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# VANISHING HOMESTEADS



Social Action Series No. 21

*BY*

REV. EDGAR SCHMIEDELER, O.S.B., Ph.D.

Director, Rural Life Bureau,  
National Catholic Welfare Conference

The pamphlets in the *Social Action Series*, of which this is the **twenty-first** number, are edited by the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. They represent an effort to present to the general public, and especially to Catholics, a discussion of current economic facts, institutions and proposals in the United States in their relation to Catholic social teaching, particularly as expounded in Pope Pius XI's Encyclical "Forty Years After—Reconstructing the Social Order" (*Quadragesimo Anno*.) In the spirit of that Encyclical they are urged upon and recommended to individuals, study clubs, discussion groups and school classes.

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PRINTED AND PUBLISHED IN THE U. S. A.  
BY THE PAULIST PRESS, NEW YORK, N. Y.

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**SOCIAL ACTION SERIES**

**No. 21**

*Published for*

THE SOCIAL ACTION DEPARTMENT  
N. C. W. C.

*by*

THE PAULIST PRESS  
401 WEST 59TH STREET  
NEW YORK, N. Y.

## FOREWORD

The family size farm, a basic factor in the making of America, is disappearing before the efficiency of large scale commercialized farming. Dr. Schmiedeler turns back the pages of history to show what similar occurrences have meant in terms of human welfare to other countries in other times, and to contrast the wide distribution of land ownership in our earlier history with its present increasing concentration. His objective account of the conditions and the prospects, as well as the solutions he proposes are a challenge not only to those who have a special interest in rural life but to all those who love their country and their fellow citizens.

SOCIAL ACTION DEPARTMENT,  
NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE.

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✠ FRANCIS J. SPELLMAN, D.D.,  
*Archbishop of New York.*

*New York, September 22, 1941.*

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# Vanishing Homesteads

By REV. EDGAR SCHMIEDELER, O.S.B., PH.D.

THE term "homestead" is a distinctly American word. And it is a word filled with much meaning. It has quite the same meaning to the American people that the briefer word "home" has to the generality of mankind. Like the latter it means the family hearth and all the memories that have with the passing of the years come to cluster there. But it also means the family acres that yield the family's livelihood. It means the trees and foliage, the shrubs and grass about the place. What a pity if the word were to go out of use. What a greater pity if that for which it has always stood, the American family-farm, would go by the board, would vanish from the American scene.

Yet precisely that is what is taking place today. Indeed, in no small measure has it already taken place. Many an American farm family has lost its homestead. Still more are bound to lose theirs unless some fundamental changes are speedily brought about in the present farm situation of the United States.

Recently accumulated evidence to this effect has taken on very large proportions. Story after story repeats the same strain, with but slight variation here and there. Thus one hears of a number of families thrown off their small homesteads in order that one land baron might put a large mechanized unit into operation. Again one hears of families descending the agricultural ladder on which they had climbed to ownership, only to see a hireling manager step into their place to make a cold-blooded business proposition out of what were once treasured American homesteads. Or again one learns of families losing their homestead acres while an impersonal "corporation" farm takes over.

Individual examples could be multiplied. We cite a few. There is, for instance, the case of the farmer in the Red River Valley. He had already for some time past been operating eleven quarter sections of land. But now he is operating twenty-one quarter sections. Family after family has been pushed off its acres to make this possible. Three of these families, unable to rent farms because of the strong competition for land on the part of big operators have ended up on the relief rolls of nearby towns. Another instance on record is that of an individual who asked twenty of his renters, some of whom had rented their farms from him for many years, to vacate them so he might farm them all himself. The farms were scattered about in ten different counties. Still another instance speaks of ten operators controlling seventy sections of land. In all these cases the results were much the same. Larger farms, fewer homesteads; more machines, fewer men; mechanized mass-production, a waning of farming as a mode of living.

This phenomenon is really not a new one in history, though a variety of different terms have been applied to it in different countries and at different periods of time. The old Latin term was "latifundium". Pliny, for instance, speaks of the latifundia destroying Italy. The words used in a number of modern languages are derived from this root. But whatever the term applied, the meaning has always been substantially the same. It has meant extensively-farmed landed properties in the hands and under the control of individual landlords or corporate owners. It has meant the uprooting of many families from the soil. Even when the tenant or other underling remained on the soil, it has meant that every right of property and direction was concentrated in the hands of the landlord.

But while not new in history, the phenomenon is new in the United States. To be sure, there has been some growth in large-scale farming here over the past half century; but the growth has really become marked only in the last decade or two. It is now in full swing. This is a particularly unfortu-

nate development, for no great country in history has had such a propitious beginning with regard to the disposition of her vast land resources as has had the United States. It should be well, therefore, before going into details regarding the present foreboding development, to review briefly the original disposition that was made of our lands. That should assure an appreciation of the changes now taking place.

### **The U. S. Land Acts**

Land was very plentiful in the early days. The Government originally acquired millions of acres for nothing, millions more for a mere pittance. The cost, for example, of the Louisiana Purchase, amounted to approximately five cents an acre. Later on, as this land was taken over piecemeal from the Indians, the latter were usually paid something by the Government. Thus in the case of the Black Hawk Purchase of 1832, the contract by which the Indians were induced to relinquish the territory that is now Iowa, an average price of fourteen cents per acre was paid the Red Men. The white settlers who took over paid the government \$1.25 per acre.

