

WHY THIS EXODUS FROM NEBRASKA FARMS

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by

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

In the preparation of this paper I have secured my information from three sources:

1---From the material given in the farm magazines, particularly as given in the "Nebraska Farmer" and the "Twentieth Century Farmer"

2---From the report of the Nebraska Rural Life Commission.

3---From personal letters sent to farmers.

In the first part of the paper I shall give a summary of the causes as suggested by the farm paper articles and the report of the Rural Life Commission. The last part will deal with the answers given by farmers in reply to the questions sent to them.

## P A R T I

First, our educational system is enticing the boys and girls away from the farm. Among others this question was asked by the Rural Life Commission: "Are the schools training boys and girls satisfactorily for the farm life?" Only 11% answered "yes" while 89% of the farmers said "no". About half of our school population <sup>is</sup> found on the farms. One out of about every two hun-

dred of the school population graduates from the high school; one in about every six hundred and fifty from the college, and one in every six thousand five hundred from a four year agricultural course. From the half of the school population furnished by the farm only a very small per cent return fully equipped for farm work.

That they do not take an agricultural course and become highly efficient in that line is not the most deplorable feature. They do not return at all. Every child that enters the common school, high school or college is educated to leave the farm. The ideal to better their condition, to secure an easier way of earning a living, to attain something higher, is constantly held before the student. They are already on the farm; anyone can farm; that is not higher or better.

They are not taught how to feed chickens or calves or to grow corn or how to do any other kind of farm work. So far as the child mind can see, there is no connection between what he learns and the work of the farm. To the boy who does not naturally like the farm the ideal of "something else" is appealing strongly. The grievances and drudgery of the farm seem greater every day. He does not like to milk the cows or do the chores. He has to stay at home and work while the town boy plays base ball and has a good time. He resolves he will leave

the farm as soon as possible and try "his luck" somewhere else. The school has failed to teach him of farm beauties and advantages. Even for the boy who naturally likes the farm no encouragement has been received nor practical lesson learned.

Many of the common schools and all of the high schools, colleges and universities are located in the towns and cities. The child is taken away from the rural outdoor life of the farm as soon as he is able to learn and placed in the school for development. The environment of the city or town is thrown about him. The real responsibilities of life have never come upon him; father and mother are supporting him. It is a life of comparative ease and pleasure. He falls naturally into the new environment. The old environment, never fully comprehended is forgotten. He only recalls the hardships on the farm. When his education is completed he thinks of "something higher" and does not return to his rural home.

Education is not expensive in Nebraska, yet it is the wealthier class of people who send their children to school. The poorer class cannot send their children to school beyond the eighth grade. The Nebraska Farmer says "educational facilities in most country communities are utterly inadequate." "Many times children are irregular in attendance while they are going to the country

school\*. The parents of children who need education most are least able to realize their children's need. The uneducated group must remain on the farm. Those able financially secure an education and seek other pursuits. Everywhere the farm retains the least trained when it should have its share of the best trained because of the complexity and diversity of farm problems. In many places the farm is being repopulated by a poor and an uneducated class of foreigners. Occasionally young men begin on the farm but fail, because of inexperience and lack of practical knowledge, and move to town.

Two methods may be suggested to counteract this movement away from the farm resulting from mis-education. The first is to offer an elective course in agriculture in the high school and some work along that line in the common schools. If a child is so inclined he may elect this course. In the present system he can get nothing along that line, even though he may desire it, except perhaps one short course in agriculture. Probably a more satisfactory method, however, would be that of a rural high school. Let this rural high school be located in the country and deal with farm problems. The town or city high school should be continued as at

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\*Nebraska Farmer Editorial September 13, 1911.

present. The two would bear the same relationship to each other as the State University and the State Agricultural College. One rural high school in each township would probably be sufficient.

