

It's time for another Country Life Commission

Agriculture is not commercially as profitable as it is entitled to be for the labor and energy that the farmer expends and the risks that he assumes...The farmer is almost necessarily handicapped in the development of his business, because his capital is small...and he usually stands practically alone against organized interests.

Not many people would argue with these statements – they accurately describe some of the problems that farmers face in agriculture today. Now consider when they were made – nearly a century ago – and the need to find workable solutions to the problems faced by our nation's farmers takes on new urgency.

The statements above are from the January 23, 1909 Report of the Commission on Country Life to President Theodore Roosevelt. It was the first time that any president had requested a study on the future of agriculture and country life in the United States, and the commission was made up of some of the nation's most prestigious leaders.

The Commission on Country Life was chaired by Liberty Hyde Bailey, the thoughtful and imaginative agriculture leader at Cornell University. Other members were magazine editor Henry C. Wallace from Iowa; Kenyon L. Butterfield, president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College; Walter Hines Page from New York; Gifford Pinchot, chief forester at the U.S. Department of Agriculture; Charles S. Barrett, president of the Farmers Union; William A. Beard from California, and E.W. Allen, assistant director of the Office of Experiment Stations.

Overall, the commission was hopeful about the future of agriculture and country living in the United States. The report concluded that agriculture, when "taken altogether," was "prosperous commercially."



Threshing oats in Indiana, 1936; a plow and harrow in Grundy County, Iowa, 1940. Courtesy USDA.

"The country people are producing vast quantities of supplies for food, shelter, clothing, and for use in the arts" and that "the agricultural people constitute the very foundation of national efficiency."

But the commission also saw ominous signs, as noted above, that needed attention. The commission noted numerous deficiencies that could lead to a compromised rural life. Among them was the "handicap" of a farmer not being able to secure an adequate return for products, "depriving him of the benefits that would result from unmonopolized rivers and the conservation of forests, and depriving the community, in many cases, of the good that would come from the use of great tracts of agricultural land that are now held for speculative purposes." Another deficiency was the "continuing depletion of soils."

The American Country Life Association (ACLA) was a direct descendant of Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. The Association was organized in 1919 and continued in various forms until 1976. Osgood Magnuson served as its last president (1975-1976), preceded by Gene Wunderlich (1974-1975).

Wunderlich has written a new book chronicling the history of the ACLA [*American Country Life: A Legacy*, University Press of America, 2003]. It will, as historian David Danbom at North Dakota State University says, "stand as the definitive institutional history" of the Association. The Leopold Center is proud to have had a role in funding that made publication of the book possible.

The story told in Wunderlich's book



may play an important role in shaping the future of rural America. Many issues that the Association addressed during its 57-year history still plague us today. Recognizing the ongoing importance of these issues to all Americans, the Association made a valiant but unsuccessful effort in the 1950s to get the President and Congress to appoint a second Country Life Commission. Perhaps Wunderlich's narrative can help us revisit that proposal.

When lobbying for another Commission in 1957, ACLA president Roy Buck expressed the need to "study the country community as a production-consumption unit to better carry out a rural development program," improve understanding between rural and urban interests, and preserve the values and attitudes of rural communities and their role in the nation's character.

The Rev. E.W. Mueller, who served on the ACLA at the time, suggested that such a Commission needed to address a new rural-urban reality: "It is one thing what happens to the people involved [in rural communities] like the small farmer or the commercial farmer. It is another thing what happens to a nation if the nation permits it to happen, because it will influence and affect the total spirit of the people."

These questions are more crucial now than they were in the 1950s because independent family farms may disappear from the landscape if present trends continue. We need to ask ourselves what kind of food system we will then have, what kind of landscape we will have, what kind of national spirit we will have. And we need to ask ourselves if that kind of future is okay with us.

These are important national issues that deserve discussion and debate at the center of our democracy, and a new Country Life Commission could stimulate such a debate in both rural and urban communities.

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