

Rural Iowa in the 1920s

Conflict and Continuity

DOROTHY SCHWIEDER

IN THE 1920s, Iowa's farm population was of two minds about its rural way of life. On one hand, farm families lived much as their parents and grandparents had before them, carrying on the time honored tradition of the "favored man of God," comfortable with the rural institutions which had served them well for many decades. But on the other hand, increasingly farm families realized the social deficiencies of rural living. By the 1920s, town society had so outdistanced rural society in regard to modern conveniences and social/cultural opportunities that the sharp contrasts between the two could not be ignored. For rural people these changes created discontent and a strong desire for change. The discontent of the farm population was only one part of the rural scene in the 1920s, however. Increasingly rural life was scrutinized by people from all walks of life. The list of critics comprised both rural and urban dwellers. The Country Life Movement, for example, included many urban constituents who strongly criticized the social deficiencies of rural living as

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well as the economic disorganization of the American farmer. Rural areas provided critics of their own including state extension personnel, farm journal editors, newspaper editors, and farm dwellers themselves, all urging changes to make farm living more profitable and more socially satisfying.

Of all the criticisms of farm life in the 1920s, however, that of the farm population proved to be the most pervasive and the most unsettling. The discontent of Iowa farm families did not lie with farm living *per se*, but rather with the shortcomings of farm life when contrasted with town or city life. At a time when town dwellers enjoyed many physical comforts and a great diversity of social opportunities, farm people often felt their lives deprived and monotonous by comparison. The crux of the discontent was often social in nature. Since 1900, Iowa's rural society had often been judged by its similarities and contrasts to town society. Town and city living were held up as a model and unfortunately, in most ways, rural society was found wanting. Increasingly critics and supporters alike pointed out the drawbacks to rural living. Farm families were isolated, and as a result, farm living was often portrayed as dreary and monotonous. Moreover, farm families had few social and cultural opportunities. Farm children sometimes received inferior educations in rural schools and many did not have the opportunity to attend high school. Most farm families did not share modern conveniences available to town residents, particularly electric lights, central heating, indoor plumbing, and electric appliances. Certainly farm families had made good use of one new invention, the automobile, but the effects were not always positive: While the automobile helped break down rural isolation it also increased the interaction between town and country people, often further emphasizing the discrepancy between the two ways of life. Yet another source of rural discontent was that the 1920s seemingly brought prosperity to every sector of society except agriculture. In the perception of farm people, town and city residents enjoyed a higher level of material well being than ever while prosperity for farm people faded quickly after World War I.

Although the twenties represented the peak of rural discontent with the social side of farm life, that discontent was certainly not new; the problem had roots that reached far back into

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the previous century. As Gilbert Fite points out in *The American Farmers: The New Minority*, people had been leaving the farm for the city since the mid-1800s because town and city living offered more physical comforts and more social opportunities.¹ By 1900, the social discrepancy between town and country living seemed to widen. Before the turn of the century, social activities of midwesterners, both rural and urban, centered around three institutions: family, church, and school. Although rural and urban social activities differed somewhat in frequency and form, they remained centered on these three basic institutions. Like rural families, town families were often large and family members frequently lived close together. Families assembled for holidays and social occasions. When social activities occurred outside the family circle, they took place at the community level. For example, town residents celebrated the Fourth of July with activities intended for all community residents. In a similar fashion, school activities involved all parents and children within a particular school district.²

Around 1900, however, social fragmentation began to appear. As Lewis Atherton has pointed out in *Main Street on the Middle Border*, in the late nineteenth century small town residents began "to participate in a national trend toward organizational activities." By the first decade of the twentieth century this behavior was so obvious that Atherton describes it as the "twentieth-century cult of joining." Atherton believes that this development took place because townspeople increasingly were unable to identify with the total community. As towns grew in size and as populations became more mobile, people joined countless organizations to give themselves the feeling of belonging. Whereas people had previously identified with the total community, after 1900 they transferred that identification to a myriad of social and business organizations. Altogether, Americans everywhere became a nation of joiners. That is, Americans in cities and towns became a nation of joiners. Rural people did not have the same opportunities.³

1. Gilbert Fite, *The American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington, IN, 1981), 10.

2. Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (New York, 1975), especially chapters 2 and 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 245-249.

