The Need of Child Welfare Work in Rural Communities

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Until recent years the study of social questions and the application of modern methods of philanthropy have been confined almost entirely to the cities. The welfare workers of America are just beginning to see that all matters of social and family uplift relate as truly to the rural as to the urban classes.

Professor Bailey, of Cornell University, says: "All great human problems are fundamentally the same, differing chiefly in their phases and symptoms. There is a city phase and a country phase of every great question. The city phase has been studied with much care and, therefore, we have come to think that social problems are city problems. But whatever vitally affects the city likewise in some degree affects the open country. One of the great needs of the time in social studies is that we treat the country phase of education, truancy, public health, pauperism, charities, and moral standards, as thoroughly as we are treating the city phase of them."

This one quotation, if accepted in its full meaning, is sufficient to prove "The Need of Child Welfare Work in Rural Communities." Yet it is true that until now the city has had nearly all the attention, while with equally important problems the country in social service matters has been neglected.

The city dweller is accustomed to think of the city as the hub, and the country as simply a thinly inhabited space through which transportation lines, as spokes, give access to regions beyond. In reality, as regards number of people, the urban hub is still the smaller part of the American wheel. According to the census of 1910, forty-six per cent. of the American people live in cities and towns of 2,500 inhabitants or more, and fifty-four per cent. in rural districts, there being an actual majority of 6,725,500 farmer and village folk over their urban competitors for life, liberty and happiness.

One reason for the former neglect of rural welfare work is the greatness, combined with the vagueness of the task. Even now it is like a big mountain outlined through the mist. There have been a few natural growths of social service, indigenous to the soil, as it were, which have shown that rural communities and welfare work are not antagonistic or incompatible. There have been a few extensions of city agencies into country districts, with success beyond expectation. The vagueness is slowly passing away but the greatness of rural welfare problems looms larger every day.

Paper Based on Special Inquiry.

When I accepted the invitation of the committee to present a paper on this theme, a few brief queries were sent to a score of leading social workers in different states, to provide first-hand material with which to build. A few gave hearty and helpful replies, but to the majority of my correspondents it was a new field of inquiry, and there were no ready-made answers to my questions.

One question was: "Is there a real need of such work, and on what lines?" The answer of Supt. C. V. Williams, of the New Jersey Children's Home Society, epitomizes the replies of many: "Yes; on educational lines, and especially in the creation of a preventive program."

Prof. Chas. B. Davenport, of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D. C., replied: "My reports on the Nams and the Hill Folk indicate my opinion of the desirability of such work, and the lines along which I think it should be carried on." The Nams and the Hill Folk are two groups of families, one in New York, the other in Massachusetts, descendants of shiftless and immoral ancestors, in whom for five generations has persisted a tendency to drink, crime and immorality, with shiftlessness and dependence on public aid. They are special examples of rural needs, many times duplicated the country over, the partial cure being education and segregation, to be accomplished through organized rural welfare work.

Miss Ida H. Curry, Secretary of the Children's Department of the New York Charities Aid Association, declared: "The most flagrant neglect of children that has ever come to my attention, has been among children of American stock in rural communities." Similar testimony was given in the replies received from other social workers, north and south, and on the Pacific coast.

An effort was also made to obtain estimates of the amount of child need in rural communities, as compared to cities. The replies varied greatly. Some seemed to think the need small, because little had been asked for or done in the past. Others, in touch with country work, declare the needs large and important. A few, after prolonged and special experience, say that the needs are as great in proportion to population as in the cities; and that welfare work is even more urgently required because of isolation, relative indifference, and other conditions.

Miss Ida Curry, who bases her opinion upon detailed rural work, most of it carried on for five or more years, in fifteen counties of the state of New York, says: "In my judgment the per cent. of children neglected or destitute requiring public assistance of some kind, is as great or greater in the country districts than in the cities. In the large towns near neighbors know of conditions, and there being social workers and organizations to appeal to near at hand, cases are more closely looked up than in the scattered population of country districts. There, although conditions in general may be known, no one is directly interested to report cases and urge action. Many serious cases go on month

after month, and even for years, without any effort being made to remedy them. Therefore there is great need for social workers to enter rural communities, stir up interest, report on definite cases, and organize for continued and remedial work for the future."

This lucid and vigorous statement, based on long and wide experience, aptly describes the situation and indicates the duty to be performed. The writer's personal experience, including eleven years of service as the Superintendent of the Iowa Children's Home Society, which did much work in rural communities, exactly coincides with that of Miss Curry, of New York, and of others in different states. If less than an equal number of country children in proportion to population are aided by welfare organizations, it is probably because the city is in this respect an easier field to cover, and the country cases are scattered beyond the reach of existing agencies.

Examples of Rural Needs.

