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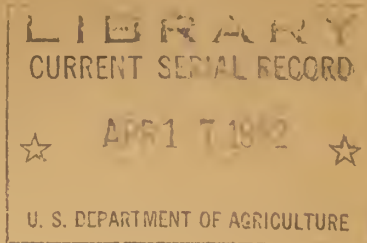
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Agricultural Research Administration  
Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics

CURRENT RURAL FAMILY HOUSING AND EQUIPMENT



Talk by Barbara B. Reagan, Family Economics Division, at the 29th Annual Outlook Conference, Washington, D. C., October 31, 1951

During the last few years, the Nation has had one of the greatest building booms in its history. Farm families have done a lot of the building of new houses--nearly 10 percent of the farmhouses in 1950 had been built in the preceding five years. But farm people have not built their share of all the new houses. They built only 10 percent of the new houses from 1945 to 1950, while 14 percent of all the dwelling units in the country are on farms. The biggest building boom was rural nonfarm, which was related to growth of suburban areas.

Few farmhouses were built during World War II, and in spite of the building boom since the war, fewer farmhouses were built in the relatively high-income 1940 decade than in the low-income 1930 decade. Farmhouses built in the 1940's made up only 14 percent of the farmhouses at the end of the decade, while those built in the 1930's made up 18 percent of those at the end of the 1930 decade. 1/

In 1949 farmhouse construction was relatively high in the South. Nearly 70 percent of all farmhouses built in 1949 were in the South, though the South has only about 40 percent of the total number of farmhouses.

For those who help farm families with their housing problems, it is important to know what kinds of farm families are building today. One piece of recent evidence is from a North Carolina Experiment Station study (Chart BHNHE 9419-D). Of the farm families that built a house from 1948 to 1950 in North Carolina, only about a fifth were young people of child-bearing age who had no children. The largest proportion of the families building had children still at home. A fourth had one or more young children, all under 10, but the biggest group (42 percent) had at least one older child still at home. The older, childless families or those whose children are no longer at home made up only 11 percent of the group building.

Families with young children are often anxious to build a new house if they can possibly afford it while the children are still young and before or as the family size reaches its peak. The increasing number of farm children growing up in the next few years will mean an increased pressure on the existing housing and will increase the desire of many families to build a new house.

1/ These estimates are from the 1940 and 1950 Census of Population and Housing. The definition of rural farm is not the same in the two Censuses, which affects this comparison somewhat, although not as much as a comparison of the absolute number of dwellings built in the two periods.

All the farm-operator families building in North Carolina were owners or part owners, and they were a relatively young group. About 45 percent of those building were under 35 whereas less than 15 percent of all the owner operators in the State were that young. Veterans' loan benefits, bonuses, and training programs probably have meant that the proportion of the younger farm families building a house has been higher in recent years than before.

Many, many more farm families are making repairs and major improvements in their houses than are building new houses. Major improvements are most often installation of electricity and plumbing. In 1949, facilities were installed in over 450,000 farmhouses. Addition of a room and remodeling were also relatively frequent. More families added to their house than built a new house. Also more families remodeled than built.

The general level of housing of farm families has been improved in recent years not only by construction of new houses and by major repairs and additions, but also by the fact that each year houses are torn down or converted to other uses, and presumably such houses are the most dilapidated structures. One reason for the net decrease in farmhouses is the consolidation of farm units and the resulting decrease in number of farms. Another factor has been that some farmers have moved from the farm into town, although continuing to farm the same units, thus leaving their former houses vacant or converting them to another use.

Data from the 1950 Census, along with data from other scattered studies, provide an opportunity to check the present status of farm housing in comparison with rural nonfarm and urban homes. From this, we can see the areas of house improvement that might be stressed in the next few years.

Electrification has spread rapidly in the past decade (Chart B<sup>4</sup>NHE 9233-D). In 1940, only 30 percent of the farms had electricity, but by 1950, nearly 80 percent of the farm houses had it. <sup>2/</sup> This chart also shows the progress that has been made in installation of telephones. In the 1930's, the number of farms with telephones dropped far below the level of 1920, but there has been a slow though steady increase since that time. By 1948, 40 percent of the farms had phones which is back slightly above the 1920 level. For many of these people with phones, the service is unsatisfactory. In the fall of 1949, REA expanded its program to help rural people get adequate telephone service, and by the beginning of 1951, progress had undoubtedly been made. <sup>3/</sup>

The job that is yet to be done in getting electricity to most farm families, if not to all of them, is shown by States in this chart (Chart BHNHE 9229-D). The data shown are for 1949, but the story can easily be brought up to date.

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<sup>2/</sup> Charts Neg. S 9233-D and Neg. S 9229-D are based on REA estimates using the 1940 Census definitions of rural farm. Chart Neg. 9417-D is based on 1950 Census of Population and Housing data and a more restricted definition of rural farm. The latter figure is quoted in this text; i. e., 78 percent of rural farms had electricity in 1950.

<sup>3/</sup> The 1950 Census of Agriculture has made a preliminary estimate that 39 percent of the farms had telephones in 1950, which this estimate is based on the 1950 definition of rural farm.

By June 30, 1951, no State had fewer than 50 percent of the farms with electricity. North and South Dakota and Mississippi had all moved up to the next classification, the group of States with 25-50 percent of farms without electricity. At the other end of the distribution are the States with more than 95 percent of the farms with electricity. Four more States joined this group. In the Northeast, there is New Hampshire and New York; in the Midwest, Iowa; and in the West, California. 4/

How farm families stand in relation to rural nonfarm and urban families with respect to housing facilities is shown by the 1950 Census (Chart BINHE 9417-D). Whereas more than 20 percent of the farm families still do not have electricity, nearly all of the urban families have electric lights. Furthermore, the condition of farmhouses is poorer; in 1950, a little more than 20 percent of the farmhouses were classed as dilapidated compared with about 10 percent of the urban and rural nonfarm.

