

THE AMERICAN RURAL SCHOOL

ITS CHARACTERISTICS, ITS FUTURE
AND ITS PROBLEMS

BY

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To

THE THOUSANDS OF CONSCIENTIOUS HARD-WORKING
TEACHERS

WHO ARE CONSECRATING THEIR LIVES

TO LABOR IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

THE HOME OF THE NORMAL AMERICAN LIFE

DEVOTING THEIR BEST ENERGIES

TO PREPARE OUR

TWELVE MILLION COUNTRY BOYS AND GIRLS

FOR USEFUL CITIZENSHIP

THIS BOOK

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

BY THE AUTHOR

PREFACE

THIS book is intended for rural school teachers, superintendents, and schoolboard members; for teachers' reading circles, normal school training classes, and all the public at large who are interested in the profound movement to make our American rural life richer and its labor more effective by means of schools adapted to the changing needs of rural society and the demands of modern life.

So far as the public school is concerned the term *movement* is here used advisedly. It is not used in the destructive sense. It does not seek out a new base for school conduct, nor does it run counter to established laws of life and growth. On the contrary, it is constructive in its use. It aims at fundamental harmony by facing the rural school away from the many artificial interests which have hampered the usefulness of this institution in the past. Indeed, the new movement strives to place the school where the school inherently belongs — in the midst of natural interests where it can prepare the youth for sane, wholesome lives on the farm — the only normal American life of our day.

Broadly speaking, no other subject is now engaging so much public attention as is the movement to organize rural life. With his usual clearness of vision, President Roosevelt sizes it up in these words: "With the single exception of the conservation of our natural resources, which underlies the problem of our rural life, there is no other material question of greater importance now before the American people." Our National Executive some time ago appointed a commission of experts on rural life to investigate and report its needs, with recommendations for improvement. This commission has just made a voluminous report which sets living and achieving in rural communities in their right relation to our national life. While sensible and suggestive rather than drastic and revolutionary, the report is so thoroughgoing in its questionings that we may indeed look to see "the benefits of organization, of coöperation, of quick travel, of swift communication, all the machinery to prevent waste of time and effort," which are even now part and parcel of urban life, applied to the entire length and breadth of rural life.

The social philosophers have outlined for us our task. They have indicated needed reforms and suggested remedies. They may even induce government to furnish the material means of reform. But it is the rural teachers, after all, who must bear the brunt of the change. The real reform must begin with the hearts and minds and hands of the rural youth. To make them receptive to the con-

templated changes, to fit them to make use of the material means placed at their disposal, to inspire them with a genuine love for the soil and all that goes with it — these, and many similar problems, are, and must largely remain, the teachers' work.

It is the author's conviction that teachers should be more conversant with rural school history and know more about the educational problems now looking toward solution. If they were generally familiar with the educational activities and impulses manifesting themselves in other rural communities, teachers could coöperate to better advantage and accomplish better results. The same is true of all others whose interests lie in the schools. If superintendents had a stronger grasp on the many perplexing problems come from supervision of schools; if school boards realized as they should the surpassing importance of their duties in the administration of school affairs; if the general laity could but half know the dire consequences of parsimony and closefistedness in school support, — if all these were so, many of the stumbling blocks in the way of rapid improvement would be cleared away.

This book was penned in the hope that earnest teachers and school officers might find in it some help in solving the questions set forth above. It is not a treatise on school methods nor yet on school management. It partakes more of the nature of an educational history, setting forth what has already been accomplished, indicating what is

yet to be done. It points out shortcomings in prevailing systems and suggests, wherever possible, remedies which can be applied profitably.

The author realizes that he is not the pioneer in this field. Others have been here before him. He has made free use of the experience and conclusions of all such, adding his own mite when and where he could. The book shall not have been in vain if he succeed in some small measure in shedding light on this greatest of twentieth-century problems.

H. W. F.

ATCHISON, KANSAS,
July, 1909.

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THE AMERICAN RURAL SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM STATED

It is conceded by students of education generally that the great desideratum of the times is a proper solution of the rural school problem. Secondary and higher education within our country have attained a satisfactory degree of excellence and efficiency. Modern unification and standardization have wrought marvelous things for the internal development of such institutions. Public liberality and private philanthropy have succeeded in making the schools an expression of the great material prosperity, and forward and upward movement so peculiar to our present-day American civilization. The universities, denominational colleges, and professional schools are definitely established and have acquired an educational momentum sufficient for all purposes. Graded schools, in city and village alike, have reached a stage of development or evolution so satisfactory that their future is practically assured.

Pathetic Story of the Rural School.—While the public attention has been centered on work and plans for the im-

provement of city schools, a great factor for or against the public weal has been sadly neglected. This is the rural school. All well-informed persons agree that conditions in the rural schools are not to-day what they should be for the proper training of the twelve million boys and girls growing up in rural communities. One half of our entire school population attend the rural schools, which are still in the formative stage. And at least 95 per cent of these children never get beyond the district school. The country youth is entitled to just as thorough a preparation for thoughtful and intelligent membership in the body politic as is the city youth. The state, if it is wise, will not discriminate in favor of the one as against the other; but it will adjust its bounties in a manner equitable to the needs of both.

Heretofore, the rural schools have received very little attention from organized educational authority. Whatever has been accomplished may be credited to local initiative; whatever has been neglected may be traced to general apathy and indifference. As a result, in some sections of our broad land, there has long existed a state of affairs bordering dangerously close on educational coma. It is not putting facts in too strong a light to say that vast numbers of our rural boys and girls are annually turned out by the schools systematically dwarfed through more or less purposeless courses of study, leaving them poorly prepared for the life struggle.