Behind the land policies followed by the government was always the self-same idea, namely, that the land belonged to the people; that a division of the same for the benefit of all was a duty of the government. To this end speculation in land was discountenanced—though not always with genuine effectiveness—and a series of legislative acts were passed that aimed at avoiding a repetition of such land abuses of other countries as the concentration of its resources in the hands of a few. The legislators were aware of those abuses, and many of them fought against their repetition here.

Daniel Webster was one of those who were to the fore in this battle. "They left behind them the whole feudal policy of the other continent," he said, referring to the New Englanders of a century and more before. Then pointing to the resultant economic situation, he emphasized the fact that "they

were themselves, either from their original condition or from the necessity of their common interest, nearly on a general level in respect to property." He urged that this relative equality be continued by means of a sound system for disposing of the public lands. Much the same point was made by Congressman Holman of Indiana, when some years later he stated: "Instead of baronial possessions let us facilitate the increase of independent homesteads. Let us keep the plow in the hands of the owner." Like sentiments echoed through the halls of Congress time and again, and sincere efforts were made to enact legislation in harmony with them.

The first comprehensive land act to be passed was that of 1796. Its main provisions were the following: The well-known rectangular surveys, the laying out of townships, the division of one-half the townships into mile-square sections of 640 acres to be sold at the local land offices—the other half to be sold at the seat of the general government—the reservation of four sections at the center of each township, the fixing of the sale price at two dollars an acre, one-twentieth to be paid down and the remainder by the end of the year. The last point, the matter of payment was changed by means of an amendment in 1800. This amendment allowed payment of one-fourth down and the remainder in four annual installments. Under this provision many farmers became indebted to the government and were unable to pay out. A number of relief measures were passed by the government to help the distressed settlers. But they availed little. By 1820 the government returned to the principle of cash sales, with price reduced to \$1.25 an acre.

Under this first major land act the government disposed of more than 220,000,000 acres of its lands. Not a little speculation in land crept in during the period. In fact, the panic of 1836, one of the worst in our history, was attributed to this speculation. Many investors bought public land, not with ready cash but with speculator's money—with bank notes and borrowed money. In order to check the speculation fever,



President Jackson, in 1836, issued a circular which directed that henceforth nothing but gold and silver should be taken in payment of public land. As a result of this the speculators became panicky. Land sales dropped from \$36,000,000 that year to \$7,000,000 the year following. The banks stopped specie payment of their notes. It is said that nine-tenths of the business men in the country went bankrupt.

Obviously some changes in the government's land policy were necessary. Certain new conditions had also developed that favored a number of changes. An outstanding aim of the act of 1796 had been to bring revenue to the Federal Government. From 1800 on, however, other sources of national revenue began to yield the funds the government needed. As a result, new theories about the disposition of the public lands began to be advanced. This was particularly true of congressmen from western states. They urged that the public domain be used to promote public improvements that would encourage and facilitate trade and commerce between the East and West. They placed increasing emphasis on the idea that the land should be distributed in such wise as to encourage rapid settlement and a strong nation. With recurrent frequency too came the note that the land belonged to the people and that they should be permitted to have access to it on the easiest possible terms. The final upshot of their discussion and arguments was the so-called Preemption Act of 1841 which proved a considerable step in the direction of fulfilling their announced aims.

The term "preemption" meant that the settler or "squatter" could take over and improve unappropriated public land and exclude others from it. However, definite limits were put on the amount of land that could be preempted. Under the terms of the Act he could take over a tract of not more than one hundred and sixty acres and not less than forty acres, before such lands were offered for sale. If the settler then erected houses on the land and improved a part of it he could buy it without competition. In other words, when the land was

eventually offered for sale by the government the settler had the first right to purchase it at the minimum price of \$1.25 per acre.

Still further acts followed in course of time. These served to bring still closer to genuine fulfillment the declared aim of getting the land into the hands of the people. The main one of these was the famed Homestead Act, which opened up the land on even more liberal terms than any that went before. The Preemption Act remained in force, with various modifications, until 1891. But even some decades before that the demand had grown that the public land be distributed free of charge to bona fide tillers of the soil. The Homestead Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1862, was the legal acceptance and approval of this demand. It provided that the settler could acquire claim to a farm of one hundred and sixty acres, free of all charges except a small filing fee. He made good his claim by living on the homestead for five years, erecting a house on it and working a part of the land. At the end of five years he could get free title to the land if he desired. One hundred and sixty acres proved insufficient, however, for stock-raising farms. Hence the Act was amended to provide for a maximum of a section of land, or six hundred and forty acres, in the case of land which was designated by the Secretary of the Interior as "stockraising land."

This Act worked out very satisfactorily. Farms multiplied under it. They sprang up everywhere in the far stretches of the West. Between 1862 and 1923, 213,867,600 acres of the public domain were disposed of under its liberal provisions and a million and a third new homesteads or family farms were established. While the arrangement did not bring to a stop all speculation in land or kindred abuses, it unquestionably proved to be the wisest of the whole series of land acts passed regarding the disposition of the public domain. Donaldson, eminent student of the public domain, referred to it as the "concentrated wisdom" of the acts that preceded it. Speaking of it after it had been in force for eighteen years, he pointed

to the fact that it was the outgrowth of a system that had extended over almost eighty years and then went on to say: "And now, within a circle of a hundred years since the United States acquired the first of her public lands, the Homestead Act stands as the concentrated wisdom of legislation for settlement of public land. It protects the government, it fills the states with homes, it builds up communities, and lessens the chances of social and civil disorder by giving ownership of the soil in small tracts to the occupants thereof. It was copied from no other nation's system. It was originally American, and remains a monument to its originators."

