

Some Aspects of the Farmers' Problems

By BERNARD M. DARUCH

(Reprinted from Atlantic Monthly)

(Continued from last week)

Now, what is the farmer asking? Without trying to intelligently re-construct the measures that have been suggested in the field, the principal proposals that bear directly on the improvement of his distribution and marketing relations may be summarized as follows:

First: storage warehouses for cotton, wool and tobacco, and elevators for grain, of sufficient capacity to meet the maximum demand on them at the peak of the marketing period. The farmer thinks that either private capital or public funds, or a combination of the two, should erect and own the elevators and warehouses.

Second: weighing and grading of agricultural products, and certification thereof, to be done by impartial and disinterested public inspectors (this is already accomplished to some extent by the federal grading of wools and grades of grain and unfair grading, and to facilitate the utilization of the stored products as the basis of credit).

Third: a certainty of credit sufficient to enable the marketing of products in an orderly manner.

Fourth: the Department of Agriculture should collect, tabulate, summarize, and regularly and frequently publish and distribute to the farmers, full information from all the markets of the world, so that they shall be as well informed of their selling position as buyers now are of their buying position.

Fifth: freedom to integrate the business of agriculture by means of consolidated selling agencies, co-ordinating and co-operating in such way as to put the farmer on an equal footing with the large buyers of his products, and with commercial relations in other industries.

When a business requires specialized talent, it has to buy it. So will the farmers; and perhaps the best way for them to get it would be to utilize some of the present machinery of the largest established agencies dealing in farm products. Of course, if he wishes, the farmer may go further and engage in meat-milling and other manufactures of food products. In my opinion, however, he would be wise to stop short of that. Public interest may be opposed to all great integrations; but, in justice, should they be forbidden to the farmer and permitted to others? The corporate form of association cannot now be wholly adapted to his objects and conditions. The loose co-operative form seems more generally suitable. Therefore, he wishes to be free, if he finds it desirable and feasible, to resort to co-operation with his fellows and neighbors, without running afoul of the law. To urge that the farmers should have the same liberty to co-ordinate and co-ordinate their peculiar economic functions, which other industries in their fields enjoy, is not, however, to concede that any business integration should have legislative sanction to exercise monopolistic power. The American people are as firmly opposed to industrial as to political monopoly, whether attempted by rural or by urban industry.

For lack of united effort the farmers as a whole are still marketing their crops by antiquated methods, or by no methods at all, but they are surrounded by a business world that has been modernized to the last minute and is tirelessly striving for efficiency. This efficiency is due in large measure to big business, to united business, to integrated business. The farmers now seek the benefits of such largeness, union and integration.

The American farmer is a modern of the moderns in the use of labor-saving machinery, and he has made vast strides in recent years in scientific tillage and efficient farm management, but as a business in contact with other businesses he is a "bone horse" in competition with high power automobiles. The American farmer is the greatest and most intricate of individualists. While industrial production and all phases of the huge commercial mechanism and its varied accessories have articulated and coordinated themselves all the way from natural raw materials to retail sales, the business of agriculture has gone on to meet the one man fashion of the back woods of the last part of the nineteenth century, when the farmer was an individual and did not depend upon the rest of the world, what the great world was doing. The result is that the agricultural group is almost as much an individual as the boy farmer of the fifty pages in the hands of a well-to-do gentleman, who sells his produce in Central Park or the Chicago city hall. The farmers of the future, therefore, understand this, and they are intelligently striving to integrate their industries so that it will be an integral part of the other businesses.

