

How Co-operation Was Brought About

IN 1926 I STARTED as a tenant farmer at Bårarp, in the county of Halland, in southwest Sweden.¹ I was rather well prepared for my future job because I had had some years of practice on prominent farms in the middle and south of the country. I also had attended the Agricultural College of Alnarp.

I soon realized, however, that there was something missing in the education given at the college. I do not mean that some of the professors were not actually good teachers. Such things, I imagine, happen in every school or college. What I mean is that we were not told anything about farmers' co-operatives and organizations. It is true that the co-operatives were not as widespread as they are now, but in 1922 a number of them did exist, particularly in the dairying field. There were also bacon factories and buying and selling co-operatives, most of them in the south. They

¹ A Swedish county is usually larger than its American counterpart. For administrative purposes Sweden is divided into 24 counties, or län.

worked independently, often in hard competition with each other. I therefore think we should have been given instruction about co-operation. Now that agricultural education has been reorganized, it is different. Farmer's co-operation forms an important part of rural economics.

During my years at Alnarp there was a difference of opinion between growers and the factories as to the right price for the sugar beet crop. There were negotiations, but the parties could not agree, and the farmers refused to produce for the price offered by the company.

I shall not discuss, so many years afterwards, whether the farmers were right in their claims or not, but I still have the impression that solidarity within a group is a very good thing. Our professor, however, did not think that way. During one lesson he told us: "It is stupid of the growers not to accept. Never forget, boys, that farmers cannot co-operate. There is nothing to do but to accept what the factories are offering. I have a holding myself, and I am just going to sign the contract."

I never forgot these words — but I am glad to say that later on they were proved to be quite wrong.

When I started farming there was no question about joining the farmers' co-operative dairy in the village of Getinge. It was a rural district and there was no other satisfactory way of selling our milk. Thanks to good management, the local co-operative dairies were able to pay a fair price. But through competition when marketing the produce, the co-

operatives themselves pushed the prices downward. The bigger farmers often sold their milk directly to consumers, although the retail business in the towns was run largely by private companies. An exception to this was Stockholm where a large co-operative milk center existed.

Farmers who sold their milk direct were looked upon with disfavor by the rest of the dairymen. There was a growing belief that all milk for direct consumption should be retailed through the co-operatives even though there was more money in retailing than in selling to the co-operatives.

During the first years of my tenancy I made a profit, partly because of the good crops and partly because of comparatively good prices. During the early thirties, however, the food surplus and falling prices made the accounts show a loss.

THE FARMERS' UNION APPEARS

One day in the autumn of 1930 my neighbor and friend, Baron Gustaf Hermelin, called me on the telephone: "You are going to have dinner with me and some colleagues of ours tonight."

"Well," I answered, "I have no objection."

"After that," he continued, "we will go down to the village and listen to a lecture by a Mr. Levin. He is traveling around, lecturing on something called Farmers' Union (RLF). It is a new organization which is going to help us out of the agricultural crisis."

"Listen!" I replied, "I am coming to your dinner party."

We had a splendid dinner and a very nice time. Hermelin had all the traditions of the landed gentry and he knew how to arrange a meal. There was, however, a feeling of insecurity over the whole. All of us knew that in the long run it would be impossible to go on with farming on the present basis; something had to be done if our industry was to survive. It might come as a government scheme, or still better — from our own efforts and co-operation.

Hermelin always had ideas in his head, and was able to make suggestions. He had a strong feeling for both the economic and social side of agricultural life. A man of quite a different type was Mr. Juel, one of the biggest and most prominent farmers of the whole county. He looked at everything from a feudal-commercial point of view. He had no interest in social things, and did not feel inclined to mix with people other than his own equals.

Juel was not at all interested in listening to the lecture by Levin: "Do you really mean," he said, "that we shall go down and hear that man . . . I have forgotten his name?"

"Levin," said Hermelin, "and you particularly need to listen to him, if you want all your big farms to pay."

I do not think that anyone but Hermelin could have induced Juel to join us at the small and rather shabby hotel in the village.

Levin was the perfect orator, but not at all a tub thumper. That was why we were so deeply affected by his talk. Never before had we heard a lecture of that kind. He was speaking about collaboration of

any kind between farmers (collaboration, of course in the old meaning from pre-war times). When selling our products we ought to say, "This is the price!" he suggested, and not ask, as we are doing, "How much do I get?"

"This," he said, "all the others are doing — the baker, the barber, the industrial laborer, etc. All of them have fixed their prices. Through an organization, for example the Farmers' Union, we could fix them as well, and at an amount that would make farming pay."

I am sorry to say there were some gaps in his reasoning. Levin did not mention anything about what to do with the surplus — at that time the greatest problem within the farming industry — but we hardly noticed it.

The discussion started, and a very animated one it was. At that time we were rather inclined to think about the world market as the only way of fixing prices. We thought it almost impossible to have different prices at home and for export.

Levin answered, "As for milk and butter, how much of the total milk production do you export as butter?"

"Fifteen per cent" was the reply, "and the price obtained for butter in England is very bad nowadays."

Levin continued: "Is it really necessary that this low export price should dictate the prices for the home market? Aren't you farmers the only group in this country who are looking so devoutly at the

world market? And do you really believe that the Swedish community would be able to go on without the farming industry?

“Do you really think the bricklayers, the carpenters, the contractors and all the others are discussing the import of cheap labor from China, Africa, etc., to keep all prices on a low level? I will tell you: No! But you have no objection to the import of cheap wheat and cheap raw materials for the margarine factories on an unlimited scale. All that will help to keep the prices of your own products down. You farmers simply must learn to get together and stick together. Look at the trade unions — what haven’t they achieved through their organizations!”

I have already mentioned that there were some flaws in Levin’s argument, but in many respects he was quite right. He had given us a lot to think about. If united, the farmers would have a lot of power within the community. At the time, the way in which we were to accomplish this was not clear. But in later years the development of the Farmers’ Union proved to be the most effective means of working together.

Local Branches of the Farmers’ Union

The result of the meeting at Getinge was an interim committee for forming a local branch of the Farmers’ Union. Hermelin became chairman, but Juel did not join — he did not care for the atmosphere and did not want to mix with the small farmers and peasants.

Each of the committee members went around with his list in his special district. House-to-house agitation is usually a hard job, but not this time. Most of the farmers felt that something must be done, and they joined our local branch without much discussion.

In the same way, local branches were formed in nearly every parish of the county of Halland and throughout the whole country. In due course, district and county branches were established — all linked together in the national union, with headquarters in Stockholm.

At the start, all work in the Farmers' Union was voluntary and without pay, but this proved impractical. Before long we engaged a permanent secretary who did much of the office work as well as supervising the whole and acting as an organizer. For that job we got a very able man, Karl Berntsson, with whom I worked for many years. The farmers had entire faith in Berntsson, so that he was able to settle almost any difference that appeared. He left some years ago for a position in the headquarters of the union.

During these first years I could not help thinking of the words of our professor at the Alnarp College. "Farmers cannot co-operate!" Could he possibly be right? Personally I did not believe so — but the union had not yet had any real test.