The second cause for leaving the farm is a lack of social life. There seems to be a mistaken idea in the minds of many that life in the city is one continuous holiday. Some feel country life monotonous. But the man of the city who prospers must think and work the same as any one else must do. But is it true that there is a lack of social life upon the farm? Yes, and inasmuch as we are social beings, the social instincts must be gratified. C. F. Curtis, Dean of the Iowa Agricultural College, says, "The rural life problem will not be solved until we establish and build up better schools, churches, and rural organizations". It is a conceded fact that the country affords no place to go, all entertainments and social gatherings are held in town. The rural folk must either attend these functions in town or remain at home. At one time there were many rural churches but now most of these are abandoned. " — end of quotation?

Then if there was sufficient social activity in the country there would always be the cry of "too busy". Mr. Linn of Polk county says "if we worked no

longer than people of the city we would starve to death." Hattie Byfield <sup>1</sup> says, "the excuse is often given in this way, we had to, (work hard) the first years we were married and now we know nothing else" <sup>2</sup> So people continue even in old age. The Nebraska Farmer says, "on some farms there are too many hours per day". <sup>3</sup> Why is it that farmers are busier than any one else. In reality, part of it is only seeming. First, the individual in the city ceases work at five or six o'clock and goes home to work for several hours longer about home tasks. His day's work is really not done. But people see him go home at the earlier hour and they think that he is through work for the day. Second, everything in the town or city is run on scheduled time. The train comes in at a certain hour. The bank closes at four o'clock in the afternoon. The stores close at a uniform hour. Business life is carried on, on time because business is social. Farming is individual. The farmer begins and ceases work when he pleases.

But what are the remedies for this situation?

1---The development of community life. Every one young or old should have the opportunity to enjoy entertainment in some clean intellectual way.

2---The perfection of the rural delivery mail

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1--Nebraska Farmer Editorial September 11, 1907

2--Nebraska Farmer article, "Length of Farmers Day," June 2, 1907

3--Nebraska Farmer Editorial April 6, 1907

system so that the farmer may receive the news each day, and the rural telephone system will make the rural communities more social. The newspaper and the telephone inform the farmer concerning his far away and near by neighbor.

3---Good roads and more automobiles will shorten the distance to town and other places as well, This will also save much time to the farmer.

A third great reason may be found in the complexity of farm problems. "Farming is coming to be a more complex proposition each year in spite of the wonderful advances made in farm science during the past half century".\* We have reached the period where it takes capital to farm. Many a young man cannot buy horses and machinery which he must have in order to start. He is compelled to become a day laborer. Naturally he turns to the city where he feels the demand is greater and wages higher.

The farm papers are full of discussions about the farm labor problem. An editorial in the Nebraska Farmer of March, 1911 says, "Everywhere we go we hear farmers talking about the difficulty of getting a good supply of help." Remedies offered are:

1---Make farm work an all year job.

2---Treat farm help better.

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\*Nebraska Farmer article June 26, 1907.

3---Make provisions for married men. ¶ This question of farm help is worse near the city. "We believe that the man who honestly inquires into the reason for the shortage of labor on the farms will be forced to the conclusion that it is a question of wages." Based on investigation made by Minnesota Experimental station farm hands receive sixteen or seventeen cents per hour. The editorial comment is, "the farmer is paying his labor all he can afford to pay and in some cases more. The city is outbidding the farmer for labor and is getting it right along. The farmer must get more for his products so that he may be able to pay more for his labor. A good supply of labor for the farm is distinctly an economic problem, a problem of eliminating some of the middle men and of turning to the farmer a greater portion of the final selling price." \*

Another editorial in April, 1911, speaks of the scarcity of men who will work by the year. They go to special places at special times. Again let us quote the resolutions of the Nebraska Farm Congress which says that "farm labor is now deficient in both quality and quantity. We favor the betterment of the farm laborer whenever possible to a working interest with the farmer and his participation in community life."

This question was asked by the Rural Life Com-

\* Nebraska Farmer Editorial "Farm Labor, March 26, 1911"

*1 min and place?*

mission: "Is farm labor satisfactory?" Thirty five per cent of the farmers answered "yes," sixty five per cent answered "no." This question was also asked, "Are conditions upon the farms satisfactory to hired help. Eighty one per cent answered "yes." Nineteen per cent "no."

