

The Arts Workshop of Rural America

A STUDY OF THE
RURAL ARTS PROGRAM OF THE
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

By Marjorie Patten



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Foreword

A CULTURAL revival sincerely and authentically American has been going on in rural America during these last dark years. It has reached significant proportions and has turned largely to the agricultural extension services of our state colleges and somewhat to the state universities for help and suggestion. The multiplying activities in drama, art, and music in an ever-growing number of communities have been thus far largely unrecorded. The movement is too new and has developed too rapidly for an adequate exchange of experience even among the state leaders, to say nothing of the local counties and communities.

It has seemed wise, therefore, to record the experiences of the states that were among the first to feel the quickening touch of this phenomenon. Financed by the General Education Board, the Department of Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University undertook to study them on the field, to visit not only the offices of extension service but also the communities where farm men and women were finding release and self-expression by depicting on stage and canvas the beauty, the spirit, the problems, the inwardness of life in rural America. The record of these visits is here set forth by Miss Patten in a truly exciting book, which holds promise of the great things that may come from our countryside.

EDMUND DE S. BRUNNER

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
April 5, 1937

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I

Introducing the Farmers' Leisure-Time Program

For those who are about to face the problems of social reconstruction with their many baffling difficulties, beauty, in at least one of its multitudinous forms, will be necessary.¹

THE story of the cultural contributions of the Rural Arts Program of the Agricultural Extension Service has never been fully told. It is the story of the rise of a host of home-spun leisure-time activities among farm people during the troubled years since the World War. These activities are deeply rooted in the soil, and they already form an important part of the agricultural program sponsored by Federal and State authorities to improve conditions in rural communities. Over wide areas farmers are interested now in opera as well as in corn and hogs, in drama as well as in cheese and cream, and in folk dancing as well as in wheat and cattle.

An *Extension Service Bulletin* issued by the Ohio State Agricultural College carries this quotation from Edman, "Leisure is an affair of mood and atmosphere rather than simply of the clock. It is not chronological occurrence, but a spiritual state. It is unhurried, pleasurable living among one's native enthusiasms."

Among the cultural interests found among farm folk in

¹ Paul H. Douglas quoted in *We Are Builders of a New World*, The Association Press, pp. 112-113.

the communities studied by the author of this book were plays, festivals, operas, choruses, bands, orchestras, folk dancing and folk music, choric speech, puppets, marionettes, hobby shows, art exhibits, play writing, crafts, radio hours of music, drama, and art appreciation. They bear witness to the fact that farm people have taken as their own something of the Edman philosophy in their endeavor to see that culture remains in agriculture. They have demanded it in spite of, and in many cases because of, depression conditions.

Glenn Frank, formerly president of the University of Wisconsin, says in a foreword to a play called "Goose Money," written by a Wisconsin farm woman,

"Agriculture is a life as well as a livelihood. There is poetry as well as production on a farm. Art can help us to preserve the poetry while we are battling with the economics of farming."

We are accustomed to hearing the voices of the little-theater groups in cities and larger towns; vacationing America has long been entertained in excellent fashion by the professional and semi-professional groups of actors, dancers, and musicians who move from cities to summer resorts annually. We are not so accustomed to the new voices now making themselves heard from the plains, the prairies, and the mining communities, and from little, remote places in the mountains. They are making themselves heard from the tall corn, from the wheat fields, the sugar-beet fields—yes, even from the dust bowl.

These voices have nothing in them of the commercial. They are the voices of men and women who have struggled through drought, thaw, drifts, impassable roads, dust and hail storms; who have fought grasshoppers, chinch bugs, and rust.

When one has listened to a seven-hundred-voice chorus of farm folk in Iowa singing Cadman's "Marching through the Clouds with God"; when one has found that literally hundreds of one-act plays are being produced in isolated little communities in Wisconsin in spite of twenty-two-foot drifts and a temperature of forty degrees below zero; when one has danced the *cserebogár* in a cold little Grange hall far from any center, to which more than two hundred farmers traveled many miles, the occasion being a Farm Bureau meeting which included music and folk dancing as a matter of course; then one becomes vitally aware that here is something new under the American sun, a program full of romance, adventure, and challenge, something new, but of the same spirit as that which marked the early pioneer days.

When one has had the opportunity to witness this far-flung program in a region one realizes that it is events like these that are propping up, strengthening, and enriching the economic side of life there.

Whole counties, districts, states, and regions have been revitalized because of the newly-developing enthusiasms for home-grown entertainment. It is their own vivid way of interpreting the idea, which is as old as Aristotle, that the whole end and objective of education is training for the right use of leisure time.

The states selected for the study include Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, Colorado, Ohio, North Carolina, New York, and West Virginia. They were chosen not because of excellence of program primarily but rather because they seemed to have programs representative of what is happening and of what may happen in different types of organizations.

