

America and Some of Its Unsolved Problems

By FRANK PARKER STOCKBRIDGE

THE United States of America stands to-day the one civilized nation of the Western world that is not seriously threatened with either revolution, bankruptcy or starvation. New York has replaced London as the financial centre of the world's business; Washington overshadows in world importance any of Europe's political capitals. We have come out of the war not only with a new national prestige among the peoples of the world who are everywhere looking to America for political leadership, but with our own internal resources unimpaired, even materially increased.

Never has a nation of a hundred million souls experienced such widely spread and generally shared prosperity as the people of America are experiencing to-day. Nowhere in all history can one find the record of a social organization on so huge a scale in which the common run of men were able to obtain in exchange for their labor such a volume and variety of creature comforts, of luxury and of recreation beyond the bare necessities of life.

Not since time began, moreover, has any such considerable body of human beings been so completely in control of its own collective destiny that every adult member of the whole great group has at all times a voice in the affairs common to all, of precisely the same weight and influence as the voice of any other individual; this, too, without the slightest impairment of the personal rights of such individuals as may for any reason dissent from the position on any subject taken by the majority of their fellows.

"Surely," the reader may exclaim inwardly at this point, "this is not a real nation: this sounds like a description of Utopia! What else is needed than these things which have just been recited? What more has mankind ever besought?" Let us see.

Why, here is a group of men and women who declare that the conditions in America's fundamental industry, agriculture, without which no nation can thrive or long endure, are simply deplorable, and that unless something is done quickly we shall lose many of our national advantages.

II.

It is no time to rest on our oars—not while the worker is still getting less than his fair share of the products of his labor, not while millions are still living in unsanitary ignorance, not while our transportation system, railroad and highway is in its present condition, certainly not while our people are still thrifless.

The list of things that need still to be done, of problems still unsolved in our national life, could be extended to fill many columns. Nor are these mere whims of so-called reformers, vagaries of self-appointed regenerators of society, untried experiments the advocates of which would proceed to try at once on a full sized national scale without first discovering by laboratory methods whether they will work or not.

This would be a gloomy subject to contemplate were it not for the cheering variety of efforts constantly in progress for their elimination and the optimistic spirit in which, all over the country, the solution of these problems is being undertaken by varying groups, with here and there such obvious success that no one can doubt that, sooner or later, the problems of to-day will have vanished, whatever new problems may replace them for another generation to solve.

It is this very characteristic of not

being satisfied with things as they are, of bringing out for public discussion our own faults and failings and calling upon our fellow citizens to rally to the rescue that has brought America to the position it now occupies which, whatever our weaknesses, is nevertheless more enviable than that of any other country in the world. Why this is so is the main theme of an interesting, comprehensive yet concise and lucid little volume by Prof. Edward Alsworth Ross of the University of Wisconsin entitled, *What Is America?*

III.

Prof. Ross knows his America; he knows the rest of the world, too, from first hand study and much travel. Knowing the world and being a student of history as well as a professor of sociology he sees in this country and its constant development and progress the evolution of the sort of democracy that must eventually save the world from at least the chief of the evils that now beset it. It would be difficult to name a single book that would serve better to introduce the newly arrived immigrant to the institutions and spirit of the United States, one that could be read with more interest and profit by the American with ten generations of Yankee ancestors behind them.

Having absorbed Prof. Ross's lucid exposition of the American spirit and its achievements thus far, one may approach with justifiable optimism the discussion of the basic problem at the moment unsolved, that of the betterment of agricultural conditions, as set forth by the president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield, in *The Farmer and the New Day*. Not that Dr. Butterfield himself is in the least pessimistic, but one cannot read his book without gaining a new and rather staggering impression of the magnitude and complexity of the whole farm problem as this amply qualified expert sees it.

The great majority of American farmers are not to-day securing from their labor a reward which they consider fair to themselves or which students of social science consider satisfactory from the standpoint of minimum requirements for a decent living, says Dr. Butterfield. The farmer is not getting his share of the consumer's dollar; tenant farming with a host of evils in its train is on the increase; worst of all, with the retirement of the old time farmer and the incoming of the new tenant type, such fundamental institutions as the rural school and the rural church are becoming less efficient than formerly in many parts of the country.

The war has given many farmers a new point of view. In hundreds of communities and in as many different ways movements for the restoration of farming to the dignity of a profession and the organization of farmers into efficient cooperative units are under way. Some of these and of the plans that wise leaders of agriculture believe will further advance the interests of the farmer and of the nation are told in this book, the main theme and purpose of which is to voice the need of a national agricultural policy, defined and adhered to, if our land is to continue to feed our people with the products of our own soil.

IV.

