

Looking Ahead With Agricultural Policy

THERE ARE MANY different types of farming throughout the world. We find, for example, the Soviet collective farms, very large and highly mechanized. At the other end of the scale are the submarginal plots of India and China which require large amounts of manual labor.

Collective Farming

In some ways it may be efficient to farm on a large scale, as in Russia. But is there not something missing from this system? What about the factor of the "love for the soil"? A farming population, settled on smaller holdings more or less permanently, acts as a stabilizing influence on the community. That is something worth considering when so many people are constantly on the move from place to place. This may be regarded as merely romantic, but I at least do not think it is. In innumerable writings and lectures I have advocated co-operation of farmers — but I never went so far as to recommend collective farming, which is co-operation at its extreme. This may

sound irrational, and perhaps I cannot defend my position in a logical way. It may be a question more of feeling than of sense — but I am happy to feel that most of my countrymen agree.

This does not prevent me from agreeing to experiments on collective farming even in this country. In fact, there has been such an experiment made in Jämtland, in north Sweden. A number of small holders started a collective dairy farm, with the herd and cowshed as common property, but the remainder on an individual basis. It has not been much of a success, partly owing to the inferior quality of their cattle. Certainly there will be more experiments of that kind, and a bill has been introduced in Parliament in order to stimulate affairs of that kind. I have no objection to this, for I believe so much in individual farming that I scarcely think there is much risk that collectivism will be successful.

On the other hand, Swedish farming cannot consider development in other countries as something indifferent, something to be neglected. If individual farming is to survive, it will be necessary to drop a lot of the ancient methods and keep abreast of technical development. Of course this process is going on constantly, but it is a question whether it would not be worth while to accelerate it during our time.

In a country like Sweden, where the major part of the holdings are rather small, it is difficult to modernize the farming industry. It might even be necessary to reorganize the type and size of the holdings.

Government Plans for Agriculture

Since 1942 a government committee has been working out a scheme for future agricultural policy. Twelve or thirteen of the group represented farming in one way or the other. The remaining members came from different groups and different political parties. Investigations and preliminary reports are innumerable, and it is fortunate that Sweden is a country rich in wood pulp and paper. Heaps of papers have piled up on my desk and it has been a heavy task to go through and read all of them.

In April, 1946, the committee delivered their final report to the government, a volume of 1,000 pages without including appendices.

They all agreed upon better farming schools, and more of them, better education and information on technical matters, and more support for scientific and research work. Tractors, machinery and implements should be available to every farmer. This should be arranged through machinery co-operatives, private contractors or other kinds of machinery centers. Loans and subsidies should be granted to enable farmers to buy complicated and expensive equipment.

The Minister of Agriculture at the time (1942), Axel Pehrsson-Bramstorp, postulated the following:

1. The standard of living of the farming population ought to be similar to the standard of corresponding groups of the urban population.
2. This goal should be reached through fair and suitable prices of farm produce.

3. For estimating the costs of production it is necessary to fix what is called a "base holding" with not too small acreage. Should too small a farm be taken as a basis, both costs and the price of produce will become too high.
4. The base holding must be well managed.

This is very easy to say, but it means a tremendous amount of work, investigation, and planning to get something out of these short sentences.

Larger Holdings

After innumerable discussions, the committee came to the conclusion that the size of the base holding ought to be about 40 acres on an average. Roughly, that corresponds to what is called a "family farm" in Sweden. The goal should be to obtain still larger holdings, say 60 to 75 acres, and in the report these are given the name "normal farms."

From the point of view of a stranger these sizes may be thought rather small. But it must be remembered that the average size of Swedish holdings at present is even smaller. Consideration must also be given to the fact that the average includes also a number of comparatively large farms in the fertile parts of the south and the midlands.

This does not necessarily mean that the larger farms should be cut up. Actually they are capable of more efficient operation than the smaller ones.

In some cases it would not be necessary to change the size of the holding. Some farmers can supplement their income from their own forests or by working in private and government forests. They may also do commercial fishing, and possibly craftwork in

their home. A farmer with a small holding can increase his income by growing crops which bring top returns per acre of land invested. Truck gardens, orchards, and poultry farms can be profitably operated on a small holding.

For some holdings new land could be found by reclaiming flooded areas around lakes and rivers. Actually there is not much virgin soil left in our country worth bringing under cultivation. The general feeling is that we have enough land to feed our people. If our present acreage were increased, it might pave the way to surpluses with their attendant problems.