Not in all of the states was the Agricultural Extension

Service responsible for the arts program. In a few the state university was responsible. While primary emphasis was placed on Extension Service, it was felt wise by those sponsoring the study to learn also from the experience of other tax-supported agencies that share here and there in directing the surging tide of cultural revival in rural America.

Some records and reports from states not visited were studied to make it possible in this volume to touch the high spots in the cultural program of rural folks throughout the country, a program which has made necessary during the last decade sweeping changes in the schedules of state universities and agricultural colleges, and especially in Extension Service.

No longer is it sufficient for this branch of agricultural planning to render to farm populations service simply on farm problems. Increasingly it must face the reality that while art cannot take the place of food, clothes, and shelter, the human spirit needs constant refreshment. Artists and dramatists are saying that they believe that the renaissance of art is coming from rural America. The father of American folk drama, Frederick H. Koch, Kenan Professor of Dramatic Literature, University of North Carolina, says:

Perhaps our student playmakers of today are pre-shadowing a new dramatic renaissance. Perhaps they will give us a drama as many-sided and as multi-colored as are the peoples of our American states—an American regional drama which will have its roots in every state, which will interpret the interestingness and the rich variety of our American life in a drama worthy of the struggles, the achievement and the common vision of all our people.²

It is intended in this volume to set forth in a sort of success-story form, some of the achievements of the rural arts

² From an address delivered at meeting of American Library Association, New Orleans, April 26, 1932.

program; and to show in some measure how far beyond prophetic message these voices have already been carried and how deeply the program has affected the areas in which it grew.

II

How the Program Grew

In leisure the centre of interest changes from production to consumption.

The rules which govern the great game of playing the man—the only game that is ultimately worth playing—apply both to labor and to leisure. The finest sorts of play are hard to distinguish one from another. On their highest level, they become two names for the same thing, and the word “art” indicates the point where they converge.¹

TO UNDERSTAND how staffs in Agricultural Extension Service and volunteer leaders in local communities carry on their cultural program it is necessary first to consider what Agricultural Extension is, how it came to be, and why it has become, in thirty short years, one of the largest single adult education organizations in the United States.

The Agricultural Extension Service is a service maintained jointly by the Federal Department of Agriculture and by state agricultural colleges under the Smith-Lever law, the broad purpose of which is to help to develop better economic, cultural, social, recreational, and community life among people living in farming areas in the United States.

In some states the agricultural colleges have been slow to co-operate fully on certain subjects related to the arts program; sometimes because one department or another falls in wholeheartedly only with phases of the service that can be interpreted readily in terms of dollars and cents. Sometimes

¹ L. P. Jacks, *The Education of the Whole Man*, Harper & Brothers, 1931, p. 76.

certain departments of the colleges believe they must uphold more professional standards than are possible or practicable in the work among farm folk.

The Agricultural Extension Service did not originate the arts program. In the very earliest days, as neighborhood life developed in rural America, farmers often met to exchange ideas on cattle, marketing, and crops. Records tell us also of spelling bees accompanying these farmers' discussions; of singing schools, debating, and home-talent performances. Thus, social and agricultural interests grew side by side, and the two date back to our oldest American civilization. Style of program, subject matter, and methods of production have changed; but the patterns remain amazingly like the original and develop from the same human needs.

The Agricultural Extension Service therefore has its roots in activities such as those which were carried on by the following: agricultural societies organized shortly after the Revolutionary War; agricultural fairs, beginning in 1809; the state departments of agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture; the land-grant colleges, established after the Morrill Act of 1862; the agricultural experiment stations, made national by the Hatch Act of 1887, which brought the first Federal grant of money for agricultural research, and numerous farmers' institutes, held ever since Civil War days, which in some states are still carried on as the basis for Agricultural Extension programs.

From the beginning of the twentieth century rapid history was made in Extension Service. There were leaders, such as Seaman A. Knapp, of the Bureau of Plant Industry of the United States Department of Agriculture, who in order to encourage demonstrations on farms took twenty-two men to the Southwest and showed them how to raise

cotton successfully in an area infested with the boll weevil; P. G. Holden, who started what he called "Seed Corn Gospel Trains" in the Middle West; the United States Department of Agriculture, which financed a farmer's co-operative demonstration work in the South with aid from the General Education Board. It was here that county extension agents were first employed as staff leaders.