Farm families are also still far behind rural nonfarm and urban families in having running water in the house, and even fewer farm families have flush toilets. However, considerable progress was made in installation of running water and flush toilets in the past decade. Since electricity is usually a forerunner of installing running water and a sewage disposal system, farm families may make more progress along these lines in the next 10 years. Many may turn to installing plumbing as soon as they can get the pipes, bathroom fixtures, and kitchen sink.

The need for farm housing improvement is probably greatest in the North Central States and the South. Nearly three-fourths of the farmhouses in the South in 1950 did not have running water. And in the North Central States, about half did not have running water.

In addition to facilities such as running water, storage spaces such as closets, attic, or basement are important construction features making for a more livable house and more efficient home management (Chart BINHE 9418-D). In 7 Southern States in 1948 and 1949, a fifth of the homes of owner-operators didn't have any of the storage facilities listed: storeroom, attic, basement, utility closet, pantry, or clothes closet. Only a little more than 60 percent had any clothes closets. The number of closets in the house did not seem to be related to the age of the house. As many older houses had closets as did the newer ones.

Increased electrification of farm homes, along with relatively high family income in recent years, has been a great impetus to the farm family to improve its household equipment. Spending for household equipment by many farm families has been relatively high, especially in the last half of the 1940 decade when supplies of consumer durables increased following World War II. What electricity can mean to farm families when income is relatively high is shown by the household equipment inventories of farm families in four Kansas counties in 1946-49.

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4/ 1951 estimates are from REA and are based on definition of farm used by 1950 Census of Agriculture, while chart Neg. S 9229-D was based on 1940 definitions of rural farm.

Nearly all of the selected Kansas families with electricity had a mechanical refrigerator and a self-heating iron, but only about half of those without electricity had them (Chart BHNHE 9421-D). Nearly three-fourths of the families with electricity had a vacuum cleaner, while the number of families with a nonelectric vacuum cleaner was negligible.

A washing machine is often the first major item of household equipment that farm families get. Of these families with electricity, more than 85 percent had an electric washing machine. It is interesting to stop and note that preliminary estimates for 27 States from the 1950 Census of Agriculture show that of all farm families in the country that have electricity about 80 percent now have an electric washing machine. In the North Central States and the West, the proportion of farm families with electricity that have an electric washing machine is nearly 90 percent compared with about 65 percent in the South and 85 percent in the Northeast.

Even without electricity, improvement in household equipment can be made when money is available. Nearly 90 percent of the selected Kansas families that did not have electricity had a power-driven washing machine, and nearly 70 percent had a gas cook stove.

Farm family spending for household equipment and furniture was higher in 1950 than in 1949, judging by the spending of account-keeping families in 3 Midwestern States (Chart BHNHE 9422-D). This increase followed a sharp cut in 1949 from the record spending of farm families for furniture and equipment in 1947 and 1948. The increase from 1949 to 1950 in the amount spent per person by farm families, however, was not as great as the increase spent by all U. S. consumers for these items.

Even in 1949, Montana farm families spent an average of \$300 for furnishings and household equipment (Chart BHNHE 9423-D). About 40 percent of this money was spent for major equipment such as stoves, refrigerators, and washing machines. Over 50 percent was spent for such items and for small equipment. Only a small amount was spent on the average for rugs and for household textiles. These farm families spent about \$40 for furniture. The relatively recent installation of electricity coupled with the families' previously low inventories undoubtedly stimulated their equipment buying as income permitted.

In Kansas in the 4 relatively high-income counties studied, farm families of 5 selected types spent an average of over \$450 in the year from May 1948 to May 1949 for furnishings and equipment, and their money was distributed in much the same way as in Montana. Over 50 percent was spent for major household equipment and small equipment. Furniture accounted for about a fifth, which was a little higher proportion than in Montana. Again the average amounts spent for rugs and household textiles were small.

In spite of increased farm family buying along these lines in recent years, farm women still have far less in the way of household equipment to work with than urban women (Chart BHNHE 9420-D). About 60 percent of the farm families now have a mechanical refrigerator, and more than a third have a gas or electric cook stove. This represents a great increase in the last decade, especially since the end of World War II. But nearly 90 percent of the urban housewives have a mechanical refrigerator and 85 percent have a gas or electric cook stove.

Television has considerable rural - urban differences because purchase of sets by farm families has been restricted to those within broadcasting range of large cities. On the other hand, there is no longer any marked difference between rural and urban families in ownership of radics.

Home freezers are an item that many farm families have been considering buying to make meal preparation and food preservation easier. By 1950, only a little more than 10 percent of the farm families had a home freezer. In addition, about half the farm families in 1950 had space in freezer lockers. Home freezers were most prevalent in the Northeast where 18 percent of the farm families have a freezer. The West and the North Central States are close behind. And about 7 percent of the Southern farm families had one. 5/

This available material seems to indicate that farm people have been doing more in equipping and modernizing their existing houses than in building completely new houses. We can see that in spite of their efforts, much remains to be done.

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5/ Estimates on home freezers based on data for 27 States from the 1950 Census of Agriculture.

Charts referred to are from Rural Family Living Chart Books, prepared for the 1951 and 1952 Outlook Conferences.