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CHANGING AMERICAN LIVING PATTERNS AND VALUES

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Change and progress are main themes in our society. Probably never before has there been so much stock-taking, so much looking back over the years to see how far we have come and so much comparing of groups within our present society to see where progress has been made and where lags have occurred. This scrutiny has been accompanied by attempts to isolate conditions causing change, to test notions as to what brings progress for some and not to others. We want to know what lies ahead and how to shape the future in order to maximize the good things of life, to minimize the bad and to avoid accidental disaster. We have long been conscious of our greatly increased productivity and are now debating the impact of the vast potential productive power that looms just ahead with the development of nuclear power and other technological changes that seem certain to occur. With this growth of productive power there has come an increased recognition in groups like this that such power is no more than a means to an end, that it is a valuable but not a sufficient condition for a good society. To an increasing extent the basic issues of society are being reviewed. These relate to people, how they live and how their living can be improved.

Questions that arise in such a review make us painfully aware of the limitations of science. What makes for high quality living is a question unanswered in its entirety by scientists. Nevertheless knowledge of life situations is invaluable evidence for those guiding decisions, and my paper attempts to present a few highlights of the change of the past half century with special attention to farm families. In attempting this I am reminded of Stephen Leacock's hero who got on his horse and rode off rapidly in all directions. Family living has changed in many ways, each of which if fully dealt with would occupy the entire time at my disposal. My dilemma is heightened by my uncertainty as to how the picture of change should be painted. What change is central? what is secondary? what should be accented? What gradations of color, of light and shade should be used? There is now a vast literature on changing family living, and many people have tried to summarize the evidence available and to appraise conditions giving rise to change and their effect. With this literature I have some acquaintance, enough to know that in spite of certain pervasive types of change, what is true for some families is not true for all. In addition

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interpretators of the changing world are far from being in agreement. I shall concentrate largely on general tendencies, touch on some exceptions and comment briefly on significance of change.

Increased production is meaningful only as it enlarges the stock of goods that families have and improves their quality. On one thing there is no doubt. The stock of consumer goods consumed has greatly increased. Families are more abundantly fed, clothed and housed than they have ever been before. Health services are of better quality and more generally available, the average number of years in school for children has increased greatly and means of communication such as the automobile, the telephone and more recently TV have widened the horizon of the world in which families live. These changes have occurred in the North, the South, the East and the West, and for farm as well as nonfarm families. In some ways, however, the transformation of the past fifty years has been greater and some of it has been more recent for farm than for nonfarm families.

The coming of electric power lines to the farm communities has been an important force transforming living conditions. This became general in farm communities only during the past decade. Anyone comparing a farm before and after electrification is certain to be impressed with what it has done to reduce the hard labor of many tasks, both in the home and on the farm, and to make for pleasanter living in general.

We have come a long way from the picture of farm family life presented in the 1909 Yearbook of Agriculture. There W. R. Beattie describes the situation as follows:

"The days of the home spinning wheel and loom are past, but in many farm homes little has yet been done to lessen the burden of women's work, although labor-saving devices are both numerous and easily installed. Public opinion seems to be divided upon the question of conditions existing in the homes of farmers, but to one familiar with facts the need of improvement is apparent. It is true that farmers and their families are, as a rule, quite comfortable and happy, but with the present labor requirements of the home too little opportunity is afforded for mental improvement or social life.

"The first and most important consideration in home improvement is a wholesome and plentiful supply of water. Until recently it was necessary to locate the dwelling near the water supply, but with the great advance in the manufacture of pumps and piping it is now feasible to transport the water any reasonable distance...

"The advent of the gasoline engine into common use on the farm has made possible the combination of a number of labor-saving facilities, including the pumping of water. It is now practicable to provide the most isolated country home with electric or acetylene light, modern sanitary fixtures, hot and cold water, dairy and laundry machinery operated by power and even ceiling fans and motor-driven sewing machines. Some of these may be classed as luxuries, but others are conveniences that will greatly relieve the burden of work in the farm home.

"A well equipped laundry room should have stationary tubs, hot and cold water, a washing machine, a clothes' wringer, a stove and an ironing table. As an adjunct to the laundry there should be provided in the yard a permanent wire clothes line...

"In certain thickly populated country districts the cooperative laundry scheme is giving good results..."

Among the minor conveniences described are an open-air cupboard and a screen-porch cupboard. Nothing is said about the possibility of modern refrigeration, and air-conditioning was probably not yet thought of even for the Utopia of the farm family.