After 1900, as more and more ruralites moved off the farm, farm living became the object of considerable scrutiny. The Country Life Commission, established by President Theodore Roosevelt, conducted the most well known study. Roosevelt, like many Americans, believed that rural living produced an intelligent, sturdy, self-reliant population that should not be allowed to dwindle. A continuation of the rural exodus, Roosevelt believed, was cause for alarm. The president responded to the situation by appointing five prominent Americans to the Country Life Commission to study rural conditions and to suggest ways to make rural living more profitable and more attractive. In 1909 the Commission issued its report and included many recommendations intended to improve rural social life. The Commission believed that farmers and community officials should work to provide better schools for young people and should develop curricula directly related to the farm youths' lives: Farm boys should study agriculture while farm girls should study homemaking. The Commission also recommended that country roads be improved, that state extension services be expanded, and that more social opportunities be established for farm women. Throughout the report, Commission members expressed concern over the attractions of town living. They pointed out that rural people continually equated town living with better living.⁴

Other notables also recognized that "drift to the cities" as one of the most difficult problems facing the nation. In 1913, Iowa author Herbert Quick wrote an article for *Good Housekeeping* entitled, "The Women on the Farm," in which he dealt with the problem of the farm exodus. Quick related that in his study of rural living, as well as from his own experience as a farm child, he had reached the conclusion that the movement to the cities "has been largely a women movement. I have found the men on the farms much more contented and happy than the women." He perceived the discontent of farm women to be a problem of major proportions and one that needed an early solution. Quick acknowledged that most of the progress had benefited the men on the farm, not the women. He noted: "In

4. *Report of the Country Life Commission* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1911), 82-83, 103-106, 121-27.

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the mothers, the wives, the daughters of the farm, toil has many slaves . . . of the open as abjectly held as its slaves of factory and mill. Not for herself alone, but for her daughter's sake, her son's future, has the country mother argued the move to town."⁵

Quick's comment accurately described the lives of rural women in Iowa. Observers of Iowa farm life had long insisted that farm women were greatly overworked. Moreover, many believed that farm women led dreary, isolated lives and were in need of more social outlets. In his article, Herbert Quick had correctly pointed out that one of the major difficulties in reducing the work of farm women was that farmers adopted many machines for outside work because they were profitable; unfortunately, few of the machines and labor-saving devices available for the farm home could be justified in the same manner.⁶ The result was that farm women in Iowa, like farm women elsewhere, worked exceedingly long hours performing many of their household tasks in the same manner as their mothers, and sometimes even their grandmothers, before them. As a general rule, farm women performed all work inside the farm home as well as raising chickens. On some farms women helped with milking and occasionally assisted with seasonal work like corn picking. Reflecting on his early life in rural Kossuth County in the late teens and twenties, Andrew Risius remembered that even as a young boy he felt "pity" for his mother because she had to work so hard. The Risius farm had no electricity until 1939. Risius did the washing for her family of ten with a hand-powered machine. Charles and Lola Crim, raised on a farm near Stratford in the teens and the twenties, also related that their mother worked excessively long hours. Lola recalled that in the summer, her mother arose at 4 a.m. so that she could churn butter during the cool part of the day. The one task Crim liked best was mending because that "gave her a chance to sit down." The heavy workloads of Iowa farm women often prevented them from taking part in activities outside the home.⁷

5. Herbert Quick, "The Women on the Farms," *Good Housekeeping* 57 (October 1913), 426-27.

6. *Ibid.*, 427-28.

7. Interview with Andrew Risius, Titonka, Iowa, December 1982 and interviews with Charles Crim, Mildred Crim, and Lola Crim, Ames, Iowa, March 1983.