The Act was indeed originally American. There was every reason to be justly proud of both the Act and its splendid results. Donaldson might well have added: "It helped to make the nation a land of family-sized farms such as the world has never seen."

### **A Changed Picture**

But today we see another picture. The situation which Donaldson spoke of so glowingly has changed not a little since the end of that first century when he uttered his words. Indeed, the half-century and more that followed it, has seen the rise of evils in our land system not foreseen, and most assuredly not contemplated, by those who gave us the Homestead and other Land Acts. It has witnessed the growth of factors that are giving a decided setback to the family-farm ideal. It has witnessed a development that suggests we are casting aside our own "concentrated wisdom" of earlier days, and are now aping "other nations' systems." On the one hand we see vanishing homesteads, disappearing family farms; on the other, rising "baronial estates," growing large-scale farms. The present rapid drift suggests that the system which was "originally American" will hardly long remain "a monument to its originators."

Matters have already gone far, though the movement is yet young and its full force has not yet made itself felt. Both in

terms of individuals and of acres affected the totals are already very disturbing. This is apparent from the general census figures, from special studies that have been made from the hearings of a number of congressional committees, notably those of the Select House Committee Investigating the Inter-State Migration of Destitute Citizens—better known as the Tolan Committee—and from the observations of those who have shown any measure of interest in the farm situation and our farm people. These sources show beyond a shadow of a doubt that many former farm operators and agricultural laborers are being driven from the land. They show that many former homestead owners have lost the ownership of their paternal acres. They show that many farm renters are no longer renters; that they have been forced down the agricultural ladder or even entirely off the land. They show that many farm laborers are no longer wanted, where for years perhaps they had been assured a home and a livelihood. Many of all these groups have become entirely uprooted from the lands. They have become migrants, wanderers over the land. Evidence presented the Tolan Committee suggests there are in the United States today approximately 4,000,000 men, women, and children constantly on the move, seeking a means of livelihood where they find it. Beside that there are what might be called the “habitual migrants,” large numbers of agricultural workers who “follow the crops” and help with their harvest. Still further, there are some hundreds of thousands of “removal migrants,” that is, farm families who are forced to move year by year and who frequently help to swell the ranks of the migratory workers. And now there are the “defense migrants.” For the time they have a job and some kind of a footing. But what will the aftermath be? The picture is far from promising.

In terms of farms and ownership there have also been great changes. The family-sized farm, the American ideal, has definitely lost ground. In its place we see rapidly rising the large-scale industrialized farm of the individual or the corporation farm of the group—the equivalent in our day of the latifundia

or the baronial estates of other times and places. At the other extreme we see the growth, in number but not in total acreage, of the small subsistence farm of three acres or less.

Such, in broad outline, is the picture that the 1940 census paints. To cite a few specific figures: A meager 1.6 per cent of the farmers of the nation—those farming a thousand acres or more—now operate 34.3 per cent of all land in farms. Farms of 10,000 acres and over account for 14 per cent of all land farmed in the United States. These latter farms have increased both in acres and in number by 18 per cent since 1935 alone. The farms in the middle acreage bracket are being absorbed by the larger scale operator. They are fighting a losing battle for survival. Thus, tracts ranging from 50 to 175 acres—roughly, the original family-sized farmstead—dropped from 25.3 per cent of the total number of United States farms in 1930 to 25.0 per cent in 1940. Of particular significance is the fact that even in the period of general upturn in the second half of the decade this middle-sized farm did not regain its former place, but continued in decline.

Even over a longer period, from 1910 to 1935, the same trend is observable. Thus, farms of 500 acres and more increased 46.0 per cent, while those under 50 acres grew by 19.6 per cent. But those between, that is farms ranging from 50 to 500 acres, decreased by 6.8 per cent. The giant estate of the land baron on the one hand and the small holding of the impoverished peon or peasant on the other seem to be coming to the fore. The family-size farm, the pride of a free and independent yeomanry, is slipping behind. The relative equality of the earlier American farmers, the equality of which Webster spoke and for which he and others fought so valiantly, is giving way to striking differences, to extremes of wealth and of acreages. The middle-class farmer, the homestead type, is vanishing.

This is not the system that was painstakingly developed over many decades. Nor is it at all a democratic system. There is no real democracy where there is no reasonably equal

division of resources. Political equality without a good measure of economic equality is in the final analysis little more than a sham.

Nor is the end in sight yet. Indeed the present development seems little more than started. It has been pointed out, for example, by agricultural economists, that in any part of the corn belt as large as a state, the consolidation of farms is not yet progressing at a rate of more than one or two per cent a year—though in more limited areas it is admittedly greater. But at the same time it has been suggested by at least one economist that consolidation might in time remove even as many as 75 per cent of the present independent farm cultivators.

Meanwhile it is well to remember in this connection that our farm population has been growing over the past decade. Many young folks who would formerly have gone to the city are remaining on the farm. It is estimated that about 400,000 farm youth come of age annually. With our growing concentration of land, and with no more frontiers to push back where are these to find farms? How are they to make a livelihood? Are they to be given wheat doles, and entertained with circuses by Uncle Sam, as were the members of the Roman rabble under the Caesars?