Some of the possibilities seen by Beattie were fulfilled. It was, however, the coming of the electric power line that initiated the great change, with electric lights coming first. In many homes these were quickly followed by the provision of a bathroom with hot and cold running water, a power vacuum cleaner, electric stove, refrigerator, a frozen food-locker, a walk-in refrigerator and more recently air-conditioning. Many a farm housewife viewing her new possessions felt a thrill of pride at having achieved all and more than her urban friends. The electrification of farm homes is by no means complete. For some time past progress of both urban and rural families has been measured in terms of the availability of electric power and possession of things related to it. Among nonfarm people, except in villages, this yardstick has lost its usefulness because the electric power and things closely associated with it are now so universal, and for farm families this limit is being approached. The rapid introduction of TV, in its early stages in large cities in 1950, provides an interesting example of the speed with which new products reach families. In May 1959, 73 percent of the rural farm households had a TV-set, 86 percent of the rural nonfarm and 89 percent of the urban.

The increase in real income and easier access to retail markets have had an important effect on farm family living because they have reduced the effort going to production of food for family consumption. The spring butchering and the curing of pork for summer use is now largely a thing of the past. So also is the home-butchering of beef, since beef coming from the home-farm herd is likely to be processed by a butcher and held at the freezer locker. The churning of butter for family use has almost disappeared. The farm garden continues, but the effort going to canning of fruits and vegetables for out-of-season use has been greatly reduced, and the buying of canned products is no longer considered the mark of the spendthrift farm housewife. The home baking in the farm household has also declined although the decline is much less for farm than nonfarm families. It seems important to note, however, that the home garden and milk from the family farm still seems important to high level nutrition of families. For many families if these things are not available from their own farm, their diets tend to lack needed nutrients. Until money income of farm families is at a higher level or they are handier to retail markets the need for a garden and a cow continues to be important. This is an essential difference between farm and nonfarm families.

The two most commonly used yardsticks of progress are increase in real income and decrease in death rate. Over the past fifty years real income has increased greatly and at the same time the death rate has fallen. Its fall has been most spectacular for children. The trend has tended to narrow the difference between the farm and urban people. In general farm communities have always been considered to be healthier than urban. This difference continues. "For white males, the expectations of life at birth in rural areas were 10.0 years above those of the urban areas in 1900, 7.6 years in 1910 and 5.4 years in 1930. In 1939, when deaths were classified by place of residence of the deceased rather than place of occurrence of death, rural death rates remained lower than those in urban areas but the gaps had been reduced substantially. For white males the expectation of life at birth was 61.6 years in cities of 100,000 and more, 61.4, in other urban areas and 64.1 years in rural areas." ^{1/} In terms of life expectancy the farm population is still ahead.

In spite of the lesser mortality of the rural population there is much concern among rural people about an inadequate supply of health facilities in rural areas. Studies have shown that medical, dental and hospital facilities per 1,000 of the population is less in rural counties than urban counties. Such measures may be somewhat deceptive because of a tendency for such facilities to concentrate in the large cities and for families to go to them. However, various studies show that farm families tend to use health services less than nonfarm people even where there is little evidence of lesser need. For example, the proportion of persons who had lost all permanent teeth is greater at all ages for rural than urban population. There is also evidence that farm people get less dental care than urban. In addition the recent survey indicates that the farm population to a lesser extent than the nonfarm population has been availing itself of health insurance protection. Some of these differences may be related to the relative level of money income of farm and nonfarm people and some to the supply of services available, and some to a lag of customary ways of meeting life situations. With the continued blending of the urban and rural communities, difference between urban and rural counties seems likely to narrow.

A third measure of progress is the number of years in school. In this respect the farm population has lagged far behind the nonfarm population, and the difference among states for the farm population is very great. Even a cursory review of the factors that may have contributed to difference in school attainment is not feasible here. It is, however, one that is receiving a good deal of comment at the present time, because of the increased awareness in the country in general of various shortcomings of our educational system in meeting the demand of the dawning nuclear era, and increased awareness that economic opportunity for farm as well as the nonfarm children lies in high school and college education.

^{1/} Conrad Taeuber and Irene B. Taeuber, The Changing Population of the United States, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1959, pp. 274-5.

The attainment of high-level education poses problems unique to rural communities, and especially to farm areas where children now attend so-called country schools with one or two teachers. The decline in the farm population has reduced the number of children in such schools and the ability to attract highly qualified teachers. In addition ideas about high-quality education has changed. There seems little doubt that the reorganization of rural schools is likely to receive a great deal of attention in the years just ahead.