What kind of needs are found in rural communities? With slight variations, everything that can be found in the cities—poverty, neglect, cruelty, illegitimacy, desertion, and the uncontrolled production of feeble-minded children, and all accentuated by isolation and the lack of local interest and authority. Take a few concrete instances of real country cases, which could be duplicated and multiplied from any state in the Union.

A few months ago, as I sat in the office of a society doing country work, a letter from the morning's mail was shown me, which asked aid in an aggravated case. The letter told of a feeble-minded mother, with three grown feeble-minded daughters, all of whom were promiscuous in their relations with men, and who have among them several illegitimate children, with more expected. They are a menace to the community in which they live, and the letter asked aid to break up the nest of iniquity, the task being beyond the powers native to that rural locality.

Housing reform seems to be a theme almost necessarily connected with slum and tenement districts of cities, yet crowded and unsanitary conditions exist in lone hovels among the hills equal to any in the congested centers. From recent reports of rural agents of the State Charities Aid Association of New York I take two descriptions. One is a country cabin or shack containing three rooms, the home of a total of 24 persons—six men, five women and thirteen children under eight years of age. The other is a two-room shack, the only dwelling for ten people, five adults and five children, whose bed accommodations consisted of one filthy mattress, some old horse blankets and a nest of straw upon the floor. In both cases the presence of vermin, the lack of decent toilet facilities, the utter promiscuity of the life, equal the poverty, squalor and crowding seen in modern city slums. Yet some think such things do not matter, if found in country districts.

In my own experience as a superintendent I have received many families from rural conditions as bad as these. I remember one family

of five who lived for years in a cave dug in the clay bluff of the Des Moines river. The three children, who were little more than animals when taken away from their unworthy parents, afterward developed into fine children.

Another family of seven, the parents and five children, lived in a hut upon the bank of the Iowa river, the structure being half a dug-out, half a gable of poles covered with hay upon which a heavy coat of clay was placed to act as a roof. The father, a wood-chopper, was seriously injured in a drunken brawl, and taken to a hospital. The condition of the family then became known, the children were rescued, and later placed in family homes.

A third family, a man, a woman, and five children, no two of whom were supposed to have the same father, lived in a wood-shed on a village alley. There were no windows and only a blanket for a door. An old legless stove stood in one corner. A big box with a few broken dishes, and a few smaller boxes for seats completed the furnishings. There was no bed, only a nest of straw on the dirt floor, and a number of old blankets, filthy beyond description. Out of this excuse for a dwelling, and away from the unworthy adults who do not deserve the name of parents, a court order rescued the five children in January, 1901. Most of them have since made good in foster homes.

Illustrations need not be multiplied. The known cases of child distress voice a tremendous demand for systematic welfare work in rural communities. Duty requires that we put in practice in country districts the principles and methods now used in our most progressive cities.

Constructive Efforts Demanded.

So far I have dwelt upon the need of what may be termed operative child welfare work, dealing with results, but in small degree abolishing causes and safeguarding the future. Side by side with the direct or operative part of the work should go preventive and remedial efforts. What are some of them?

1. Every correspondent, east and west, urged the enlargement of educational opportunities for the children of rural communities. From Massachusetts, New Jersey, Missouri and Washington social workers plead for the regeneration of rural schools, their modernization, vitalization, adaptation to the times, and some way of making them the heart of social life and action. In some of the states a beginning has been made along these lines by combining several districts, or whole townships, into grade and high schools, with public transportation to and from the central school buildings—one of the most important rural educational movements of recent years. More and better teachers, modern schoolhouses and equipment, and neighborhood playgrounds, will aid mightily in solving the problems of rural communities.

2. The second agency to be established is an endless chain of social centers, among the people, by the people, and for the people, but at first necessarily under trained leadership from the outside. This implies a

constant and general use of schoolhouses and playgrounds, and perhaps churches, in ways some of which were unknown to the fathers, but proven effective wherever rightly undertaken. An eminent social worker says: "I believe that the establishment of social centers in rural communities, with one or more trained workers in each of them, taking a kindly interest in the people and teaching them high standards of living, and exercising at the same time a legal and sympathetic protectorate over the neglected children of the neighborhood, would be an invaluable agency for the betterment of present conditions."

3. The third constructive element in rural welfare is the revitalizing and modernizing of the country church. No real welfare work can ignore or minimize this great agency in efforts to improve or reconstruct rural society. While named third, it is probably first in potentialities. In all ages the sanctions and power of religion have been of immense influence upon human life and character. If adjusted to modern conditions, as the best city churches have adjusted themselves, the country church may provide both essential dynamics and leadership to rural welfare movements.

In the country up to this time there has been very little development of the churches to meet the needs of the day. As a consequence they are proportionately weaker than they were 25 years ago. About 1890 there were 21 flourishing country churches in Scott county, Iowa. Today, according to a leading citizen of the county, only three of them have supporting congregations and regular services. This is an extreme but not an isolated case. The broadening, strengthening, and socializing of the country church is one of the crying needs of this generation.

