Can the City-Bred Man Succeed on the Farm?

By AARON HARDY ULM

This is the last of a series of six articles by Mr. Ulm on farm life and farm management.

"WHAT chance has the city man without farming experience of making a success as a practical operating farmer?" That question was put recently to leading specialists in the United States Department of Agriculture. No one of them was inclined to give an unqualified answer, but after all their provisos and ifs were assimilated with the facts so far as known, the answer invariably was, "very little."

"Does the city man of no experience always fail when he turns farmer?" they were asked.

"Not at all," was the reply. "Many of the most successful farmers in America didn't know what a furrow was until they were adults."

"Then the inexperienced man is not excluded from farming as a paying occupation?"

"Of course not, but students of the subject hesitate to advise inexperienced persons to go in for farm operation; that is, if they must earn a living from their efforts."

The United States Department of Agriculture doesn't advise the novice against taking up agricultural pursuits; on that question, as far as the writer could find, the departmental policy is a non-committal one; certainly so unless the beginner wants to start at the bottom of the agricultural ladder and "work up."

If the city man wants to turn farmer, the department will do all it can to provide him with needed help and advice on how to farm. It is significant, however, that virtually no literature of the department bears directly upon the needs of the inexperienced beginner in farming. The reason is that there is very little demand for such literature. Thousands of city people yearn for the open life of the country, but comparatively few, the facts indicate, yield to it. Of course there is always a margin of population that shifts more or less from city to country and vice versa. It, however, is primarily an agricultural population, consisting in the main of people reared in the country and familiar more or less with the business of planting and harvesting.

Many city occupations can be assumed on short or no apprenticeship by the man, woman or boy who leaves the farm. There is always a chance that they will go back to the country. Often the period of city life is helpful to them as farm people. They learn order and system and frequently save money that enables them to jump many years of humble and hard effort in getting established as operating farmers. If they remain in town and raise their children there, the second generation is apt to become fixed and indelibly urban.

Hence the division of population between rural and urban is affected by a confusing basal condition. A certain percentage of country-reared people will always be more or less unfitted for farming; that is, they can be of more use to themselves and to their time by following urban occupations. The transition from the rural to the urban is relatively easy. That is, the farm-reared boy, for example, who doesn't possess an affinity for the soil can go to town and, if employment conditions be good, become a street car conductor in a week or two, or a shipping clerk, or a minor retail salesman, or a workman, with opportunities for advancement as he learns and develops. But the city-reared boy who has affinity for the soil and might render his best service as a farmer, faces no such easy process of change. If he goes to the country and rents or buys a farm and tries to operate it the chances are that he will fail, no matter how hard he works. Hence economic forces that bear on the division of population do not operate with equal vigor between country and city. And as farming becomes more complex, the differential against the country increases. Some day this condition may present a serious problem.

In fact, "back to the land" and "forward to the land" movements are not participated in by the United States Department of Agriculture. Its energies in that respect are aimed chiefly at keeping the farm population on the farms, by making farming and rural life satisfactory, rather than at getting non-farmers to quit the towns and cities for the country. Officials of the department hold that economic laws will and should be permitted to control the division of population between rural and urban.

While the odds are against the average city man who would turn to farming as a living occupation, the non-farmer is by no means excluded from agriculture as a profitable pursuit. If he goes about making the change in the right way, he has good chances of success. The chief trouble, say the specialists, is that the city man is not much inclined to go about it in the right way. He is partial to the idea that he can show farmers how to farm by applying city methods to farm pursuits. Dr. Warren, of the Cornell School of Agriculture, has written that he knows of no case of a farm operated by a wealthy city man on the principle of "showing farmers how to farm" that is a financial success. This is the case, he says, even with those wonderfully equipped farms that are managed on salary by first-class agricultural college graduates, who frequently when farming for themselves achieve big success. The "country estates" conducted by wealthy city men render many good services to farming by promoting the growing of pure-bred cattle or horses or chickens or by introducing better plant life or superior cultivation. But in the item of management they contribute nothing of worth; for no management that doesn't make farming pay makes contribution to the advancement of agriculture.

Another mistake the city man makes, say the students, is in thinking that it is easier to be a specialty farmer than an all-round farmer.

"Because you can make a success of a dozen fowl kept in a city backyard doesn't mean that you can succeed with a flock of 500 fowl on a poultry farm," is the way one specialist put it. "You will find that the troubles you have with a dozen hens will grow much out of proportion to the number of hens added to your flock."

Of course there are many successful poultry farms and other specialty farms, and some are conducted by men who were not practical farmers at the start; but the odds, they say, are very much stronger against the novice that attempts poultry raising or like farming as against general farming.

How is the city-raised novice with a burning desire to add to the farming population to begin, if he begins at all?

There are two ways. One is to make a scientific study of agriculture, preferably in a college of agriculture, and the other is to serve an apprenticeship in practical farming.