I do not altogether agree with this reasoning. As I say, I am only relating the common opinion. It seems to me that with the new machinery now available the cost of reclaiming land would not be prohibitive. Regarding the problem of surpluses, actually there is no world-wide surplus of foods. It is only a matter of buying power and adequate distribution.

Finally, with a bigger population and an increasing standard of living there will most likely come more demand for animal products. This would mean that a lot of plant food would have to be changed into animal. It would also mean that a much greater number of calories would be needed to satisfy the people.

Several other methods of increasing the size of the holdings are possible. The government could buy forests or other land from some of the larger

holdings. The plan suggested by the committee is to divide up some of the smaller farms and add this land to the adjoining holdings — thus making two larger farms out of three small ones.

Income Subsidies

However, the individual farmer is not required to dispose of his small holding in order that his neighbors may enjoy larger ones. If his income is substandard, he may receive a subsidy. These sub-



FIG. 14. Typical farm laborer's cottage.

sidies are not based upon prices, and are limited to the lifetime of the present owner. He may sell the farm to his children, but should he want to sell to someone else the government has the right to buy at the same price.

Such a plan will cost the government an enormous amount of money, and there has been a great deal of discussion and criticism of the committee's report.

With the countryside concentrated into fewer, large holdings, it becomes more difficult to get good schools and decent roads. The young people dislike settling down in these remote places, especially the women. Farmer members of the committee point out these facts in expressing their fear that the rural areas would become impoverished. The representatives of Capital argue that larger holdings will decrease the price of farm products, hence keeping industrial production costs low.

Other critics claim that this plan would drive many farmers from the land. Actually there has been for many years a tendency among farmers to leave their small holdings. The aim of the committee is only to link development in rational channels, and to make the change as smooth as possible for both community and individuals.

It is much more difficult to modernize farming, with its large numbers of small units, than to do the same with the wood pulp industry, for example, which is concentrated in a few large mills. Yet it must be done if the individual European system of farming is to survive.

In Sweden we have tried to get a draft scheme. There must, of course, be a balancing between different points of view. The committee may be wrong in some respects — but it is an attempt.

Swedish farming is in the melting pot.

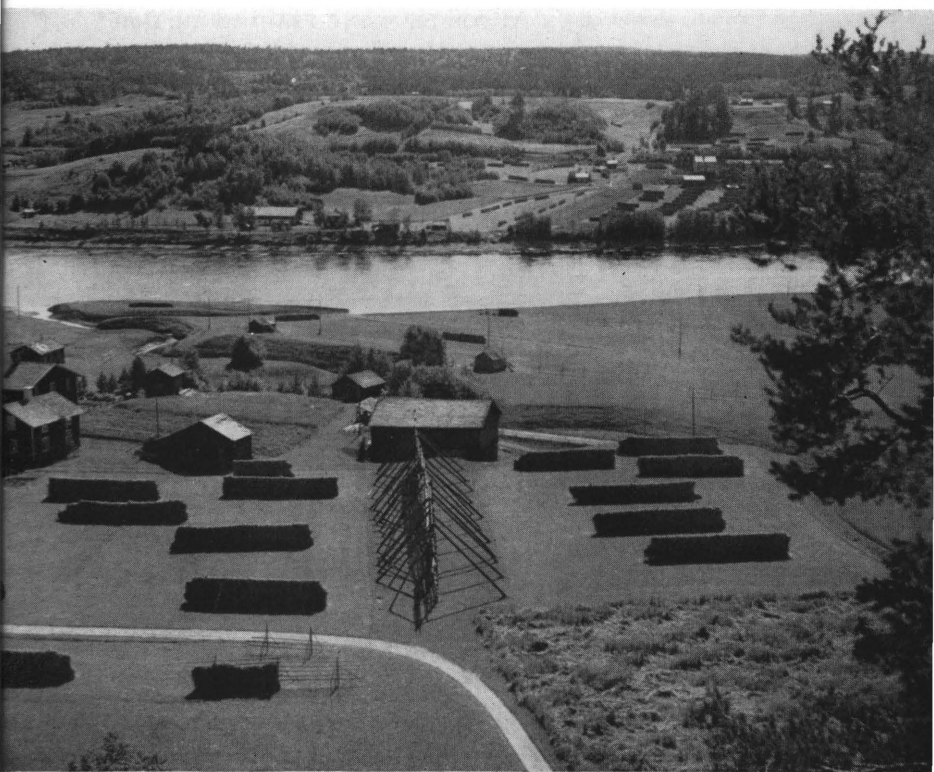


FIG. 15. Hay harvest in one of the river valleys of the North.