Plunkett Foundation still follows founder’s vision of co-ops as force for sustainable rural development

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“Golly George, that’s it! I’ll megaphone it to the world!”
These were the words of President Theodore Roosevelt when he read Sir Horace Plunkett’s plans for sustainable rural development in the United States and beyond.

Anglo-Irishman Plunkett, the pioneer of farmer cooperatives in Ireland, spent 10 years ranching in Wyoming when he was a young man. This period of his life influenced his thoughts and actions about the cause to which he dedicated the majority of his life: helping rural people to believe in what they can achieve by working together.

In Wyoming, Sir Horace learned the importance of enterprise and the value of self-help efforts. He also learned that by coming together to tackle common issues, farming and rural communities can be places where people can live and work — now and in the future.

Sir Horace began looking at cooperation after seeing the impact of the industrial revolution on rural areas. At this time, rural people were beginning to leave their communities to seek employment and the hope of a better life in cities.

He saw that there were two choices for rural communities. They could either let the full impact of the industrial revolution sweep over rural communities or, as he advocated, rural people and communities could come together and use cooperative enterprises to provide economic and social development in their communities.

Much of Sir Horace’s work at this time was focused on establishing successful cooperative creameries in Ireland.

The Plunkett Foundation, founded by Sir Horace in 1919 to implement his vision internationally, is celebrating 90 years of helping rural communities to believe in what they can achieve together. It believes that Sir Horace’s blueprint

Co-op members help harvest crops at one of the Stroud Community Agriculture farms. It is one of the growing number of Community Supported Agriculture projects in the United Kingdom. Photos courtesy the Soil Association.
for sustainable rural development is even more relevant today.

**Plunkett’s core values**

Plunkett believed in three core values which influenced his life’s work. These are:

- Economic solutions create social change;
- These solutions enrich rural life;
- Self-help is the most effective way of achieving goals.

These values came together in the phrase Sir Horace is best known for: “Better farming, better business, better living.”

By “better farming,” he meant rural businesses using the best technology and methods available. By “better business,” Sir Horace was referring to cooperative business, which he strongly believed to be the best business model. Lastly, “better living,” relates to Sir Horace seeing a need for an increase in the standards of living in rural communities. This was crucial, because he believed that economic improvements must lead to social improvements. No rural cooperative should forget its community roots or it will likely fail as a business, he stressed.

For the past 90 years, the Plunkett Foundation has been dedicated to raising awareness worldwide of cooperation and its potential for helping farmers and rural communities to help themselves.

In the early years of the Plunkett Foundation, a conference was held in London which brought together those involved in farmer cooperatives from across the world. At this event, it was agreed that there was a need to collate, analyse and distribute information related to farmer cooperatives internationally. On this same day, it was proposed that the Plunkett Foundation become a clearinghouse on information relating to farmer cooperatives.

This role — as a center for ideas and information — is still a core aim of the Plunkett Foundation, which it accomplishes through sharing and receiving information worldwide.

**Taking control with co-ops**

The common challenges facing rural communities across the world are heightened by greater distances, a more dispersed population and lack of access to employment and services. Through cooperation, Sir Horace believed that farming and rural communities can take control and provide sustained economic and social development.

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**Consumers, farmers share risks and rewards of organic farm**

Stroud Community Agriculture (SCA) is a cooperative that is pursuing a new model for sustainable farming in England. It builds on cooperation and mutual support so that the risks and rewards of farming are shared between the farmers and consumers.

SCA is a community supported agriculture (CSA) effort, but with a twist on the most common CSA model found in America. In the case of SCA, the consumer-members actually own the co-op and hire farmers to run the farm for them, although members are encouraged to do volunteer work on the farm.

Consumers who join the co-op commit themselves to supporting the farm and providing a fair income for the farmers. Farmers can then develop the health and fertility of the farm, its wildlife and the environment.

The farm consists of two plots, each covering about 23 acres in the beautiful countryside of Gloucestershire (home to Prince Charles and Princess Anne) about 100 miles west of London. Two full-time farmers grow organic vegetables and raise the co-op’s pigs, cows and sheep; there are also a part-time farmer and an apprentice. Long-term plans envision starting a dairy herd, raising chickens/eggs and growing various fruits, as well as doing more food processing.
Increasingly, farming and rural communities are developing innovative ways of addressing the challenges they face. For instance, in the United Kingdom, there are now 200 rural communities that have set up cooperatives to own and run a general store — often the last general store in the community.