The social roles of other farm family members also had undergone little change since the turn of the century. The activities of farm families continued to revolve around the three basic institutions of family, church, and school. Most social life took place within the family itself. Charles Crim recalled that in the teens and early twenties his family was quite isolated from town events. The family resided in the southeast corner of Webster County which placed them quite a distance from the county seat and definitely reduced the number of trips that they made to town. But at the same time, Crim remembered that he and his brothers and sisters never wanted for entertainment. The nine children often made their own toys and devised their own games. As a youngster, Crim had farm animals to play with, particularly the colts. Many relatives lived nearby and cousins often came to visit. The Crim family's experience underscores the fact that when children married, they frequently settled close to the parental home which allowed family members to maintain close ties. The Crims, like most rural families, gathered for birthdays, holidays, and other social occasions.⁸ Curtis Harnack, an Iowa author, dramatically emphasizes this point in his autobiographical account of growing up in northwest Iowa in the 1930s. In his book, *We Have All Gone Away*, Harnack describes the one time each year when neighbors gathered at his farm home to discuss plans for the cooperative threshing operation. At that time his mother and his Aunt Lizzie "felt a trifle uneasy, for this was the only night of the year when our visitors were other than relatives. With so many dozens of kin on both sides of the family, we needed no further friends."⁹

A major consideration of farm living in the 1920s was the matter of roads. While farm families were quick to purchase automobiles in the late teens and twenties and these were a vital factor in reducing rural isolation, bad roads remained a problem. Although state and local officials initiated road improvement programs in the twenties, particularly the use of gravel, in inclement weather country people still found themselves unable to travel to town. To a large extent, weather determined rural

8. Interviews with Charles Crim, Mildred Crim, and Lola Crim.

9. Curtis Harnack, *We Have All Gone Away* (Garden City, NJ, 1973), 107.

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families' travel patterns. The diary of a young farm girl growing up in rural Case vividly illustrates that point. Throughout 1921, sixteen-year-old Helen Brainard dutifully recorded the daily events that took place on her parents' farm. Although Helen wrote about many events, the topic of weather dominated her diary. If it rained, muddy roads were inevitable and that brought a whole series of cancellations for the Brainard family. The first casualty was that the mailman could not make his rounds. If family members had planned a trip to town, rain usually forced a change in plans. Sometimes the family could still make the trip by abandoning the automobile for a horse-drawn buggy. More often than not, in the event of rain, the family stayed home. For the Brainard family, like most Iowa farm families, "bad roads" were often the bane of their existence.¹⁰

Like their parents and grandparents before them, Iowa farm families in the 1920s attended rural churches and most sent their children to rural schools. Mildred Erickson Crim, who grew up in Hamilton County in the 1920s, recalled that "rural people were extremely proud of their little schools" and they believed that rural children received a better education than did town children. State law required that rural children pass eighth grade examinations before becoming eligible to graduate and rural parents believed that this system ensured that their children received an adequate education.¹¹ While some country schools were staffed with excellent teachers and contained good facilities, all country schools did not fit that description. No doubt many Iowa farm children in the twenties attended poorly maintained, over-crowded facilities and listened daily to ill prepared, disinterested teachers. Rural schools underwent little change in the twenties because school consolidation, underway from 1897, was halted temporarily in 1921.¹²

Country churches, however, did undergo some change during the 1920s. With the help of the automobile, farm people

10. Helen Brainard Diary, 1921, Brainard Family Papers, Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines.

11. Interview with Mildred Crim.

12. Joseph Wall, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1972), 188. See Jessie Field, *The Corn Lady* (n.p., 1911) for a view of a resourceful, successful country school teacher.

began to attend church in town. As one historian explained: "It was not that farm families had quit going to church, but that they had begun to go elsewhere."¹³ One churchman believed that some country people had abandoned the rural churches because their children "were no longer 'satisfied in a little country Sunday school while their chums and playmates were gathered in a large school in a nearby city or village. . . .'"¹⁴ In some areas rural churches consolidated so that they could remain open, while others moved their congregations to town. Many rural churches, however, did survive into the twenties and remained open for several more decades.¹⁵