What the unfortunate results are to those who are driven off their acres in this revolution in land is today known in some measure to Americans. The volume, *Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, and the moving-picture based on it, have given the public at least some idea of what has been transpiring. Articles in popular magazines have helped to throw further light on the subject. To be sure, while considerable numbers go to California, as Steinbeck's volume suggests, by no means all of them go there. Some are fortunate enough to find another farm, though usually on poorer land. Some, again, become truckers for other farmers in their own neighborhood. Others get WPA jobs. Still others go on relief, usually in nearby towns. All are reduced in status. None are any longer

the independent American yeomen they were before as they lived on their own family farms. Individual and family morale suffers. And not only do those who are actually dislodged suffer. Many of those still holding on experience a sense of insecurity. They live in deep dread lest their turn be next.

Nor as already noted, is it only the farm owner and renter who are losing out; the farm worker also is affected. The extent to which farm laborers have lost their former means of a livelihood was recently shown by a report of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture. It stated that there was a drop of 339,000 in the number of persons working on farms between January 1, 1930, and January 1, 1940, even though farm population increased 2,076,000 in the same period. Both family workers and hired workers were included in the figure. "Normal requirements in farm production for both domestic and foreign outlets," went on the report, "can now be met with approximately 1,600,000 fewer workers on farms than in 1929, which with their dependents means about 3,500,000 fewer persons." Nor has the end been reached. *Technology on the Farm*, a comprehensive report by the Bureau states that "machines alone are expected to displace 350,000 to 500,000 additional farm workers during the next ten years." What is to become of them? Where will it all end?

### The Example of England

A striking example of the growth of large landed estates to the detriment of the small cultivators, is that of England. Sir Thomas More (d. 1635), recently canonized Saint of the Church, gives a description of the situation as it existed already in his day. The following passage in his *Utopia*, for instance, reads almost like a page from our own literature on the agricultural migrant:

"Therefore that one covetous and insatiable cormorant and very plague of his native country may compass about and in-

close many thousands of acres of ground within one pale or hedge, the husbandmen be thrust out of their own, or else either by cunning or fraud, or by violent oppression, they be put beside it, or by wrongs and injuries they be so wearied, that they be compelled to sell all; by one means therefore or by other, either by hook or crook, they must needs depart away; poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, mothers with their young babes, and their whole household small in substance and much in number, as husbandry requireth many hands. Away they trudge, I say, out of their own accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in. All their household stuff, which is very little worth, they be constrained to see it for a thing of naught."

The words refer to fifteenth, and early sixteenth century England, when tenants were forced to leave their holdings to permit the development of large sheep enclosures. The English wool export trade was rapidly taking on proportions at the time, and wealthy merchants bought land in large quantities for the raising of sheep. To make possible large enclosures for the purpose the tenants were driven, "by hook or crook," off their holdings. Even many freeholders and copyholders, supposedly protected by the law, were evicted by chicanery. It has been estimated that, during the reign of Henry VIII (1507-47) alone, 50,000 peasant farms were abandoned. The government intervened, though largely without effect, to put an end to the depopulation of the countryside. Thus, in 1489 an act prohibited the destruction of peasant farms containing 20 acres or more of land. Henry VIII decreed that a landowner might not keep more than 2,000 sheep. Both these attempts to stem the tide, however, failed. The number of peasant evictions continued on; migrancy and vagrancy became serious problems.

Indeed, the development of large estates continued far beyond the time of St. Thomas More and Henry VIII. Other factors besides the practice of developing sheep enclosures entered into the picture in the course of time. Trade was rapidly



expanding, and it was felt there was no limit to potential markets. Hence agriculture was made more and more a capitalistic enterprise. Farms were made larger and larger.

There were not lacking those who took up the cause of the small holders. But their efforts proved vain. By the time of George III's accession to the throne of England in 1760 all the more powerful forces of the country were arrayed against them. Further resistance largely crumbled. With the passage of another century the vast majority of small holders had either been driven from the land or changed into landless wage-earners. In both instances their acreages had been absorbed into large estates.

There are many striking passages in English literature that describe the situation and its manifold evil results. Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," for instance, which appeared in 1769, is a good example. It deals with fact and not with fiction. The following passage touches the heart of the problem:

"Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,  
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;  
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,  
And desolation saddens all thy green:  
One only master grasps the whole domain,  
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain."

A pamphlet by Thomas Wright, published about a quarter century after Goldsmith's verses, and entitled "A Short Address to the Public on the Monopoly of Small Farms," tells of the increasing size of farms and the growth of commercialized farming. Incidentally, it reminds one forcefully of what is transpiring in the United States today.

In the parishes of Sabridgeworth, Much-Hadham and Stocking-Pelham in Hartfordshire, three wealthy farmers have, within a few years past, added to their own seven, eight, and nine small farms of from fifty to one hundred and fifty acres each, and on each of which was formerly

a farmhouse, yard, barns, etc., where the farmer was able to bring up his family comfortably, not only by the cultivation of corn and hay, but also by rearing of stock for the supply of the weekly markets, such as sheep, cows, calves, pigs and poultry. Mark the event! Instead of twenty-four farms, there are now only three; and no one of those three raises more stock on their whole united farms than any one of the twenty-four formerly did.

