The Progressive Farmer.

"Of one fact we are rather proud," said Mr. Robert A. Anderson, Secretary of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society, as I was leaving him the other day, "and that is, it has been our good fortune in Ireland to set an example in agricultural co-operation for all English-speaking peoples."

This is exactly what Ireland has done; and our American farmer whose richer opportunities, better facilities, and more democratic atmosphere should have won for us a position of leadership must go to Ireland to learn the lessons needed for all America and especially for our own Southern country. In Ireland, which has a population about twice that of one of our average Southern States, there are now 312 creameries with an annual turn-over of \$10,000,000; 166 agricultural societies; 237 co-operative banks, and 87 miscellaneous co-operative co-operative societies—poultry, bee-keeping, bacon-curing, etc.

An Example for the South.

Suppose we had in each county in the South two co-operative creameries, one or two farmers co-operative societies for the sale of poultry and truck: such a development would correspond to what has been accomplished in Ireland.

Of course, all this has not been brought about in a day. The movement started away back in 1889 when Mr. Horace Plunkett began to tell the Irish farmers that what they needed was less politics and more business—or at any rate, a good deal more business along with their politics. For a long time his voice was as that of one crying in the wilderness. He held fifty meetings and pleaded with fifty different groups of farmers, asking each group to join in some co-operative business organization, before a single enthusiastic response varied the long monotony of deaf-earred failure. But Mr. Plunkett was an Irishman terribly in earnest; and anybody who is terribly in earnest is likely to go a long way—especially if he is an Irishman.

"Beware when the Lord Almighty lets loose a thinker on the planet," says Emerson, in words as nearly as I can recall them; and Mr. Plunkett was a thinker. He was also a patriot with a yearning for the uplift of his oppressed and poverty-stricken homeland. He had all the patriotism to which Erin's poets and orators have given such vivid and eloquent expression; but his patriotism was to take a form of constructive work rather than spectacular words.

How the Credit System Bled Irish Agriculture.

The Irish farmer, at that time, was the joint prey of landlords and "gombeen-men," the latter phrase being used to describe a class of credit merchants whose exorbitant time-prices kept the poor peasants in virtual slavery. What profit the landlord did not get in the shape of rent, the "gombeen-man" got when the money for the farmers' products came in. Or, to be exact, I should say that the credit merchant took the farmers' goods at prices named by himself, and credited them on the farmer's account, and about all the poor soil-tiller knew was that he was getting deeper and deeper into debt all the time. It was our blood-sucking "credit system" of the South of a generation ago in an even more abominable form; and the "gombeen-

men," furnishing not only supplies, but liquor as well, often took further advantage of the peasant after getting him full of drink.

Saving the Middleman's Profits.

In a word, middlemen were absorbing all the profits of the Irish farmer. Nothing was done directly. There was a circuitous route from the farmer's produce to the city consumer, with tolls taken all along the way; and there was a circuitous route between the fertilizer-maker or implement-manufacturer and his farmer purchaser, with tolls taken all along the way. Alluding humorously to the fact that Sir Horace Plunkett's ancestors were robber-barons, Miss Susan L. Mitchell says:

"He was a man of direct methods inherited no doubt from these freebooting ancestors. He could see the farmer-producer and he could see the consumer; and he proposed in his simple way to hew a straight road out of the mountainous middleman that stood between them, so that the produce of the farmer should go straight from him to the consumer and the money of the consumer should drop straight into the farmer's pocket without any intermediary toll being taken on the way."

Combination Necessary to Profitable Business.

Another thing that Sir Horace saw (I say Sir Horace because the King of England has since knighted Mr. Plunkett in recognition of his great services) was that if the farmers were to succeed, they must organize and co-operate. Only a considerable number of farmers working together could sell their products to advantage—a small farmer cannot profitably ship a dozen or two eggs or a pound or two of butter or a basket or two of vegetables, whereas, it is very different if a hundred farmers together wish to ship their eggs, poultry, or truck—and they must work together along very business-like and scientific lines. He saw that the farmers were suffering not only because the middlemen's tolls were excessive, but also because their failure to unite prevented them from giving consumers uniform, high-quality products. He declared they must furnish "one good kind of butter—not many samples of bad and good kinds; a uniformly fresh egg—not a dozen stale ones of different shapes and sizes, with occasional fresh ones rubbing shells with their dingy neighbors"; and that they must furnish regular supplies at regular intervals—not three long weeks of famine and then a week of surfeit.

A Threefold Program.

"Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living,"—this was the threefold program which Sir Horace proposed for Ireland: more productive farming methods, better methods of buying and selling, and a richer rural life. And he kept everlastingly at it, in season and out of season. After fifty meetings he got one society started in 1889, and 1890 ended without another one being added to this lonesome one. But in 1891 the number jumped to seventeen; next year there were twenty-five; next year, thirty; next year, thirty-three; and then the day of small things was over. In 1895 the number of societies doubled; in 1896 the one hundred mark was passed; in 1908, the two hundred mark—and now

there are more than eight hundred. The Irish Agricultural Organization Society—popularly known as the "I. A. O. S."—is the head of the movement, with Sir Horace as the head of the I. A. O. S., and Mr. Robert A. Anderson the Secretary. I was to have seen Sir Horace in Dublin, I may say by the way, but his absence in London makes it necessary for me to postpone my interview until I meet him there.