While participation in rural churches and rural schools often proved to be a positive experience for young people, attendance in town schools frequently had a negative result. Many rural people recalled feeling "discriminated against," particularly when they attended high school. Charles Crim remembered that he deeply resented being called a "dumb farm kid," a standard label for farm children who attended town school. Many rural residents recalled that as high school students, they felt the stigma of "being different," as well as feeling inferior to town people. Mildred Crim recalled that many farm young people started to high school but did not finish because of the name calling and the many negative remarks directed at them by their town counterparts. One rural resident who attended high school in Jefferson in the 1930s commented that town people felt country people "were socially below them." For some farm people, these negative memories lingered for a lifetime.¹⁶

By the mid-1920s, Iowa's rural population seemed to have entered a period of deep uncertainty about their particular way of life. On the one hand, they remained staunch supporters of rural life. Farm families continued to believe deeply in the natural superiority of rural living. For so long farmers had been singled out as providing the moral and spiritual backbone of the

13. Don Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s*, (Westport, CT, 1970), 116-18.

14. Quoted in Kirschner, *City and Country*, 117.

15. *Ibid.*,

16. Interviews with Charles Crim and Mildred Crim; quoted from a forthcoming study by Tom Morain, "Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Town in the Early Twentieth Century," 149.

nation. Terms such as independent, self-reliant, and hard working had long been used to describe the farm population.¹⁷ Farm families had no reason to reject these descriptions in the twenties. Moreover, rural people continued to be proud of their rural institutions. Yet at the same time, rural discontent continued. Everywhere farm people looked they saw their way of life contrasted with town living and subsequently described as deficient, backward, and greatly in need of change. Even farm journals regularly carried ads which insinuated that by comparison with town living, country homes were dull, monotonous places from which young people longed to escape. The ads urged farm families to purchase radios, lighting systems, stoves, and other products that would enable them to bring the city to the farm. Ironically, even food was included in the advertisers' campaign. In almost every issue of *Wallaces' Farmer* for 1921, the Jello Food Company ran an ad which typically announced: "Time for farm women to learn about jello like city women."¹⁸ As the 1920s progressed, it became increasingly evident that Iowa's rural society contained an inherent contradiction: Farm life was good, but it was not good enough.

While rural people had their own perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of rural living, country observers offered a plethora of advice on ways to revitalize farm society. To individuals like Henry A. Wallace, editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* and the leading farm spokesman in the Middle West, "The mindlessness and artificiality of city ways were beginning to worm their way into the country."¹⁹ Wallace believed deeply in rural values and rural ways of life, but he perceived that rural society must change if it was to resist the encroachment of urban ways. Writing in *Wallaces' Farmer* in May 1925, Wallace asserted that farm people should become socially independent from town society and that they should develop their own rural culture. He noted, "Too often folks in the country seem to think they can maintain no social and intellectual life of their own. They have the notion that the ideal is to dash off to the nearest small town as often as possible and to lose themselves in its ac-

17. Kirschner, *City and Country*, 61-62.

18. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 11 March 1921, 481.

19. Kirschner, *City and Country*, 48.

tivities." Wallace then went on to sketch briefly his own view: "We want a distinctive culture of our own in the country; we want to prevent our countryside being merely a field for the extension of town habits. No one who looks at it sensibly thinks that our urban civilization is anything to pattern after. Not imitation of the town but the creation of a genuine rural civilization is what we need."²⁰

During the 1920s other Iowans, like Wallace, perceived that rural society must change to become more attractive and more satisfying. The Home Economics Department at Iowa State College continued to train home demonstration agents throughout the twenties whose major aim was to help farm families improve the quality of rural life. In 1925, seventeen counties employed home demonstration agents.²¹ These women were assisted by members of the ISC Home Economics staff at Ames who frequently traveled around the state presenting lectures and holding workshops. The home demonstration agents presented materials designed to improve all aspects of farm living—ranging from preparing more nutritious meals to utilizing better home ventilation methods to improving personal appearances through hat making. A frequent topic of discussion was home management or how the farm wife could do her work more efficiently and thus have more leisure time.