True, there are successful farmers, many of them; that they are the exceptions merely proves that the majority are not awake to the possibilities of their craft. John R. McMahon was commissioned by an agricultural journal of national circulation to find the best farmer in each State and write the story of his success. Sixteen of these stories are included in his book, *How These Farmers Succeeded*. The territory covered stretches from Maine to Oklahoma; the farms described range from W. J. Burtis's 100 Kansas acres that he farms "top and bottom" and causes to yield fifty bushels of wheat to the acre, to the Whiting family's almost baronial estate of 14,000 acres in Iowa.

We think of tractors and power operated farms as being peculiarly Western; here is Arthur H. Sagendorph operating 1,000 rocky Massachusetts hillside acres entirely by machinery. We are told the fertility of Eastern farm lands has vanished; Jared Van Wagenen earns a big income from a New York State farm that his family has tilled for 119 years! After reading of these and the others in the book one is convinced that successful farming is possible anywhere, the only requirements being the combination of

unflagging industry and trained intelligence, with a modicum of capital.

American farmers probably average higher in native intelligence than the farmers of any other part of the world; the main handicap to successful farming is the meager training the ordinary country school affords for the development of that intelligence. Testimony is unanimous as to the deplorable condition of most of our country schools. That this condition is one that can be remedied without resort either to State or national paternalism and without increased expense to the taxpayers has been demonstrated beyond cavil in the rural school at Porter, Missouri, the story of which is told by Miss Evelyn Dewey, daughter of Prof. John Dewey of Columbia, in *New Schools for Old*.

Mrs. Marie Turner Harvey went to Porter as teacher of the district school. She found the school, in its physical condition, the morale of the pupils and of the community and its academic standards just about as bad as any one could imagine an institution to be and still call itself a school. It was typical of the 10,000 rural schools in Missouri, the 200,000 one room country schools in the United States.

The story of the regeneration of the Porter school, and through the school the regeneration of the whole district and the establishment of a new and fine community spirit is one of those rare recitals of fact that read like romance. Given the conditions as they were and the result Mrs. Harvey actually achieved as a goal to be reached, it would be a brave prophet who would even admit that it could be done. It was done. It can be done anywhere that a man or woman with the courage, the ability and the common sense of Mrs. Harvey will undertake it.

V.

Nor is the farmer the only American class in which the community spirit needs to be aroused if its members are to appreciate fully their place in the general scheme and their true relation to the remainder of the population. The little town, the country village to which the farmer comes to trade and which, in turn, trades with the bigger city, has a place and a function all its own, and a multiplicity of problems that have been largely overlooked in the discussion of both urban and rural questions. The little town is neither city nor country. At the University of Wisconsin the social students have coined the word "rurban" to describe this community link between the farmer and the ultimate market for his product, so Harlan Paul Douglass tells us in his book, *The Little Town*.

The trouble with the little town is that it apes the manners of the city, looks down upon the farmer upon whom its very existence depends and yet has no civic pride of its own. Its young folk grow up contemptuous of their environment and

flock to the big cities as fast as they reach maturity. Mr. Douglass has analyzed and set down the spirit of the little town and an estimate of its possibilities, illustrated with examples of little towns that have made something of themselves, not as a theorist dealing with superficial symptoms but out of an intimate personal knowledge of many little towns, gained in the service of the American Missionary Society.

VI.

Where, then, in America must one seek to find the Perfect State? In the cities? Not so, if one is to believe the array of more or less famous students of municipal government who have collaborated with Edward A. Fitzpatrick in the writing of *Experts in City Government*; the expert in almost every line of human activity is still all too little consulted by municipal managements, all of these agree. We would have better governed, more livable cities if they were. This utilization of expert assistance to the limit is one of the five cardinal points for which the National Municipal League is working, as described by its secretary, Clinton Rogers Woodruff, in *A New Municipal Program*. Absolute local self-government, safeguarding of the city's public property rights in land, removal of all barriers to the expression of the popular will and the placing and fixing of official responsibility are the other four. How these may best be achieved, and how they have been achieved in many cities make up a valuable reference treatise for students of public affairs.

After reading of our national shortcomings as already outlined, one wonders whether the title of *Democracy in Reconstruction* ought not to read *The Reconstruction of Democracy*. Its authors, Dr. Joseph Schafer and Frederick A. Cleveland, do not think so, however. They share Prof. Ross's faith in America and American institutions, and while their bulky volume lists an imposing array of deficiencies in our social structure and organization, all are in fields in which much earnest, intelligent remedial work is already being done.

- WHAT IS AMERICA? BY EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS. The Century Company.
 THE FARMER AND THE NEW DAY. BY KENYON L. BUTTERFIELD. The Macmillan Company.
 HOW THESE FARMERS SUCCEEDED. BY JOHN R. MCMAHON. Henry Holt & Co.
 NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD. BY EVELYN DEWEY. E. P. Dutton & Co.
 THE LITTLE TOWN. BY HARLAN PAUL DOUGLASS. The Macmillan Company.
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