In 1914 a nation-wide extension program was provided for by the Smith-Lever Act, with the purpose of "aiding in diffusion among the people of the United States, useful and practical information on subjects relative to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same." The objectives of Extension Service, according to a summary of literature on the subject, include the following:²

1. To increase the net income of the individual farmer through more efficient and economical production.
2. To cultivate a desire for a more satisfying home life.
3. To encourage more comfortable, convenient, healthful and beautiful homes and surroundings.
4. To implant an appreciation of, and love for, rural life in farm boys and girls.
5. To advance the educational and spiritual needs for rural people.
6. To acquaint the general public with the needs and ideals of agriculture and its place in the national structure.
7. To foster cultural, social, recreational and community life of rural people.
8. To improve the quality of agricultural products for the purpose of increasing income, meeting competition from abroad more successfully and giving a greater service to the consumer.
9. To encourage the general participation of farm people in agricultural organizations for the purpose of becoming an

² From Landis, *Rural Adult Education*, p. 81; Stacy, *An Integration of Adult Education*, p. 20; and *A Study of the Extension Service*, by a committee of the Staff of Iowa State College, p. 28.

effective and helpful influence in local, county, state and national affairs.

10. To develop rural leadership.

The Agricultural Extension Service was meant for every member of the farm family; and from the beginning it has developed with that program in mind. As early as 1900 efforts were being made to organize the young people, thereby to encourage parents to adopt better methods and at the same time to enable the coming generation to become better informed in agricultural pursuits. This was the beginning of the great 4-H movement which now includes nearly one million young people of the farms. Its objectives are as inclusive as life itself. Its emblem—the four-leaf clover—is a familiar one in almost every rural community in the United States. The 4-H movement has served to keep boys and girls interested in rural activities; has helped more than ever can be written to make life among the youth of rural America well rounded and satisfying, to train leadership for community service, and to furnish a happy, wholesome program for the young folk. The 4-H Clubs are everywhere building strong foundations for the future farm community.

They need no further comment here; but it is worthy of note that the *Christian Century Magazine* for June 24, 1936, in an article headed "Government Promotes 4-H Clubs," states:

The 4-H Clubs have won such a following among the farm youth in all parts of the country, and the character-building work that they accomplish is of such moral and religious value, that they stand in the front rank among the agencies that are promoting those ends that are the avowed objectives of the religious education movement.

High praise this for an organization whose primary purpose is to further economic betterment among rural people.

It was in 1921 and the years following that emphasis began to be placed on recreation in the agricultural program. 4-H Club leaders and home economics workers began to secure for recreation and music-appreciation programs the leadership of Fannie R. Buchanan of the Education Department of the Victor Talking Machine Company. Co-operative arrangements were developed with the National Recreation Association, whose specialists in drama, music, and general recreation have added so much to the development of the arts program through their leadership-training institutes throughout the country, especially in those areas where recreational leadership has been available permanently on the staff of Agricultural Extension Service to follow up visits of this efficient traveling staff. In 1935 Miss Ella Gardner, of the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of the Interior, was secured as National Specialist in Extension Recreation.

W. H. Stacy, in his book, *The Integration of Adult Education*, says in describing the rapid development of the recreational program:

Of the first 1000 *Farmers' Bulletins*, which were published by the United States Department of Agriculture previous to the Fall of 1918, only one dealt with the community. Not one had reference to social programs, such as recreation, art, organization, uses of time, leisure, beauty, music or sociology. The next 500 published during the period 1918 to 1926 included nine community studies and two that were related primarily to recreation.³

Yet in 1933 county extension agents reported in statements regarding achievements that more than 14,000 communities were developing recreational activities. In the states included in this study in 1936 some of the most far-

³ W. H. Stacy, *Integration of Adult Education*, pp. 40-41.

reaching recreation programs in the United States have been developed; yet only here and there have full-time recreation specialists been employed, and the few that are now working in the field must cover so much territory and their schedules are so crowded that any comprehensive, growing program is next to impossible. The rural arts program has developed at a much more rapid rate than the awareness of the need for expert leadership to carry it on.

The recreation staff members in Extension Service in the areas studied have proved that wherever adequate leadership is available there develops a sound, firmly-rooted program; and also they have pointed out a definite need for more of the same type of leadership and for some permanent plan for such leadership. Rural sociological extension staffs have seen the need arising and have tried to meet it; but often it has been difficult to interpret this need in terms of adequate support for expert help in the arts field, since the values of this type of program cannot in any way be measured in dollars and cents.

It is interesting that directors of Extension everywhere seem to be among the most interested champions of the cause. Something of the prevailing enthusiasm is expressed by an assistant director of co-operative Extension Service:

If we should be forced by economic conditions to abandon Farmers' Week features—the home-talent ones must be the last to go. Corn and clover, and cattle, markets, money, prices—these are but the flesh and blood of agriculture; but music and play and discussion are the very soul of it.⁴

The range of interest in the field of the cultural arts is almost unlimited. A survey by a committee of the American Country Life Association in 1933 included many different

⁴ W. H. Stacy, *Integration of Adult Education*, p. 42.