Far-reaching Changes

When I first began to take note of farm activity about me, in the 1890’s, some of the tools and implements that farmers worked with were little different from those that farmers for generations before them had used. They had a number of items of field equipment that served passably well. Some of these, including plank drags (or “clod-crushers”), land rollers made from log sections, corn row markers, and mudboats were homemade; several were the handiwork of local blacksmiths; the remainder were factory products. The use of a few of those horse-drawn contrivances involved much hard work on the part of the operator, not to mention the many miles of walking. Farmers today would scoff at most of them as crude, clumsy, and inadequate.

There were drills for sowing seed grains, but where these machines could not well be used, it was not unusual to see wheat, oats, rye, or grass seed broadcast by hand. This method of distributing seed probably differed little from that of the sower who “went forth to sow,” as in the biblical parable. (By analogy, the word “broadcasting” in later times has come to refer to the transmission of radio
and television programs over wide areas by means of elec-
tromagnetic waves.) The sower carried the seed in a bag
or other receptacle within convenient reach. He swept
his arm in a wide horizontal arc before him as he walked,
releasing the seed held in his hand gradually, so that it
was distributed evenly over the ground. His reach into
the receptacle and the swing of his arm were in rhythm
with his steps. He set stakes to guide himself in a straight
path and to regulate the width of the area covered, meas-
uring distances by pacing. Allowance had to be made for
wind force and direction. The field was finally harrowed
to cover the seed.

I saw men cutting grain with cradles, bunching the
straw with wooden rakes and binding it into sheaves by
hand—the ground was so stumpy that no machine could
be used. On a nearby farm was a “self-rake” reaper, which
had seen much service in cutting standing grain and
depositing the straw on the ground in orderly bunches
for laborious hand-binding into sheaves with twisted wisps
of straw. This machine was then used on that farm only
occasionally, to cut and bunch ripe clover to be dried and
hulled for seed. As a grain harvester, it was obsolete; the
self-binder, as it was called at first, had some time before
taken over the grain-harvesting function.

At about the time I viewed the harvesting scene, I saw
a portable steam engine that had to be moved from place
to place by horses. It had superseded the treadmill and
horse-power mechanisms that utilized the muscular power
of horses for driving threshers and other machines. This
engine, too, was then outmoded, having been supplanted
by the steam traction engine, which could be moved at
will under its own power.

The coming of that traction engine could be regarded
as marking the inception in that area of farm mechanization, to be characterized as time went on by the general substitution of mechanical power for the muscular power of men and animals. After that engine, new farm machines and improvements in old ones began to come at a somewhat accelerated pace, one development often leading up to, and paving the way for, another. Although all of us there were witnessing the local beginning of an era in which would come a profound revolution in farming operations and rural life, the development had been so gradual that there was no open-eyed wonder. We were all too close to see in true perspective, to evaluate correctly what was happening, or to foresee what would follow.

Within a comparatively short time the steam engine had to give place to the far more versatile and useful tractor, powered by an internal-combustion engine. It could perform the steam engine’s sole task of driving machines by means of a belt; in addition, it was designed for the operation of farm equipment in fields. Today powerful tractors that handle with ease big gang plows and other equipment for rapid and efficient tillage are commonplace. Tractor-powered machines reduce sharply the time required for sowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. Thus it is possible for one man to handle well five or six times the acreage that one man could care for in premechanization days.

Rivaling the tractor and concomitant equipment as boons to farmers of the Black Swamp and elsewhere is electricity from central generating stations. Perhaps the most important of the contributions it makes is the automatic pump, which provides a supply of running water and so makes available to the farm home a sanitary plumbing system. Going further, to provide for rural
people the comforts and advantages enjoyed by urban dwellers, electricity also makes possible on the farm good lighting, an impressive assemblage of devices and appliances that save time and labor, efficient central heating, air conditioning, the mechanical refrigerator, and the deep-freeze unit. It widens farm families' horizons of culture and entertainment by bringing to them the best in radio, recorded music, and television—also, it must be admitted regretfully, much that is exceedingly poor.

