

Educating Our Farmers *The Co-operative Way*

IT CANNOT BE POINTED OUT TOO frequently that information and education are essential in a broad reform movement like that which took place among our farmers.

We started with lectures at the meetings of the local branches. We soon discovered that the lectures had to be interesting enough to hold the attention of the ordinary man. It was not an easy task to get lecturers for all these branches. At the beginning we had to rely on volunteers. These were mostly farmers with better-than-average knowledge about economic and social things, and last but not least, with real enthusiasm for the movement—for the union as well as the co-operatives. In due time, we got a paid staff both at the county branch and at headquarters, and they did a good deal of the work. I consider the first category the best, for the farmers believe more in their own fellow farmers who know exactly what the farming trade really is like.

An important factor was that farmers were able to get together at meetings to discuss their own

questions, local as well as national, and to raise claims and pass them on to the national union.

CO-OPERATIVE FILMS

Too much listening to lectures, however, was not so good. People sometimes get tired of such talks. There is a saying in this country (and most likely in others too) that a man remembers much better what he has seen than what he has heard. Consequently, we tried to get some illustrations for our talks.

We made expressive drawings on big paper wall sheets, but it was difficult to carry these big sheets everywhere, and it was not long before we turned to lantern slides. These enabled us to show a quantity of pictures, drawings and photographs, and to make whole series of stories. There was, of course, always a tendency to show the value of co-operation or anything similar.

At that time I had an artist friend who specialized in making these drawings. Particularly at the family parties of the local branches this kind of entertainment was much appreciated. A good way to make people comfortable was to have a cup of coffee and some scones or sandwiches in connection with the meeting.

The next step was films. These were produced to show the work in our co-operatives, practical ways of doing the household work, and films with a plot in them. All of them were very much appreciated.

In the county agricultural society of Halland we

had made some films, one of them dealing with the work in the Halmstad Co-operative Packing Plant. The big Co-operative Milk Center in Stockholm had also produced a film on their activities.

In 1938 there was an inquiry from the British National Farmers' Union about these films. Previously I had felt that no one could beat Swedish institutions in using long and complicated names. But hearing the name "National Farmers' Union Mutual Insurance Society Limited, Stratford-on-Avon," I realized the English were ahead of us! The "Farmers' Mutual" was showing films as an entertainment during their local meetings. Now they wanted to have a film about Swedish agriculture. Their intention was to borrow the films in question, make copies of them, and use parts of these copies for editing a "Swedish Film" in Stratford-on-Avon with a commentary in English.

I Become a Producer

I did not like the idea that someone in Stratford, who had most likely never seen our country, should tell the British people everything about Swedish farming. Consequently I wrote to the Farmers' Mutual and told them my point of view, suggesting that we should make the film in Sweden and send it over to England for revision so that it would suit the British public.

I got an answer from Mr. Sydney B. Carter, whom I liked from the first moment. He quite agreed to my suggestion, and so I started. I went up to my

friend Axel L. Ericson, the horticultural adviser, and explained everything to him.

"All right," said Axel, "we will do it. Our county Halland is a miniature Sweden; you find all types of landscape within the county borderlines. We can take all the pictures here. That will save a lot of time, and a lot of money too — for I suppose you don't have an unlimited amount of capital at your disposal."

In fact, I hadn't very much. He became the manager and photographer, I the producer. We could not afford to give ourselves any big salaries, but the honor of our country was at stake, and we simply had to make a good film.

We went around and photographed farming in the plains and in the poorer regions, different breeds of domestic animals, crops and machines, co-operatives and meetings, farm buildings and houses, the interior of kitchens, the youths competitions, etc.

We copied films from other parts of Sweden, work in the forests, beautiful scenery, immense flocks of reindeer in Lapland and so on. We went down to the seashore to get some shots of the farmers' leisure hours — but the real reason was that we wanted to have some nice girls in order to brighten up the picture!

One film with a modernized farmer's kitchen was spoiled, and there was no time for another shot. What to do? Axel went up to his new flat in Halmstad, which had more up-to-date equipment than the best rural homes. In the film, however, it became a

rural kitchen — and all the improvements were due to the efforts of the Farmers' Union and the co-operatives!

We needed some pictures about sports. One man who had a film on moose shooting had promised to lend it to us — but he changed his mind, probably thinking us a little suspicious. We had to have something. It was not hunting time now, but what about fishing?

On his way to the office, Axel met the mayor, who was known to be very keen on angling. Axel seized the opportunity, stopped his car and pressed the mayor inside. Away they went to collect the tools and out in the country to a stream, where Axel made some grand shots of a farmer fishing salmon during his leisure hours. The best of all was that the mayor really happened to catch a trout — though only a very small one.

We had made some diagrams too, showing development of farm produce prices. The agricultural crisis was symbolized by a devil pulling a string — downwards, of course — but at the bottom of the curve the united farmers interfered and pulled the string up again. To move the symbols just a little between each exposure took a great deal of time, and it was very late before we finished — but we felt ourselves to be the equals of Walt Disney and thought the episode worth mentioning in the newspapers! We rang up the newspaper *Hallandsposten*, and the following day there was a headline straight across the front page:

“Farmers’ Union slaughters the devil!”

I went over to England to deliver the film at Stratford. Syd and I became friends at once. He took me around both in Shakespeare’s town and in the rural districts. We discussed films, and I got some copies of his from Great Britain and Australia. He made some cuts on our Swedish film, and altered our draft commentary quite a lot to suit English audiences.

The film was shown to many audiences among the British Farmers’ Union’s local branches, and thanks to Syd Carter’s initiative I think that at least some people have an idea of what Swedish farmers’ co-operation means.