As an example of integration, take the steel industry, in which the modern United States Steel Corporation, with its iron mines, its coal mines, its lake and rail transportation, its own power, its own product, its own steel furnaces, its own mills, its blast furnaces, its rolling mills, its tube mills and other manufacturing processes that are carried to the highest degree of finished production comparable with the best made in the world. All this is generally considered to be in the best advantage of the consumer. Now if the steel corporation irresponsibly dump its products on the market, on the contrary, it so acts that it is frequently a stabilizing influence, as is often the case with other

large organizations. It is master of the distribution as well as of its production. If prices are not satisfactory, the products are held back or production is reduced or suspended. It is not compelled to send a year's work to the market at one time and take whatever it can get under such circumstances. It has one selling policy and its own export department. Neither are the grades and qualities of steel determined by the caprices of the buyer, nor does the latter hold the scales. In this single integration of the steel corporation is represented about 40 percent of the steel production of America. The rest is mostly in the hands of a few large companies. In ordinary times the steel corporation, by example, stabilizes all steel prices. If this is permissible (it is even desirable, because stable and fair prices are essential to a well-ordered and prosperous) why would it be wrong for the farmers to utilize central agencies that would have similar effects on agricultural products? Something like that is what they are asking for.

Some farmers favored by regional compactness and contiguity, such as the citrus fruit raisers of California, already have found a way legally to integrate and sell their products in unity and in accordance with seasonal and local demand, thus improving their position and rendering the consumer a reliable service of assured quality, certain supply, and reasonable and relatively steady prices. They have not found it necessary to resort to any special privileges or to claim any exemption under the anti-trust legislation of the state or nation. Without removing local control, they have built up a very efficient marketing agency. The grain, cotton, and tobacco farmers, and the producers of hides and wool, because of their numbers and the vastness of their regions, and for other reasons, have found integration a more difficult task; though there are now some thousands of farmer's co-operative elevators, warehouses, creameries, and other enterprises of one sort and another, with a turnover of a billion dollars a year. They are giving the farmers business experience and training, and, so far as they go, they meet the need of honest weighing and fair grading; but they do not meet the requirements of rationally adjusted marketing in any large and permanent way.

The next step, which will be a pattern for other groups, is now being prepared by the grabbers through the establishment of such media which shall handle grain separately or collectively, as the individual farmer may desire. It is this step—the plan of the Committee of Non-Trustees—which has created so much opposition and is thought by some to be in conflict with the anti-trust laws. Though there is now a large measure of agreement as to the wisdom of this step, the anti-trust legislation is not yet settled on any humanity from anti-trust legislation. Their desire, and they are entitled to it, is to coordinate their efforts just as effectively as the large business interests of the country have done. In connection with the selling organizations the United States Grain Growers Incorporated is drafting a scheme of financing instrumentalities and auxiliary agencies which are indispensable to the successful utilization of modern business methods.

It is essential that the farmers should proceed gradually with these plans, and aim to avoid the error of rearranging the existing marketing machinery, which has been so laboriously built up by long experience, before they have a tried and proved substitute or supplementary mechanism. They must be careful not to become entangled in their own reforms and lose the perspective of their place in the national system. They must guard against fanatical devotion to new doctrines, and should seek coordination with the general economic system

rather than its reckless destruction as it relates to them.

To take a tolerant and sympathetic view of the farmers' struggles for better things is not to give a blanket endorsement to any specific plan, and still less to applaud the vagaries of some of their leaders and groups. Neither should we, on the other hand, allow the froth of letter-writing, false economies, and mistaken religious fan to conceal the facts of the farmers' disadvantages and the practicality of stabilizing them by well-considered measures. It may be that the farmers will not show the business capacity and develop the wise leadership to carry through sound plans; but this possibility does not justify the cessation of their upward efforts. We, as city people, see in such and spontaneously unorganized prices, speculations, waste, scarcity, the results of defective distribution of farm products. Should it not occur to us that we have a common interest with the farmer in his attempts to attain a degree of efficiency in distribution corresponding to the efficiency in production? Do not the recent fluctuations in the price of wheat, apparently unrelated to normal interaction of supply and demand, offer a timely proof of the need of some such stabilizing agency as the grain growers have in contemplation?

It is contended that, if their proposed organizations be perfected and operated, the farmers will have in their hands an instrument that will be capable of dangerous abuse. We are told that it will be possible to pervert it to arbitrary and oppressive practices, to the detriment of the farmer and to the benefit of the consumer. I have no apprehensions on this point.