Here was commercialized farming quite as we know it to-day. On this particular point, and on that of the self-sufficient acreages, Wright adds the following interesting observations:

I must here observe the farmhouses monopolised are let out as cottages as long as they will stand without repair, and only a small piece of garden-ground sufficient for a few vegetables. . . . The wealthy farmer's attention is engrossed by the means of producing the greatest quantity of grain and hay; and when his harvest is over to let them lay in store till he can take advantage of the highest market price. The middling and poor farmer not only attends to the production of grain and hay, but also to the rearing of stock, all of which his needs compel him to carry to market as soon and as often as possible, that he may have wherewithal to pay his rent and taxes as they become due. The rich farmer's wife is above the drudgery of looking after pigs, geese, fowls, etc. The poor farmer's wife thinks these her treasures, nourishes them till they bring fourfold, and then adds their produce to her husband's store.

Quite some decades earlier, more accurately in 1732, John Cowper told, in the following striking passage, of the unusual rural depopulation that resulted from the English enclosures:

I myself, within these thirty Years past, have seen about twenty Lordships or Parishes inclosed, and every one of them has thereby been in a manner depopulated. If we take all the inclosed Parishes one with another, we shall hardly find ten Inhabitants remaining, where there were an Hundred before the Inclosures were made. And in some

parishes, a Hundred and twenty Families of Farmers and Cottagers, have in a few years been reduced to Four, to Two, nay and sometimes to but one Family.

Even as in our day, too many of the people dispossessed of their holdings ended on the relief rolls. "As soon as the little schools of industry are grasped into the hands of an overgrown rapacious farmer," wrote Nathaniel Kent in 1775, "the former occupiers are at once all reduced to the state of day-labourers; and when their health and strength fails, there is but one resource; they and their children are thrown upon the parish." He observed further, in his *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, that even when the husband had work, and when his wife earned money in her spare time, these former owners of their own independent farmsteads could afford little else than dry bread for themselves and their children.

Cardinal Manning, contemporary of Leo XIII, Pope of the working people, also wrote on the English land question of the day. Needless to add, he inveighed against the situation that was current. "The land question," he said, "means hunger, thirst, nakedness, notice to quit, labour spent in vain, the toil of years seized upon, the breaking up of homes; the misery of parents, children and wives; the despair and wildness that springs up in the hearts of the poor when legal force, like a sharp arrow, goes over the most sensitive and vital rights of mankind. All that is concerned in the land question."

Others wrote and spoke in similar vein, some before Manning, some in his day. But results were really never genuinely encouraging. The fact of the matter is the battle in behalf of the small holder was already lost by the time Manning was born in the first years of the nineteenth century. The age-old cry of "economic efficiency," of greater production by means of larger estates, had won the day. It had caused the public to close its eyes to the dreadful social effects that accompanied the economic change. Protests in high places gradually decreased. Those in low places, never indeed uttered vigorously, entirely

ceased. The public lost interest. The large holding was an accomplished fact. The small farmer of yesteryear accepted his less fortunate lot.

The thought that naturally crowds to the fore as one pages through the literature on the subject is, "Will the same process be repeated in our own country? Can nothing be done to stop it?" The questions suggest the idea of solutions, remedies. But perhaps it is more logical to turn first to the matter of causes.

### **A Variety of Causes**

Many different factors have contributed to the creation of large estates or latifundia. Sheep raising, as has been shown, was one important factor in the case of England. But once the development of large holdings was under way, other factors entered in, playing increasingly important roles. Farming became more and more a capitalistic enterprise. Large farm owners became a particularly honored class. Increasing numbers sought the distinction that went with membership in this "landed gentry." In earlier periods of history and in other lands, it was growing military power and political corruption that figured time and again in driving the small holders to the wall and in concentrating the lands in the hands of the few. In the Rome that followed the Punic Wars the development of latifundia was along the following lines: Laws which had in the past protected the peasants lost their force. This gave the Roman nobility, who were excluded from trade and commerce and were looking for other means of investment, the opportunity to build latifundia quite unhampered by any legal restrictions. This they did as ordinary capitalistic enterprises. These enabled them to make use of their booty money and of the slaves captured in Roman campaigns. Behind the entire venture was the age-old profit motive, the drive for accumulating property, the greed for wealth.

Perhaps in most instances the ultimate cause of the development of latifundia has been the fact that the wealthy

found land a handy, and often a chief, medium of investment. With the development of the large industrial enterprises of modern times, this cause has no longer been so important. It is not at all unlikely that in the case of the United States, land speculation would undoubtedly have been much worse, and land would likely have become much more centralized in spite of all legislation to promote the growth of family-sized farms, had it not been for the fact that the country's rapidly growing industrial enterprises usually served as excellent media for the investment of surplus funds. Today, however, that situation has changed somewhat for the United States. Normal industrial enterprises have slowed down in the city. Over the decade of the '30's vast sums of money, much of it drained in various ways from the countryside, lay idle in the city. Eyes turned searchingly toward the countryside for possible media of investment. However, the situation there was not particularly promising either to the investors. Land had lost greatly in value. Still, some may have harbored the hope that it might "come back," as it had so often done in the past. Then there was also a new development. It became quite the thing to own a country estate as a means of diversion. This idea of "Fifth Avenue to the farm" speedily gained momentum.