Kilkenny—a Typical Irish County.

Secretary Anderson and Mr. Norman, however, gave me very full information about the various organizations at first hand. Kilkenny is a dairying county and in it are sixteen co-operative creameries; four farmers' co-operative banks; eight agricultural societies for the purchase of fertilizers, seeds, etc.; a co-operative poultry society and a farmers' county fair.

In the depot at Ballyragget, the first village I visited, the most conspicuous objects were cases with the labels, "Guaranteed Pure Irish Creamery Butter," and other cases for shipment bearing the legend, "Guaranteed New-Laid Irish Eggs," with the added name and trade-mark of the "Irish Federated Poultry Societies, Limited." I made several trips out into the country around Ballyragget to see for myself the workings of the various co-operative societies, and I probably cannot give a better idea of the general movement in Ireland than by describing in detail the work of these individual Kilkenny organizations as I saw them.

A Co-operative Creamery.

Perhaps the best work here, as in other parts of Ireland, is done by co-operative creameries. Muckalee Creamery, near Ballyragget, was one of the first organized after Sir Horace Plunkett began his work, and it has been such a success that I found the Castlecomer farmers planning to establish a creamery of their own if a sufficient number of cows can be secured for it. Milk is tested for butter-fat, and farmers are paid by the pound—not by the gallon—and in proportion to the amount of butter-fat in their milk. As a rule, the creamery butter pays the farmer six and eight cents a pound more than ordinary home-made butter, and the Irish housewife is also relieved of the work of churning and molding the product, besides getting back eight and one-half gallons of separated milk for every ten gallons supplied. A Ballyragget business man told me that the Muckalee creamery butter was bringing 120 shillings per hundredweight as compared with 96 shillings for ordinary farm butter; which statement being translated into plain United States language (with the further understanding that this Irish hundredweight means 112 pounds, and not 100 pounds as with us) means that the creamery butter was selling for about 27 cents a pound and the ordinary butter for about 21 cents. Moreover, all the profits of the creamery are divided among the farmers who supply the milk, so that the farmer has other sources of profit besides the gain from the improved quality of his product.

The Co-operative Poultry Society.

No less interesting than the Muckalee Creamery is the North Kilkenny Poultry Society, with headquarters in Ballyragget. This society, a combination of 450 poultry-raisers in and around the village, has had a rather significant history. In the beginning, so a Kilkenny farmer told me, it had one or two so-called "expert" managers from a distance who turned out to be "expert" mainly in eating up the profits, so that for the first three years the society ran at a loss.

Then something happened which often happens in these co-operative

societies, and whenever farmers unite and meet together for any purpose: hitherto unappreciated local talent was discovered and made use of. The members picked up John Carey, a plain young farmer-boy without any frills about him, but every-day common-sense and a good character, and put him at the head of the society. In three years' time he has wiped out the old loss; increased the membership by nearly two hundred and has carried the total poultry and egg trade from \$25,000 three years ago to more than \$40,000 last year. Farmers get 30 per cent more for their eggs than they did before they organized, not merely because they save the middleman's profits, but because they ship eggs while they are fresh and clean instead of waiting for them to get stale and dirty; ship them properly graded and crated, and because they know where to ship in order to secure top-notch prices.

A Society Which Tells Where to Ship.

This last clause calls for a word of parenthetical explanation. The various agricultural organizations maintain in Dublin what is known as "The I. A. W. S."—the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society—an organization which not only furnishes the society members with fertilizers and seeds at wholesale prices, but keeps in touch with all the leading English markets and directs organized societies where to ship their produce. My friend, Mr. Carey, of the North Kilkenny Poultry Society, for example, gets news from the Dublin I. A. W. S., say each Saturday, as to what English market he should ship his goods to the following week, and the probable price. The price is then fixed at which the society will buy eggs during the week, and all guaranteed fresh eggs are bought at this figure by the pound.

How the Eggs Are Collected.

The morning I was there, as every other week day, two carriages had gone out over a radius of six miles to collect eggs; and on Mondays they go out as far as ten miles. Eggs of the same size and color are shipped together and small eggs are shipped as "seconds." Dirty eggs are also shipped separately, and care is taken in every way to maintain a reputation for giving the buyer exactly what is promised him.

Another work it is now proposed to take up is that of fattening young chickens before shipping them, instead of shipping them elsewhere to be fattened, as is the present practice.

In this society, as in the case of the Muckalee and all other such organizations in Ireland, the profits go to the patrons. There is an annual meeting which all the members are asked to attend, and the business meanwhile is conducted by an elected committee of twenty-five members, a quorum of whom meet with the manager monthly for the examination of the books and for general oversight of the business. I was told that an average patron had about fifty hens, and the women, of course, look after them in most cases.

One other feature of this society deserves mention—that it could not have succeeded without the support it received from the Catholic priest and a wealthy land-owner near-by. In fact, in nearly all the societies I visited I found that the Catholic fathers—nearly everybody in Kilkenny is a Catholic—were active leaders. I wish our preachers in the South showed as much interests in the general movements for rural development and uplift.

In next week's article I shall describe and explain the remarkably successful and helpful system of farmers' co-operative banks or credit societies—something we must go to work and get for the South.

Dublin, Ireland.