The consumption of farm families has changed, and their dependence on market goods increased. But even more important has been the change in their general orientation, in how they see the future for themselves and their children. Improved means of communications have been a great transformer of living in the country in general. Its impact on the farm family has been especially great because of the greater isolation that preceded the coming of hard-surfaced roads, the automobile, the telephone, the radio and TV. Horizons have been extended and life has taken new forms. With greater ease of travel has come the possibility of earning income in town and village for those wishing to remain on the farm. At the same time migration from farm to city has been occurring--for a time at least it was akin to a flood tide. Thus farm families more and more see the continuity of life for themselves and their children, not in the farm community where they or their grandfather settled, but in an area encompassing the economy in general. To some people this change has entailed a loss, for example, a loss of membership in a close knit group centered in their children and grandchildren and in the school, and church they first attended, and the country store frequented where there are no strangers, at least not for long.

While farm people sought economic opportunity for themselves and for their children in nonfarm occupations, the proportion of the population in farms shrank and that of cities, large and small, expanded. A two-way flow thus occurred, hard-surfaced roads, automobiles and buses brought to rural areas urban people whose main focus of life lay in a city. Among these are the so-called urban farmers, those who operate a farm in considerable measure as a recreational sideline or as a security against inflation. Thus farm and urban living in a real sense has been merging not only in terms of kind of goods purchased but also in face-to-face contacts. The diversity of interests, attitudes and views represented in many rural areas is now much greater than two decades ago. In many areas the unification of this diversity into a rural community is still in a very preliminary stage. With good leadership a richer fuller rural community should emerge. It will be a blending more than ever before of farm and nonfarm people. These rural communities will, however, probably be more amorphous than those of 50 years ago. This seems assured by the wider range of contacts of the members and by the relatively high mobility of the future population of rural communities, even among those for whom agriculture is the main source of income.

In spite of the rise in real income poverty still continues. It continues in both farm and in nonfarm population. Many inquiries have been undertaken to try to bring to light its causes and conditions that would lead to its elimination, but problems related to it are not easily solved. They do however appear to be more important for the farm than for

the nonfarm population. This is indicated by the fact that among states average income of 1949 was much more unequal for the farm than for the nonfarm families, and it seems highly probable that this was accompanied by greater inequality of consumption among farm than among nonfarm families. There seems little doubt that some inequality will disappear with reduction in the isolation that long bottled up some farm communities, with increased mobility as families seek out better opportunities, with increased education, and with reduction in artificial barriers to opportunities, such as those affecting the Negro population and some recent in-migrants to the United States. The flow of the in-migrants from Puerto Rico and Mexico has contributed much to the low-income groups of both the farm and the nonfarm population. America has, however, had long experience with helping the new immigrants to find a place. The presence of such low-income groups, low in our terms but not in terms of the economy from which they have come, should not be viewed in any way as a failure of our society to promote economic opportunity. Failure will occur if the income of these recent in-migrants does not improve. In fact the rate of such improvement should probably be greater than that of the population in general.

The security of income as well as its adequacy has been a matter of much concern, especially since the Great Depression. That experience brought home to farm people, as never before, the extent to which they were a part of the far reaching economy, that they can no longer provide for themselves the things they want, that their possessions and way of life are very dependent on the market price of their products and that state of the economy in general. How to minimize the sharp drops in income continues to be a matter of debate, and one of vital concern to farm families. I do not believe that a longrun decline is likely so long as real income in the economy in general tends to rise and so long as off-farm economic opportunity continues.

Various programs designed to increase and to stabilize farm income have been tried and their suitability is still a matter of keen debate. At the same time there has developed an extensive social security system. At first it was applied solely to wage and salary workers. The trend has been to its greater and greater coverage of the population. In recent years Old Age and Survivors Insurance and disability provisions have been extended to the farm population, to farm operators as well as laborers. This extension is still much too recent to gauge how well this program initially conceived for the nonfarm wage earner is adapted to farm families in general. The economic security of farm operator families has long been and continues in large measure to be sought in the ownership of a farm and its operating capital. For this reason then the economic security is closely related to the financial institutions that make agricultural credit available. This link seems likely to continue.

Increase in real income makes available additional purchasing power. In some quarters there has been concern about over-production, that people would not know what to do with additional income. Some potential production will be sacrificed for increased leisure. Such a tendency has been apparent among both farm and nonfarm people. Even so there seems little shortage of ideas as to what and how consumption might be expanded.

Expansion continues. Hagood, for example, reports that "Farm-operator families in the United States...improved their levels of living significantly between 1950 and 1954." ^{2/} The 1954 farm-operator level of living index was 15 percent over that of 1950. This rise from 1950 to 1954 was a continuation of the general improvement that had been underway since 1940.