Still other causes played a part. But there is one very special factor in the case of the recent American change that is quite outstanding. It is the machine, power-driven farm machinery of various kinds. It deserves a little more specific attention. Some types of machines, notably the tractor, are already extensively in use. At the present time there is a growing use of such offspring of man's inventiveness as corn-pickers, pick-up hay balers, side-delivery rakes and mechanical hoists. Then too one hears increasingly of the cotton picker for the harvesting of the great Southern crop. Insofar as the giant wheat "combine" is concerned, it is no longer a novelty in the wide open spaces of the Wheat Belt. Nor are there any signs of abatement. When the machine manufacturer finds it difficult to fit his machine to the crop, he tries the other way

round; he seeks to make the crop fit the machine. Just recently there has appeared on the scene the rubber-tired tractor. This has furthered still more the cultivation of large holdings by individual operators or corporate groups. Since these rubber-tired power machines can move rapidly from place to place, it is no longer essential that farm land be contiguous. The operator can cultivate a number of farms, all removed quite a distance from each other.

More than likely the reason that originally leads many a farmer to turn to machinery is that it lessens work for the farm family and reduces dependence on outside help. But after the farmer has the machinery he soon comes to realize that, if it is not to be a great expense to him, it must be kept at work quite steadily. He comes to appreciate the fact that the more it is used, the less the per acre or per bushel cost of power. His logical conclusion is, at any rate from the viewpoint of economic efficiency, to take over additional land if he can do so.

It might surprise many to learn how far mechanization has already gone in American agriculture. The machine has made considerable inroads into the Wheat Belt, the Corn Belt, and the Cotton Belt. Some idea of its extent can be obtained from the number of dollars it costs the farmer. Over the past 25 years, according to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the increased use of farm machinery has added 600 million dollars to the annual cost of farming. Meanwhile the cost of farm help has decreased, though not in proportion to the increase in cost of machinery. In 1910, for example, 5.63 per cent of the United States cash farm income went to machinery and 9.1 per cent to farm wages; in 1939, 21.01 per cent went to machinery and 7.13 per cent went to wages. This must not be interpreted to mean, however, that the farmers who went in for mechanization have the worst income position. The fact is, the large-scale mechanized farms are the "economically efficient" ones. Their owners have improved their position at the expense of the small-scale farmer, the homesteader. The latter is finding it increasingly difficult to do business on even terms

with his big commercialized competitor. Many more homesteads seem destined to vanish.

Insofar as individual states are concerned, mechanization and large-scale commercialization have gone further in California than in any other commonwealth. In 1938, for example, 38 corporations engaged in farming in that state reported holdings of 1,866,148 acres, 991,009 acres of which was within the state itself. Besides farming, these corporations also engaged in other activities, such as canning, shipping, and sugar refining. In 1937, according to the Bureau of Internal Revenue, 293 corporations engaged in farming in California enjoyed an aggregate sales' income of \$72,245,650, or an average of nearly a quarter of a million dollars each. According to Dr. Paul S. Taylor of the University of California, 2,892 large-scale industrialized farms "dominate production" in the Golden State. These, although they constitute but 2.1 per cent of the farms of California, produced in terms of value, 28.5 per cent of the agricultural produce of all kinds. Still another striking figure is the one that shows that, although California produced less than two per cent of the nation's cotton crop, it had 30 per cent of all large-scale cotton farms of the country.

Incidentally, it is on the industrialized farms of California, with their hiring and firing of large numbers of workers, with their labor contractors, their foremen and armed guards that one finds, mainly if not exclusively, the strife and brutality and violations of civil liberties that have come to the attention of the American public. These are not the spawn of the independent family-sized farm so universally characteristic of the America of the past. They are the result of "corporation farming." It hardly augurs well, therefore, for the future of the rural people of America that such giant farms promise to continue, and even to increase in size and number. And there is much evidence that the latter will be the case, that they will continue to grow and expand. Mechanization is increasing consistently in old fields and moving progressively into new ones. The State of Florida is an example of rapid de-

velopment. Speaking before the Tolan Committee, John Beacher, Farm Security Administration supervisor, stated: "Here in Florida exists the most propitious conditions for the development of a large-scale industrialized agriculture, and here such a form of agriculture is fast developing. Here we find tractors and gang plows and crop dusting by airplane, thousands of intensively cultivated acres under the ownership of a single individual, tens of thousands under that of a corporation." In the Everglades large-scale commercial truck farming is being developed, and it is said that the possibilities for expansion are very far-reaching. The small truck farmer nearby, and even the one at a distance, is already feeling the result of this development. He finds it impossible to compete effectively with the larger farms. He is being submerged. Who knows how long it will be before he vanishes, leaving the field entirely to agricultural "big business"?

Vast changes also seem to lie ahead in the Cotton Kingdom. A large part of the cotton crop is already produced west of the Mississippi River, notably in Texas and Oklahoma. It is easily conceivable that practically all of that crop will eventually be raised in that area and in certain select areas of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Most of the land west of the Delta is adapted to both cotton culture and the use of the machine. This gives the territory a great advantage over the "Old South" where for the most part, the topography forbids the use of the machine. This puts the whole latter region, so long dependent on cotton culture, at a grave disadvantage. What would happen to it should the machine come into its own in the cotton fields of the West, is not pleasant to contemplate.

### **Proposed Solutions**

But is there nothing on the horizon that gives promise of stopping this concentration of land, this progressive growth of American latifundia? Can nothing be done to correct the situation or to keep it from growing worse?