Coming years before electric service, macadam roads, which took the farmer out of the mud and put him into closer touch with markets and the outside world, were improvements of inestimable value. But those roads were not good enough for the automobile; soon after this vehicle came into extensive use, it stimulated such insistent demands for their betterment that, within a surprisingly short time, they were extended and made more serviceable. Now, the rutted one-lane pikes, dusty when dry and sloppy when wet, have become dustless, hard-surfaced roads that are integral parts of a vast nationwide network of highways.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to appraise fully the influence and the impact of the automobile upon American life, rural and urban. Perhaps there could be no better summarization than that made years ago by President Hoover's Committee on Social Trends. It reported, regarding this machine: “It is probable that no invention of such far-reaching importance was ever diffused with such rapidity, or so quickly exerted influences that ramified through the national culture, transforming even habits of thought and language.”

Aided by the automobile and good roads, the telephone brings the best of medical care and hospital facilities
within easy reach of the farm family; most farm babies are now hospital-born. Being available for use in emergencies, the telephone materially enhances the security of all ruralites. From the first it has been of great service in facilitating the transaction of business and in linking farm families more closely with neighbors and friends.

Several crops for which no market formerly existed are now grown extensively on Black Swamp farms, widening the field of productive activity and augmenting incomes. Hybrid corn, bred to assure a number of desirable qualities formerly lacking, is increasing yields and putting an end to some of the problems that worried growers of earlier times. Seeds of other grains have been materially improved. Careful selection and breeding have produced better cattle, sheep, hogs, and poultry.

Thanks to these advances, to continuing assistance from agricultural science, and to modern machinery that multiplies individual productive capacity, the average farmer enjoys a better income than his predecessors had. He lives more comfortably; he can find time for recreation, for travel, or for vacations if he wishes. He may even sojourn occasionally in a sunny clime to escape the unpleasant features of a northern winter. Let no one assume, however, that his life is one of carefree ease. He has a great deal of hard work to do. Furthermore, he is beset by disquieting worries peculiar to the farming business. The more serious of these worries stem fundamentally from the long-standing problem of crop surpluses and the resulting depressed prices of agricultural products. He is disturbed by the disparity between prices he receives for commodities and prices he must pay. He finds farm machinery generally so costly that owning a complete out-
fit may require a large investment—variously estimated at from $30 to $80 and more per acre for the larger farms. To make matters worse, a large proportion of this equipment is needed and used only during a short period each year. The remainder of the time it stands idle, earning nothing, while interest charges run on.

Before the advent of powered equipment, we and others on farms in the region practiced diversified farming. That is, we kept domestic animals in numbers economically suited to our acreage, and we grew a variety of crops, most of which were fed to those animals. We counted on the sale of mature livestock and surplus grains for a cash income. With proper management under this system, little, if any, of the soil's nutritive elements need be permanently lost from a farm.

For a long time straw, cornstalks, etc., were burned on a few farms as unwanted refuse. The more enlightened farmers considered this a gross waste of potential humus. They took pains to return these and as much as possible of other organic materials to the land. They followed a sound program of crop rotation, and they grew clovers, knowing and valuing the peculiar ability of such plants to enrich the soil. By these means they maintained the fertility of their acres with no noticeable impairment, unaware of any need for the chemical fertilizers now used on Black Swamp farms in an amount that totals thousands of tons yearly.

With mechanization has come a trend away from diversification toward specialization, the latter often somewhat limited or modified. In addition to the establishments where more or less diversified farming is still practiced,
there are a number of farms that have no livestock of any kind—not even chickens. In many cases operated in conjunction with neighboring acreage, these farms may produce only grains or other marketable field crops. Here, of course, commercial fertilizers are indispensable. Some of the farm specialists concentrate on dairy production, others on poultry and egg production, or on growing potatoes or fruits.

In some instances two or more farms have been consolidated under one ownership. A new name may appear upon the barns, unless they and other buildings are moved away, as they often are, to reduce valuation for tax purposes. Thus we see farms increasing in size and diminishing in number. For the most part, however, they remain family enterprises.