In the first place, a loose organization, such as any union of farmers must be, at best, cannot be so arbitrarily and promptly controlled as a great corporation. The one has a limiting democracy and the other an agile autocracy. In the second place, with all possible power of organization, the farmers cannot succeed to any great extent, or for any considerable length of time, in fixing prices. The great law of supply and demand works in various and surprising ways, to the making of the best laid plans that attempt to foil it. In the third place, their power will avail the farmers nothing if it be abused. In our time and country power is of value to its possessor only so long as it is not abused. It is fair to say that I have seen no signs in responsible quarters of a disposition to dictate prices. There seems, on the contrary, to be a commonly beneficial purpose to realize a stability that will give an orderly and abundant flow of farm products to the consumer and ensure reasonable and dependable returns to the producer.

In view of the supreme importance

to the national well-being of a responsible and controlled agricultural population, we should be prepared to go a long way in assisting the farmers to get an equitable share of the wealth they produce, through the inauguration of reforms that will procure a continuous and increasing stream of farm products. They are for farmers, not a fair share now. Considerable credit and the long hours of labor put in by the average farmer and his family, is remunerated less than any other occupational class, with the possible exception of teachers, editors and bays. Though we know that the present general distress of the farmers is exceptional and is linked with the profitable economic readjustment following the war, it must be remembered that, although representing one-third of the industrial product and half the total population of the nation, the rural communities and many other but a fifth to a quarter of the national output. Notwithstanding the fact of prosperity, the farmer is today a lower standard of living among the entire population of the South than among other parts of the country.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the farmer is chiefly striving for a generally beneficial integration of his business, of the same kind and character that other business enjoys. If it should be found on examination that the attainment of this end requires methods different from those which other activities have followed for the same purpose, should we not sympathetically consider the plea for the right to do so, if only from our own enlightened self-interest in obtaining an abundant and steady flow of farm products?

In equalizing the agricultural situation with a view to its improvement, we should be most helpful if we maintain a detached and judicial viewpoint, remembering that existing wrongs may be readily an accident of mismanagement, and not a result of inherent defects and conspiracy. We Americans are prone, as Professor David Friday well says in his admirable book, "Profits, Wages and Prices," to seek a "vindictive intent behind every difficult and undesirable economic situation." I can positively assure from my contact with men of large affairs, including bankers, that, as a whole, they are endeavoring to fulfill as they see it on the obligations that go with their power. Preoccupied with the grave problems and heavy loads of their own immediate work, they have not turned their thoughtful attention to the delicate and intricate situation of the farmer, who, as a result of their preoccupation and neglect, rather than from any purposeful exploitation by them. They ought now to turn to respond to the farmers' difficulties, which they must realize are their own.

On the other hand, my contacts with the farmers have filled me with respect for them—for their sanity, their patriotism, their balance. Within the last year, and particularly at a meeting called by the Kansas State Board of Agriculture and its members, called by the Committee of Seventeen, I have met many of the leaders of the new farm movement, and I testify in all sincerity that they are endeavoring to deal with their problems, not as promoters of a narrow class interest, not as exploiters of the hapless consumer, not as senseless monopolists, but as honest men bent on the improvement of the common weal.

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VAPORUB
Over 17 Million Men Used Yearly

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We Like to Give Service

Or, to put it differently, how it ever struck you that it isn't the raw of the job, but your living for it that makes it attractive?
We're in the battery business because we like it.
We can give you service that you didn't know we had, we are particularly pleased. We don't stop with merely filling, charging and testing your battery, and selling you a new one when you need it. We're here to do everything we can to see to it that your battery gives most miles of uninterrupted service per dollar, and most satisfaction all around.
We like to be bothered. Come in anytime.

LA GRANDE BATTERY STATION
Willard Batteries
A. L. Crossman

"Permanent as the Pyramids"
CONCRETE PIPE COMPANY
Manufacturers
CEMENT PRODUCTS
SEWER AND WATER PIPE—CULVERT PIPE
HOLLOW BLOCK CEMENT BRICK
WELL CURBING MADE IN SECTIONS
HOLLOW BUILDING BLOCKS