The writer was surprised when he learned that a large proportion of students enrolled in many of the state agricultural colleges are from cities and without any practical farming experience. And a man who used to teach in one of the leading agricultural colleges says that the city-bred agricultural students get along about as well and are as successful, after graduation, in practical farming as the country-bred boys. *The development of agricultural education may serve to clear up that differential apparent in economic law against the flow of population, on necessity, from city to country. For the agricultural schools offer a way for the successful migration of the best type of city boys who would take up agriculture as a profession.*

The apprenticeship process of changing from city life to farming is much less attractive than the school method, but the authorities say that *apprenticeship in farming is much more essential to success than in the run of city trades and professions.*

This is because farming is no longer, if it ever was, a simple business. It is doubtful if any other pursuit involves so many complexities, so many different kinds of ability and talent, and such abrupt changings from one to the other.

But for those with the hardihood to learn farming from the ground up, agriculture offers many opportunities for material success and esthetic satisfaction.

"It is singular how the idea always crops up that the first step in farming is to own a farm," says E. T. Meredith, former Secretary of Agriculture. "'A farm of your own' is all right as a goal to look forward to, but the man who lacks either the requisite money or experience will reach the goal quicker by starting in as hired hand. If he has money even and no experience he will not find it profitable to acquire and operate a farm until he has gained that skill and judgment which will enable him to manage a farm successfully. The cheapest and quickest way to gain this skill and knowledge is by working on a well-managed farm in the summer and attending the winter short course at the nearest agricultural college.

"The young man without money will find working for wages on the farm the means for saving a little money and establishing his reputation as a skilled workman and a man of integrity. With a good reputation in these regards but little money is required to start as a tenant farmer, where he can realize on the extra energy, the better skill, and the good management he is able to put into his farming business.

"The road is open to the 'farm of your own,' and the road is neither longer nor harder for one who likes farming than is the road to success in other occupations, but the safest way is to start in at the bottom and climb the 'agricultural ladder.'

"The custom in many parts of the country, and among many progressive farmers, is to take the hired man into the family, while in industries the worker may never even see his employer and have no human contact with the man for whom he works," says former Secretary Meredith. "In the country we still have in considerable measure the old-time relations between employer and worker. The American farming regions form the great reservoirs of traditional American democracy. In the right sort of farming community and the right sort of farmer's household the hired man is received on his merits as a man. The individual human being seems to count for more out on the farm than he does in the city where great numbers of them are crowded together. If the hired man makes good, he will have no reason to complain of his social status."

Comparatively few farmers step into proprietorship through inheriting establishments developed for them by others. In three townships of Sedgwick County, Kansas, only 5.9 per cent of the farmers inherited the establishments they were operating; 13.7 per cent had procured their places via the homestead act; 80.4 per cent purchased the farms they were operating. Three-fourths of the purchases had been made by deferred payments, the other fourth with cash, usually procured from the sale of other farms.

It has been found that approximately 76 per cent of all operating farmers under 25 years old are tenants; which shows that the majority of every generation of American farmers is composed of men who build up from the bottom. The rate of tenancy declines rapidly with the growing age of farmers, until in the case of farmers 60 years old or beyond, it amounts to only 15 per cent. *No other industry will show such a rate of advance from worker to proprietor and owner.*

There are virtually no more arable lands open for acquirement by homestead. And farming lands have so increased in value that those in good farming sections are considered cheap when purchasable at $100 an acre. It is not unusual for farm lands in the rich Middle West to sell at from $400 to $500 an acre. Eighty per cent of sales made during the "land boom" in Iowa last year and the year before were at from $150 to $200 an acre, and it is estimated that the average Iowa farm now represents a capital investment of around $80,000. Of course it is not all in land, for farm implements and machinery now require big investments for farms where the best labor-saving devices can be used.

When one finds that the average value of farm land and improvements increased for the United States as a whole in a little more than a year, during 1919 and 1920, in the amount of $17.35 an acre, one cannot avoid the impression that farm land is becoming a scarce article in these United States.

Investigators estimate that the arable land for farming in this country may yet be increased approximately 50 per cent. That is to say, one-half as much land as is now included in farms may be made suitable for farming. Most of it calls for big expenditures for clearing, irrigation or drainage. Much of it, like the cut-over lands of the South and the Northwest, may be purchased very cheaply, and is excellent land when put into shape for cultivation.

Excepting those highly developed or "boom" agricultural districts, and the tremendous advance in the value of nearly all worth-while land during the last several years, farms may still be purchased at prices that are not exorbitant when compared with the cost of going into a good business in the city. *In fact, the cost of a medium-grade city home isn't much above the value of the average farm establishment, which is both home and business plant for its owner.*

City boys learning the joys of growing things. Some will want to become practical farmers. How may they negotiate the transition which is by no means an easy one?