As I see family behavior, goals tend to be set a little beyond what currently seems feasible. When income rises and this higher level is expected to be maintained, there tends to be a corresponding increase in goals. In fact some urban men claim that their wives have next year's income spent before it becomes a reality. Perhaps farm wives feel that their husbands have the increase spent before it becomes a reality, so that no matter how high is this year's income the extra inflow of funds must go to liquidate a farm debt, a mortgage on the farm or a loan for the purchase of farm equipment. With increase in the price of land and the greater importance of farm operating capital this seems not unlikely. Many examples of this kind are likely to be provided when a group of farm women meet to discuss family finance.

I find some writers on family finance using the phrase "discretionary" spending, seeming to imply that families now feel that they have more income than they really need, something to play around with, to experiment with and not feel too badly if the experiment does not pan out. I doubt very much that the sense of having a surplus for experimentation is much greater now than 50 years ago--that too was a period of rising income. In the experience of families variation does of course occur in the feeling of current surplus and stringency, the ability at one time to splurge and the need at another to watch every penny. These feelings are likely to be related to the ups and downs of income, from year to year, a condition common for farm families, to change in number of dependents with whom income is shared, and the stage in paying off the mortgage. These conditions bring no change on longrun family goals, such as tends to occur with above-average attainment, or a rising national income representing generally increased economic opportunity. Thus it seems best for educators to assume that wise choice in the use of income is a matter of continuing concern to families, that they still do not want to pay any more than they have to for the household equipment, the clothes, or the food they buy. This feeling of the need for economy continues even though most families are able and willing to spend more for their food, clothing and other types of consumer products. They want a higher quality, but do not want to pay more than is necessary for that quality.

As consumer-buyers the world of the farm and the nonfarm families is very similar. In one respect at least problems have greatly increased. Choice is much more difficult than formerly. Families are surfeited with alternatives. New materials have replaced old, such as in clothing and house furnishing. A great increase has occurred in the degree of processing, whereby household tasks have, as it were, left the home and entered

^{2/} Farm-operator Family Level of Living Indexes, 1945, 1950 and 1954,
U. S. Department of Agriculture, Stat. Bul. No. 204, March 1957, p. 1.

the factory, e.g., in food and clothing. And wholly new products have appeared such as many types of household equipment. Established customs and traditions help little in the evaluation of these. Information as to their merit, how to recognize quality and how to use or care for the new products in the home creates need for a continuing program of consumer education and for the development of grades and standards, to increase information available to consumers at time of purchase and to evaluate performance of products available. In this field the consumer testing agencies, initiated in the twenties, have made a very important contribution, so also have various agencies specializing in the development of standards for consumer products. The contribution of these agencies seems likely to increase. In the education for consumer buymanship the rural families have the great advantage of the programs sponsored by the agricultural extension service. In few states do urban families have the advantage of such a reliable impartial source of information to which to turn.

The evolution of legislation to protect consumers from deception and misrepresentation has come a long way, even though still imperfect. There is need for continued scrutiny with respect to enforcement, the possibility of loopholes, the need for adaptation to technological change and possible feasibility of additional information on labels that would be useful to consumers. In this the combined efforts of commodity specialists and family economists are needed.

Misrepresentation of terms of credit sales and of consumer credit in general is still a serious problem, even though some progress has been made through legislation on conditional sales agreements and small loan acts. Nevertheless financial tangles related to instalment purchases are very common. Consumer education is without doubt an important means of dealing with this. It is very difficult through legislation to protect consumers who sign unread contracts, and who contract future payments without a careful review of their future income and other commitments.

Protection of consumers from sales pressure has made little or no advance. In fact some people feel that the defenses of consumers have tended to weaken. They point, for example, to mass communication through radios and TV that reaches into every home and influences even pre-school children, and to hidden persuaders by which people are presumably influenced through their subconscious. I find the claims and counter-claims on these issues very difficult to evaluate. Protection of consumers seems likely still to come from the boastings of many advertisers neutralizing each other. However, more support to the Federal Trade Commission from consumers in general should help to reduce the frequency of half-truths, or what might better be described as marginal lies.

The sense of change and of uncertainty as to what lies ahead, the need for scrutiny of the economy and for search of more effective rules to guide the vast network of interrelations that make up the nation are felt by farm and nonfarm people alike. You as leaders in rural communities have a continuing need for information and revision of perspective to see the best means of achieving goals that have remarkable continuity. These are the goals of personal liberty and growth of individual persons combined with a recognition of the rights of others. I see little

likelihood of the impetus to change being modified appreciably in the near future. To achieve our goals traditional programs are often insufficient. The current program of the Department of Agriculture relating to poverty among farm families gives full recognition of this. Here imagination as to the development of persons seems of the utmost importance. In many other areas a new look with insight and imagination is needed. In this period of change you can take comfort in the fact that great achievement as seen by later generations has often been accompanied by instability and much perplexity and debate.