These answers and quotations are not all in harmony as to conditions on the farm nor do they coincide as to a remedy but are proof of the seriousness of the farm labor problem. A few hints may be given as suggestive of a remedy.

First, the quantity and quality of labor must be increased; conditions must be so arranged as to draw a better laboring class to the farm. This can be done by various methods of perfecting community life.

Second, the farmer is now paying all he can afford to pay, yet the city pays more. The hope is that the farmer's profits can be increased. There are two ways in which this may be done. The farmer should use more business like methods. The Twentieth Century Farmer says "the farmer today has no definite plan for a permanent and business like system of farming."\* If a man in business used the same methods as does the average farmer he would make a bigger failure than the farmer does. Education will assist in this. Farm papers, agricultural bulletins and farm institutes will give to the farmer better methods.

\*Twentieth Century Farmer Article February 22, 1913

*Will increase  
in farmers'  
profits - increase  
farm wages  
for laborer*

Another way to increase the farmer's profits is to increase the price which the farmer receives for his products. Sixty five per cent of the farmers answered "no" to this question, "Do the farmers get the returns they should for their products?" Farmers are constantly advocating co-operation in business. Probably the price of the farmer's products will never be increased until the farmers learn to "stick together," ( a lesson the business world has known for years) until farmers unions are a success.

A fourth reason for the exodus from the farms is to be found in the land question. A few editorials from the Nebraska Farmer will explain this cause. "Nebraska lands in the eastern part of the state are very high priced. The investment one must make in buying a Nebraska farm is almost staggering and the load must all be assumed at one fell stroke. We haven't credit associations to help young men----the young renter who accumulates a few thousand dollars strikes for a region of cheaper land"\*. In another article they say, "land prices usually outrun prosperity and take into account all future possibilities. To the landless, prosperity puts up the price of land and raises rent or as has often been stated, goes to enrich the man who owns the land. No matter what is done in the way of improving conditions in the country, however commendable

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\*Nebraska Farmer Editorial March 15, 1911

and desirable such conditions may be, will not solve the problem of enabling the landless man to get a foothold in the country where he may become an independent producer."<sup>1</sup>

A third article says "farmers say \$125 and \$175 land will not pay as great interest as elsewhere invested, but claim land is profitable because of the increase in price which will come. Then how can a young man without money, who must hope to pay for a farm by working it, ever pay for it? His only hope of securing land is by inheritance. Increase of price has increased faster than returns."<sup>2</sup>

The thought is this. The price is so high a young man cannot buy for cash because he will not have that much. He cannot borrow money and buy because the interest he pays for the money will be above the returns he will get off of the farm. He cannot buy on time and get a raise on the land because the original owner sees the wave of prosperity and raises the price before it arrives. The present land owner is safe and his heirs are safe; but the landless man is doomed to continue without land. Therefore he goes to the city where he can get a higher wage.

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1---Nebraska Farmer Editorial March 15, 1911  
2---Nebraska Farmer Editorial August 16, 1911

## P A R T   I I

The last part of this paper gives the results of personal inquiry among farmers of this state. Answers were secured to a list of questions from twenty five successful farmers. All but four owned their homes and farm. But few were in debt. They were picked upon because it was felt they were especially capable of answering intelligently.

The following gives the questions asked the the per cent answering "yes" and "no" to each question.

1---Is the farm profitable under present conditions? "Yes" 64%, "No" 36%.

2---Can (and if so how) the farm be made more profitable? "Yes" 96%, "No" 4%.

3---Are the wages of laborers too high in proportion to the quality of work done by the ordinary farm hand? "Yes" 76%, "No" 24%.

4---Will farm products increase or decrease in the future? "Yes" 50%, "No" 9.01%, "Doubtful" 40.09%.

5---Do you consider farmers are receiving a just proportion of wealth? "Yes" 48%, "No" 52%.

6---Would you rather live on the farm because of moral environment? "Yes" 87 $\frac{1}{2}$ %, "No" 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ %.