A number of owners of sizable farms have adjusted to changed conditions brought about by mechanization by working at full-time jobs in town (sometimes thirty or more miles distant) and operating their farms as sidelines. The time was when retired farmers in numbers moved to town; now, as a rule, they choose to remain in their comfortable farm homes. They rent their fields to neighboring farmers, as do some of the younger men about them who live on their farms but work at jobs in industrial establishments. There has been a noticeable migration of farm people to urban or suburban areas and industrial employment. Concurrently with this displacement of country populations has come an impressive movement of people and industries into suburban and rural areas. Some farms that lie relatively near the larger towns and cities are owned by business and professional men. Regardless of size, they are commonly called "estates." Rather
often, the owner lives in a good house on the property, driving to and from his work in town. Generally, a less pretentious house is provided for the man who operates and cares for the establishment.

The status of barns has been drastically affected by the elimination of livestock that has occurred, together with the use of combines, field balers, and other late-model machinery for harvesting and handling corn crops. Not infrequently, one now sees large barns, originally intended to shelter livestock with ample supplies of feed, standing virtually empty and unused, deteriorating rapidly in some cases because of lack of care. New barns that are put up tend to be rather small; construction materials in them come almost exclusively from commercial lumber yards.

Like the big barn, the silo, formerly widely used for storing succulent feed materials, has become a useless adjunct on a large proportion of farms. Neglected and forgotten, some are gradually falling into ruin. Windmills have been generally phased out, supplanted by electric motors for pumping water. Towers of some now support television antennas; scores of others, battered and rusted, stand as creaking, ugly eyesores.

The faithful horse inevitably became a casualty when farmers generally gave in to the lure of the tractor. To all who are fond of the animals, it is a matter of deep regret that, with the exception of a few riding horses here and there, horses are practically extinct in the region. Occasionally, one comes up for sale at an auction. Animals that don’t qualify as saddle horses are sold at a few dollars a head as “foxers,” to be slaughtered and used as food for stock on fox or mink farms or for carnivores in zoos.
Most of the old one-room school buildings have gone by the board. A few have been left to the ravages of time and the elements. Occasionally, one is found in use for farm storage of some kind. A number have been remodeled and adapted to use as family dwellings. Numerous church edifices, also long familiar landmarks, are no more. Two in the home community, including Salem Methodist, were demolished by tornadoes a few decades ago. The Salem congregation, jointly with congregations from three other churches—all much smaller than in former times—erected a new building that all, as a unit, now use. The automobile and improved roads have furthered the consolidation of a number of other church organizations.

A goodly number of older farm houses have been remodeled, becoming more comfortable, more convenient, and more attractive. New houses generally embody the best in modern design and arrangement. It is evident that more farm families are giving thoughtful consideration to the architecture and placing of buildings and to the landscaping of adjacent grounds. Unfortunately, however, many of these people, like others in the region, generally neglect field growths of noxious, unsightly weeds, such as Canada thistle, wild carrot, and Jimson weed, allowing them to flourish and spread freely.

Wooded land is diminishing in area. Most remaining stands of timber are thin and show symptoms of dying out. Everywhere, the Dutch elm disease has made devastating inroads. Rarely, it seems, is any effort made toward preservation or renewal of timbered tracts. Few bother even to remove unsightly dead trees. It is gratifying to note, however, that natural agencies have continued active in propagating trees and shrubs, so that the country-
side as a whole retains its appeal to lovers of natural beauty. Here and there at well-chosen sites—in numerous instances at points of historical significance—public parks are maintained for the pleasure and convenience of local people and travelers. Probably no taxpayers’ money buys more in sound value than that spent for establishing and maintaining these parks.

Native wild animals generally seem to have adjusted so well to the loss of natural, thickly wooded habitats that some species are seen in greater numbers than formerly. Groundhogs, for instance, once somewhat rare, now appear to be the most numerous of all wild creatures, strongly entrenched in old fencerows and along wooded banks of numerous open streams. Occasionally, they become destructive pests, causing serious damage to field and garden crops.

In any study of Black Swamp history one of the most striking of the emerging facts would be the paradox that a region that only a few generations ago was plagued by an overwhelming perennial surfeit of water is now so dehydrated that during a considerable part of the average year large sections suffer from a critical shortage of water. This has become a serious matter that is steadily worsening as populations grow, as household demand for water increases, and as water-using industries expand. Of late, serious consideration has been given to proposals for the installation of large-capacity pipe lines to carry water inland from Lake Erie.