Rev. Harry Deiman, of Chicago, says: "The church of the country must not be satisfied with a gospel of personal salvation, but must be filled with the passion of vitalizing the life of the entire countryside with ideals that do justice to our social Christianity. The church must so energize rural life that it may keep pace with our advancing civilization."

Dr. Charles Otis Gill and Mr. Gifford Pinchot are the joint authors of a remarkable new book on "The Country Church." I can quote but one or two of its pregnant statements: "The church is the natural body to lead in rural social service." "The country church needs social service to vitalize it as much as social service in the country needs the help of the church." "Social service is as important to the health of the community in the country as in the city, while results in the country are far more easily accomplished."

The necessity of the revitalized and modernized church in any worthy scheme of rural welfare is therefore apparent. How to coordinate it with progressive educational systems and secular social service, is a matter for deep and careful study.

4. The next preventive agency is adequate institutional provision for the feeble-minded. According to the estimate of the best authorities, every state has a feeble-minded person for about every 300 of its popu-

lation. One development of recent years is the conviction that the feeble-minded female should be segregated during her years of possible child-bearing, as a protection to her personally, and to safeguard the future of the race. Hence the need of great additions in every state to the present inadequate institutional provisions for this class.

The country needs this aid even more than the cities, as the conditions there are less favorable than in the cities for the mentally subnormal. In the cities there are special schools for the backward and the feeble-minded of the higher classes, and various other remedial agencies, all of which can be conducted successfully where sufficient numbers can be gathered for their operation. These remedial and educational arrangements are impossible in the country, so the welfare of the rural feeble-minded, and that of the normal people who now are in daily association with them, can best be conserved by such institutional provision.

5. Another instrumentality combines caring for results with seed-sowing for a better future. Agencies or societies, local or general, should be enlisted or established, with representatives in at least every county, and in some cases smaller communities, to seek out and care for homeless children, or those in the hands of criminal or otherwise improper persons, and find them homes in good families at a distance from their original environment. This would give to each one of these children a fair chance, unhampered by old names or associations. Neighborhoods so treated would in time lose their depressing elements, and rise above the average in mentality and morality.

Social Work in Rural Communities.

What is the best method of doing rural welfare work, by new local organizations, or by the extension of city organizations to rural communities? An extension of city organizations, to prepare the way for local organizations, is in my judgment the only feasible way, the only practical solution of existing problems.

1. Rural communities must be stimulated and shown, before they can be expected to do welfare work for themselves. Some one must bear into each country community the seed of this social gospel, and sow it in sympathetic tears; and continue in the field after the first harvests, lest lack of leadership produce discouragement.

2. Only the cities now have the trained workers, capable of teaching and training others as potential leaders; and the cities alone can now gather, train, and send out these rural agents to be the voice and example of the new and better ways.

3. The cities alone now have organization, and the financial backing to carry out a social propaganda for the country districts. Ultimately the country will support its own work as generously as do the cities now; but at first the country must be considered a social mission field for city beneficence.

A number of strong and worthy societies and agencies, in all par of the Union, are sending their agents from the cities into their respe tive country districts, there to seek family homes for their wards, a occasionally to do active work in the local neighborhoods. Yet, as t late Joseph Cook said of certain things in his lecture on "Ultima America": "These are efficient, but they are not sufficient." There mu be systematic constructive work looking to the future as well as acti efforts relating to the present.

In some way the boards of education and superintendents of struction must be roused to meet more adequately the educational nee of the majority of our people, who are found not in cities, but in t rural communities of our land. In some way the social center idea mu be fitted to the narrow and meager lives of rural people; and the c livening influence of interesting associations will do much to transfor the unprogressive and isolated into advanced and influential citizens. some way the rural church must be awakened, so as to become a pri agency in the regeneration of country life. It must advocate social r forms, originate social improvements, and stimulate the service of h manity as the earthward side of the service of God.

These, with the adequate institutional care of defectives, and oth measures to cure existing social ills, are essential parts of a protecti scheme to safeguard the future of our people. They will take mon but somehow the money must be raised. They will require workers, b somehow the workers must be found.

Note the method employed by the Children's Department of t New York Charities Aid Association to develop welfare work in rur communities. They make the county the unit of service. There th locate a trained social worker, whose duty it is to stir up interest, definite service in behalf of destitute and endangered children, and ganize for the permanent improvement of social conditions. Actu cases, preferably of long standing and aggravated character, within t county, are specially studied, names of witnesses and data for use evidence are secured, and assistance sought from courts, officials, a institutions. The needs that exist and the changes that should be ma are brought before the local communities. When the people are pr pared and the time is ripe, a local organization is formed to push a lines of child welfare work throughout the county.

Such methods, modified to meet the needs of different localiti and co-ordinated with reforms in education, social center organizatio the modernized church, and the segregation of the mentally subnorm will, I believe, solve the main problems of rural welfare work, and ul mately prove both efficient and sufficient.