It can be said, in answer to these questions, that recommendations that have been made, notably those before the Tolman committee, contain some possibilities. These recommendations are the following:

- (1) Limit AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration) benefits to family-sized economic units.
- (2) Enact a graduated land tax.
- (3) Raise agricultural prices.
- (4) Refinance and scale down the farm mortgage debt.
- (5) Enlarge the program of the FSA (Farm Security Administration).
- (6) Increase the tenant purchase program.
- (7) Lengthen the term of tenant leases.
- (8) Include migratory families in social legislation.
- (9) Establish a farm placement service.

What promise do these recommendations give? Are there any other possibilities?

Limiting AAA benefit payments to family-sized economic units would undoubtedly have some value. There is no question that quite a few farmers, mostly tenants, are being forced off the land by owners and large operators because the latter have discovered that they can operate large units, with a maximum of power and minimum of labor, practically without risk because of these benefit payments. Should their crop, for example, prove a failure, the AAA payments or crop insurance covers taxes, rent, and operating costs. On the other hand, if there is a bountiful crop, profits, counting in the benefit payments, are large. This is an inducement to take on more land. It is an unforeseen and unfortunate result of the Triple-A program. The soil conservation program was meant to protect the family-sized farm. It has as a matter of fact worked in some measure in the opposite direction. It is effectively encouraging the development of large acreages, and

in doing so is hurting the small farm. Unless a change is made the situation will continue on; the movement will even gain momentum.

Incidentally, some small renters are being deprived of their benefit payments. This is being done through the requirement of a bonus on renting. Farms for rent are scarce, and owners are taking advantage of the fact by requiring share tenants to pay, in addition to the usual share of the crop, cash rent on such items as crib space, the use of pasture and of buildings. In effect this is really a demand on the ready cash which the tenant gets through his AAA payments.

Enacting a graduated land tax should help by limiting the amount of land an individual could afford to hold. It would work out in the following manner: On a certain minimum number of acres the same proportionate tax would be charged to all, but on each additional number of acres the tax would be progressively advanced until in the higher brackets it would make it impossible to hold land without a loss.

The raising of agricultural prices is of course of importance. Disparity between industrial and agricultural prices has led to the loss of great numbers of small farms. To be sure, the better prices would also go to the large operator, thus still leaving the small farmers at a considerable disadvantage in competing with the larger ones. Incidentally it is well to add that in the long run low agricultural prices also hurt industry. When farm income is low farm people cannot buy a reasonable amount of city wares. Industry's home market is poor.

Scaling down farm mortgage debts would also provide some help. Many are still losing their farms because of their inability to meet interest and principal payments.

The fifth and sixth recommendations, calling for an extension of the Farm Security Administration program through provision for more rehabilitation or other small loans, and more tenant land purchase loans, would add some further help. So far the Farm Security Administration has had suffi-

cient funds put at its disposal annually to do some excellent experimenting, but not sufficient to make any real dent in the problem of the underprivileged farm groups with which it is dealing. Much larger appropriations are necessary for it under the Farm Tenant Act. Several years ago the writer suggested an appropriation of one billion dollars in order to make possible a real attack upon the tenancy problem and its multiple ramifications. To some that seemed a huge sum even for so fundamentally serious a problem. Yet, how generous Uncle Sam can at times be with his billions.

The other recommendations also have some value. To state them again: Lengthen the term of tenant leases; include migratory families in social legislation; establish a farm placement service. Helpful as these may be, either individually or in unison, it must be recognized that they give but little promise of remedying the present inequality of competition between the small family-sized farm and the large mechanized units. In no sense do they offer a fundamental solution.

But there is on the horizon a means that, if really energetically put to use, does give promise of correcting that inequality, namely, the co-operative ownership and use of machinery by small groups of farmers. How such a co-operative undertaking might work out is well shown by an example given by the Rev. Brian Kirn, O.F.M., in a thesis written at the Catholic University of America. The case in point, made possible by a loan from the Farm Security Administration to 25 Colorado farmers, is described by him as follows:

As all grain farmers they needed harvesting machinery. Such machinery must be at hand when the grain is ripe, for long delays in harvesting while waiting for someone to move in with machinery that can be rented may cause great losses in the crop. These farmers could not afford to buy machinery separately. Their farms were too small for that. They got together, however, and discussed their problems with each other. They figured out how many acres of grain they would have to harvest and how many acres could be

harvested conveniently with one combine during the season. They found that a tractor could be used for a good many operations on the individual farms during the year, so that it would be idle only a relatively short period of time. The cost of the harvesting equipment that they needed amounted to \$3,250 which would come to an investment of only \$130 apiece. They decided that it would pay them to form a co-operative and get this equipment. The Farm Security Administration made a loan of \$130 to each of the members and with this money the co-op bought a rubber-tired tractor, a thresher, a trailer, and a shelter for the machinery.

Since all the members have money invested in such a co-operative enterprise it can well be expected that all will do their part to make it a success. And, when successful, it enables them to compete on some terms of equality with the large operators. Such co-operative buying and use of machinery should be definitely stimulated. It should do much to keep farms from vanishing as have so many independent small farms. Incidentally, co-operative buying of machinery, as well as of stock and a considerable variety of other things, by farmers, is not only common but quite the accepted thing in a number of European countries. It fosters neighborliness and mutual helpfulness.