Other copies were shown in France, Holland and Switzerland, but the war put a stop to further activities in that direction.

Again I have probably used too much space, too many pages, for a detail, but is there not something in this idea worth consideration, and on a much larger scale? Even among Swedish farmers, probably the most “peninsular” in the world, there is now an increasing interest in international contacts. How would it be if farmers’ organizations in the different countries started to produce representative (and, of course, entertaining) films on their own agriculture, adapted for showing abroad?

That might well be one of the first steps toward getting the farming groups to know more about each other and to establish contacts over the frontiers,

thus serving as a background for future co-operation on essential things.

We need, however, quite a lot of methods for solving that rather hard task of farmers' international co-operation.

Publishing

The press plays an important part in any educational program. We have a number of farmers' papers, and within the federation there is a publicity branch, dealing with these things. A lot of books are published for schools and the general public. There is also literature on actual problems within farming — technical, scientific, co-operative, political, and economic. A number of novels about country life have been published, and some have been quite successful.

We have national papers, one belonging to the union and one to the Federation of Farmers' Co-operatives, both distributed all over the country. Nearly as valuable as these are the local daily newspapers with which we always worked in a friendly spirit.

WORKING WITH YOUTH

However, we soon realized that there was still one thing of utmost importance. Another generation was coming after us, new members, indeed, coming each year. We had to establish contact with farmers' sons and daughters who were going to succeed their parents. There were farmers' schools all over the

country (there ought to be still more of that kind), and we were very anxious that farming co-operation should come within the scope of teaching. Some of the headmasters and teachers were quite interested in our activities, in fact they had been among the pioneers of our movement. With them it was rather easy to insure co-operative instruction during the lessons. Many teachers at first did not care much for the union and co-operatives. These teachers were informed by special courses, and in due time it was possible to get our information taught in the regular educational program.

In order to stimulate interest, we gave prizes for the best articles written by the pupils on Farming Co-operation.

It was not enough, however, to contact the schools. There are two youth organizations in this country, J.U.F., corresponding roughly to the 4-H clubs in the United States; and the S.L.U., Youth branch of the Farmer's Party. Both operate much toward the same purpose — club work, etc. The union established connections with both of them, and we gave them the opportunity of electing one member in county and local branches.

We supported them in many ways, granting them some money for their work, having common parties, common lectures, etc. In return, they entertained at our meetings with songs, music and folk dances.

WE START A SCHOOL

In spite of what has just been mentioned, it was evident that we had not yet done enough. The

pioneers, so to speak, had grown with the movement. In one way or another they had educated themselves for the co-operative work. What about the successors? Would they have the same enthusiasm? These questions concerned both the executives and the employees, particularly the managers.

We took a glance at some other broad movements in our country, especially consumers' co-operatives (KF) and trade unions, and found that these bodies had quite a number of schools. They elected the best of their young people and sent them to their special schools for courses of different lengths. There, these young people acquired knowledge on such subjects as national economy, social questions, etc., and also

FIG. 5. Study circle at the Sänga-Säby School.



how this knowledge could be applied in their own branch. There was "Vår Gård" ("Our Court") at Saltsjöbaden, Brunnsvik, Jakobsberg, and some other schools.

In the union and federation we realized that we had to go the same way. It took a long time, however, before we got our own "Idea School," as we like to call it in Sweden. In May, 1944, the opening of the Sångas-Säby School was celebrated. Sångas-Säby is a farm on an island beautifully situated near the shore of Lake Mälaren, roughly twenty-five miles from Stockholm. This holding was wanted in order to get "farming atmosphere," not so much for the agriculturists, but more for other people employed in our co-operatives and in other branches who would come to courses and conferences at Sångas-Säby.

Quarters for the school were arranged in the former Manor House. Dormitories, lounges, and a kitchen were erected. As a headmaster we got Theo Ågren, previously at a farmers' school in the county of Småland. He had the co-operative spirit to a high degree, and had done a lot of work for our movement.

School Activities

At Sångas young farmers learn the business of agricultural co-operation and organization, including the economical and social background. Wide latitude is given in discussions, personal activities, and initiative.

There are special courses for people employed in the farmers' enterprises, supplemented by visits to,

and some work in, our co-operative unions. The value of these conferences and meetings held at Sångå, cannot be overestimated. Our people come there in order to discuss their problems. Representatives from other branches of the community visit Sångå. These include journalists, students from universities and colleges, consumers' co-operatives folk, housewives, trades-union people, etc. On their arrival they generally do not know much about farming, on many occasions only "that farmers are always grumbling." They are, however, intelligent and selected people and acquire a lot of knowledge about the problems and difficulties of farming. They discuss matters with ardor on these occasions — but that is a good thing in a democratic community. When it is over, there is nearly always a much better understanding between the farming group and the townspeople.

Mr. Ågren, the headmaster, believes that the school should offer courses for people not engaged in farming, such as engineers, teachers, etc. All these desire to come, because of the school's pleasant surroundings and proximity to the capital. On these occasions Mr. Ågren always has a chance to tell them a little about the school and its aims, and about the state of agriculture in general.

Thus the Sångå School is becoming just what we wanted it to be — an ideal and an idea center of our movement. People come there, and afterwards tell a lot of others about farming and farming problems.

I imagine that in some other countries the understanding between farmers and other people is better

than in our country. Look, for example, at the number of books about farming published in America and England which are read by the townspeople.

It is important in a democratic community to have people of different classes understand each other, especially the townspeople and country folk. Negotiations are better than blind fighting; and without knowledge about the conditions of the other party, negotiations become unnecessarily hard and long.