Much of the advice given to farm families in the twenties concerned farm children. Frequently extension personnel viewed the drawbacks of rural living from the perspective of how they affected young people. Throughout the 1920s, extension people and many others urged farm families to improve the quality of rural life if they wished to keep their children on the farm. In 1921, an extension speaker noted that pig clubs and poultry clubs were important, but it also was necessary to see beauty in other things. Sometimes these needs were coupled with a need for physical comfort on the farm. Yet another extension speaker told a group of farm women in 1925: "The reasons given for much unhappiness on the farm are lack of appreciation for the fine and aesthetic things of life and attention to making homes attractive and comfortable."²²

20. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 1 May 1925, 643.

21. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1925, 113.

22. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1921, 62; 23 January 1925, 114.

Anna E. Richardson, dean of the Home Economics Department at Iowa State College, frequently commented on children's needs. She urged farm communities to initiate the selection of a Blue Ribbon girl and a Blue Ribbon boy to call attention to the achievements of farm youth. Dean Richardson often emphasized the need to upgrade education and opportunities for farm children. Speaking to farm women at a meeting at ISC in 1925, Richardson advocated what she called a "Bill of Rights for Iowa Children." She believed that it should accomplish three things: "First, Iowa boys and girls should be intelligently managed and controlled; second, they should have access to the best education there is; and third, they should have the right to play and enjoy themselves."²³

During the twenties, social opportunities for some farm families increased through the expansion of farm interest groups, particularly the Farm Bureau and the Farmers' Union. Although their major concern was to help farmers economically, these groups also sponsored a variety of social activities. The Farm Bureau in particular offered women the opportunity to come together for neighborhood meetings where they studied a wide variety of domestic topics. Many times Farm Bureau women carried out their programs jointly with ISC extension personnel. In January 1925, when Farm Bureau members met in Des Moines for their annual meeting, the members had extensive praise for the positive way that the Farm Bureau had improved their lives and the lives of their families. Farm Bureau officials estimated in January 1925, that almost fourteen thousand Iowa farm women were involved in presenting Farm Bureau programs to their rural neighbors.²⁴

At the same time, some rural families followed the advice of Wallace and others and formed community clubs. These clubs increased social activities and developed strong, more cohesive rural neighborhoods. One community club, known as the Evergreen Sporting Association, had roots that reached back to 1905 when farmers in western Wright County met to hunt down a wolf that was threatening their livestock. That group became the nucleus of a general neighborhood club that

23. *Ibid.*, 22 January 1925, 114; 13 February 1925, 22.

24. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1925, 113.

existed through the 1920s. Neighbors held picnics, sponsored a field day, and participated in a literary society known as the Prohibition Club. The club also sponsored short courses in agriculture and domestic science taught by personnel from ISC. Of all their functions, however, members considered "the social side" the most important. Each month the club planned a community party in some member's home. One club member writing about the practice noted, "The only trouble that we encounter is to find a house large enough for the crowd, which often numbers one hundred and more. The people attending range in age from babies to grandparents; but all come expecting to enjoy themselves. . . ."25

From the viewpoint of Iowa's rural society, the third decade of the twentieth century could be described in a variety of ways. For some, the twenties offered a chance to revitalize rural society and assist it in warding off the assault of the city. For others, the decade offered a chance to improve the quality of rural life in more limited ways. Yet for others, like the farm population itself, the twenties was a time to rethink priorities and values. Certainly these years created great stress for farm people and produced uncertainty and ambivalence about their way of life. Although attempts were made to rebuild and refocus rural life, some quite successfully, overall the effort was too little and too late. Rural Iowans carried their discontent into the 1930s where, because of the severe depression, it was obscured but not eliminated. During the 1930s, Iowans moved closer and closer to the lifestyle enjoyed by town and city dwellers; urbanization of the countryside had begun. After 1930, some rural associations remained, but for the most part these became less and less important. Certainly in the transition, rural Iowans lost some of the old rural values, but by the 1930s, they seemed willing to pay the price.²⁶

25. *Ibid.*, 27 February 1925, 291.

26. See James Shideler, "Flappers and Philosophers and Farmers: Rural-Urban Tensions of the Twenties," *Agricultural History* 47 (1973), 298-299 for an interesting discussion of this problem. Also see David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, Iowa, 1979) for a full discussion of agricultural change during this period.

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