In perhaps a more limited way a number of related farm families could also buy machinery together and thereby enjoy the advantage it gives. Indeed, there has been some development along this line. In fact, there is also some evidence of a further development, the farming of one tract of land by several closely related families. This so-called "great family" system was exceedingly common in history, and might well again prove its worth as a means of combating the evil of land concentration by a limited number of large holders.

It would seem that the possibility of developing smaller and less costly machinery should also be worthy of mention and consideration. If Americans really have the ingenuity they are

credited with, this should not be out of the question. And such machinery should at least make competition with the large-scale operation noticeably less difficult.

Worthy of consideration too might well be the idea of farm families in a neighborhood combining to bring pressure to bear on any who would try to start large-scale farms in their territory at the expense of the small operators. They would be on pretty substantial ground in doing this. It will be remembered that St. Thomas More referred to those who would grab up everything for themselves as "insatiable cormorants, the very plague of their native country." For that matter even Holy Writ pronounced a woe on those who would "lay field to field." Why then should American farmers hesitate to let an insatiable American cormorant know when they think he already has what the western farmer calls—I think respectfully—"a God's plenty?" The effectiveness of such an approach to the problem might prove surprising.

Taken together, the foregoing proposed remedies could undoubtedly do much to solve our ominous problem of vanishing homesteads, if they were really energetically carried over into action. That they should be carried into action, there can be no question. The welfare of the United States and its people calls for more, and not for fewer farm families. But when one raises the question as to whether the recommendations will be put effectively into operation, one cannot answer with the same assurance. The writer does not claim the "I predict" ability of the modern radio commentator, but he will venture the view that our farmsteads will continue to vanish, even as they did in England, and perhaps even much more rapidly. The reasons for this view are many. But they sum up to this: Economic efficiency has always been rated higher in the United States than human welfare, and is still so rated today. Down in his heart he may have a faint hope that this statement may prove a challenge, and even lead to action that will prove it unfounded. But he repeats, the hope is a faint one.



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## N. C. W. C. DISCUSSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION (pp. 3-5)

1. What does the author mean by the term "Vanishing Homesteads"?
2. Give examples of the combining of small farms into larger units.
3. Are there examples in your neighborhood? What are the social results?

### II. THE U. S. LAND ACT (pp. 5-9)

1. Describe the main U. S. Land Act.
2. What was the general policy behind these Acts?
3. Did they work out satisfactorily?
4. Were they copied from other countries?

Suggested Paper: The Value of the Farm Family in the Building of America.

### III. A CHANGED PICTURE (pp. 9-13)

1. Since when have our farms been growing in size?
2. What are some of the main findings of the Tolan Committee regarding migrancy in the U. S.?
3. State the main facts regarding size of farms in the U. S. according to the 1940 census.
4. What are the future prospects of farm laborers in the U. S.?

Suggested Paper: Review of *Our Rural Proletariat*, Schmiedeler, Paulist Press.

### IV. THE EXAMPLE OF ENGLAND (pp. 13-18)

1. Read and discuss Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*.
2. What were major causes for the growth of latifundia in England?
3. What were the results of the growth?
4. Name outstanding Catholic leaders who fought against the growth of latifundia in England.
5. What does Pope Leo XIII say in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* about land ownership?
6. What does Pius XI say in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* about agricultural workers?

## V. VARIETY OF CAUSES (pp. 18-22)

1. Describe the main causes of our vanishing homesteads.
2. Give facts on the extent to which machinery is being used on American farms.
3. Why do machines tend toward the development of large farms?
4. Tell about the growth of corporation farming in California. In Florida.

Suggested Paper: Review of "From 'Free Soil' to Latifundia." *Social Justice Review*, St. Louis, 1941.

## VI. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS (pp. 22-27)

1. Name the nine solutions that have been suggested by the Tolan Committee for halting the growth of American latifundia.
2. Evaluate the proposed solutions.
3. Discuss co-operative buying of machinery and the development of less costly machinery as solutions.
4. Discuss the effectiveness of pressure of public opinion in preventing growth of large scale farms.
5. Does human welfare mean less than economic efficiency in your community? In the country? Why?

Suggested Paper: Review and Discussion of Chapters VIII and XII in *Co-operation: A Christian Mode of Industry*. Schmiedeler. Catholic Literary Guild, Ozone Park. 1941.

## Catholic Action for Social Justice \*

**H**OW shall we know well the right moral principles and spread them?

We shall all be unified in our religious program and our work under the Bishops (48).

We shall join a Catholic lay organization working with and under the Church (31).

We shall get it to start, or we shall join, a program of training (31).

We shall take part in study clubs and industrial conferences and the like (8).

We shall spread books, newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets (8).

We shall get the help of a priest trained in this matter (46).

We shall start work among youth (47).

We shall attend lay retreats (47).

We shall be apostles to our own associates—workers to workers, employers to employers, and so on (46).

We shall ground all our ideas in the Encyclicals of the Popes (48).

We shall take on the social charity of brotherhood in God and in Christ (44).

We shall lead good Catholic lives (44).

We shall know the crisis facing us which has, with the grace of God put the destiny of mankind in our hands (47).

We shall have hope, because the Christian spirit of the people is strong, ignorance and environment can be overcome, and even the most abandoned have in them the sparks of "a natural Christian soul" (45); and because already much has been done to make known and apply the social teaching of the Church (7-13; 45-6).

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\* Numbers refer to page numbers of Pope Pius XI's Encyclical, "Reconstructing the Social Order" (N. C. W. C. edition).

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