7---If a renter what is the just proportion of crop the renter should give? Answers vary from 1/3 to 2/5 per cent. *of crop.*

Some of the answers given by the farmers to question number two, "Can( and if so how) the farm be made more profitable," are of value to us in this study. Farmer number six, Lancaster county, owner of one hundred sixty acres, says the farm can be made more profitable by "rotation of crops, conservation of moisture and by retaining and selling crops on a good market."

Farmer number nineteen, owner of three hundred twenty acres in Morrill county, says "by putting more intelligence into the business, farm profits can be increased."

Farmer number twenty, owning one hundred sixty acres in Lancaster county, advises "a close study of crops----efficient system of book keeping---best equipment for labor."

Farmer number twenty-two, owner of eighty acres in Scottsbluff county, says, "farm productiveness may be increased by farming less and doing it better."

Farmer number twenty-five, possessor of eighty acres of Scottsbluff county land suggests, "the bringing of consumer and producer closer together."

In answer to question number three concerning farm labor, seventy six per cent of the farmers indicated a feeling of dissatisfaction with the quality of labor. They did not object to the wage paid had they been able

to secure a capable man.

It was dissappointing to discover that forty per cent of the prosperous farmers were doubtful as to the future of farm profits, and nine per cent expressed a fear of a decrease in profits. The seriousness of the farm problem is more quickly discerned when we realize that one half of the farmers feel that they are laboring at a doubtful, or even a hopeless task.

Answering the question of moral environment a number said they would rather live in the city because the country afforded no church privileges.

# TABULATED RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONS

Farmer number	Question number							8	County Acres					Married		Owner
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		County	Acres	Irr.	Age	Single			
1	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	yes	yes	2/5%	yes	Douglas	160	Rain	45	Single	Owner		
2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	2/5%		Lancaster		Rain	35	Single	Renter		
3	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	1/3%		Lancaster	160	Rain	50	Family	Owner		
4	no	yes	yes		no	yes	1/3%		Lancaster		Rain		Family	Renter		
5	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	yes	yes	2/5%	yes	Douglas	240	Rain	65	Family	Owner		
6	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	no	yes	1/3 to 2/5%	no	Lancaster	160	Rain	60	Family	Owner		
7	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	yes	yes	2/5%	no	Lancaster	320	Rain	60	Family	Owner		
8	yes	yes	no		yes	no		no	Saunders	160	Rain	50	Family	Owner		
9	no	yes	yes	Doubtful	no	no		no	Saunders	80	Rain	50	Family	Owner		
10	no	yes	yes	Doubtful	no	yes	1/3%	yes	Morrill	80	Irr.	25	Family	Owner		
11	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	no	yes	1/3%	yes	Lancaster	160	Rain	50	Family	Owner		
12	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes		yes	Lancaster	80	Rain	35	Single	Owner		
13	no	no	yes	no	no	no	1/3%	yes	Scottsblf	320	Irr.	55	Family	Owner		
14	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	yes	yes		no	Morrill	40	i-	35	Family	Owner		
15	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no		no	Morrill	80	ga-	32	Family	Owner		
16	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes		yes	Scottsblf	80	tion	30	Family	Owner		
17	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes		yes	Scottsblf	80	Irr.	40	Family	Owner		
18	yes	yes	yes	Doubtful	no	yes		yes	Butler	160	Rain	45	Family	Owner		
19	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	2/5%	yes	Morrills	320	Irr.	40	Family	Owner		
20	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	Lancaster	160	Rain	40	Family	Owner		
21	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	2/5%	yes	Saunders	160	Rain	45	Family	Owner		
22	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	1/3	yes	Scottsblf	80	Irr.	30	Family	Owner		
23	yes		no		no	yes	1/3%		Scottsblf		Irr.	25	Family	Renter		
24	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes		yes	Scottsblf	160	Irr.	50	Family	Owner		
25	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	1/3 to 2/5%	yes	Scottsblf	160	Irr.	50	Family	Owner		