There are also examples of community-owned cafes, post offices and even swimming pools. Rural communities are also increasingly using cooperative enterprise approaches for local food production and acquiring supplies. More recently, co-op approaches are being used to address health needs. A growing number of farmers have also set up cooperatively run farmers’ markets.

These are all examples of rural communities and farmers using cooperation to take control.

Today, the Plunkett Foundation is involved in a wide range of activities with the aim of promoting and supporting cooperative enterprise in rural communities worldwide. Sir Horace believed that his work needed the twin approach of education and cooperation.

By education, he was referring to raising the awareness of the cooperative potential to farmers and rural communities, sharing information and best practices and creating an environment where rural cooperative enterprises can thrive. Central to the education role is giving rural communities the belief of what is possible through cooperation.

By cooperation, Sir Horace was referring to direct support to help rural cooperatives become established, develop and prosper. These two twin pillars still form the basis of the Plunkett Foundation’s work.

**Couchman to lead Foundation**

In April, the Plunkett Foundation appointed Peter Couchman as its new chief executive. For the previous 25

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More than 200 rural communities in the United Kingdom have established cooperative general stores. Cooperatives that forget their community roots will likely fail, Horace Plunkett believed.

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SCA is managed by an elected “core group” of volunteers who meet once a month. Meetings of the whole membership are held to discuss the direction of the farm. Decisions regarding purely farming issues are delegated to the farmers.

Members are provided with produce year around. Seasonal gaps in production are covered via purchases of organic vegetables from other farms, using local suppliers wherever possible (and never purchased from outside Europe).

Co-op members pay a monthly fee of 35 pounds per share (about $52) to receive produce and meat (pork and beef). All the produce from the farm is shared between the supporting consumers, or (if there is a surplus) is sold locally.

**Begins with only a vision**

The co-op grew out of a strong interest in finding a source of locally produced, organic food. “We began with no land, no farm, no money and no members,” says Jade Bashford, one of the co-op founders. “All we had was a vision.”

Starting with a one-acre plot in Brookthorpe in 2002, the farm later expanded to 23 acres near Hawkwood College on the outskirts of Stroud, then expanded again with an additional 24 acres leased near Brookthorpe.

The expansion of the farm meant that more members were needed to ensure that the project remained viable. A membership drive was launched, supported by a grant from the National Lottery Seed Program’s “Growing Home” initiative.

The grant paid the salary for a marketing person who could actively promote membership to a wider circle and produce a membership brochure. The money also helped pay for some much-
years, Couchman has worked in the consumer cooperative sector and has also been involved in a wide range of activities that have promoted cooperation worldwide.

“I believe that the Plunkett Foundation’s approach is the model for farming and rural communities worldwide,” says Couchman. “Rural people have the answers — our role is to help them to believe in what they can achieve together.”

From 1922 to 2001, the Plunkett Foundation published the World of Cooperative Enterprise, a leading publication on cooperation. This publication included contributions from cooperative thinkers and practitioners from across the world.

As part of the 90th anniversary celebration, the Plunkett Foundation will be re-launching the publication in a modern form. The reason, as Couchman says, is that “Good ideas come from farming and rural communities across the world. By spreading new ideas, fresh thinking and different approaches, all of those involved in cooperatives across the world have the opportunity to cement cooperative enterprise as the business model for farming and rural communities.”

During 2009, the Plunkett Foundation will be looking to re-establish links with organizations it has worked with throughout its history. It is also keen to hear from organizations that share its values and those who would like to know more.

For more information, visit the Plunkett Foundation’s website at: www.plunkett.co.uk.

needed equipment.
This effort proved very successful, and in less than a year membership had risen to 100, with a waiting list that soon rose to 30 families. By autumn 2007, membership had expanded to 150. Today, membership is approaching 200, which the core group has decided is the optimal size for the farm.

The farm follows a biodynamic philosophy (a holistic method of organic farming that emphasizes balancing the interrelationships of soil, plants and animals as a closed, self-nourishing system). By keeping a herd of cattle, the co-op is able to maintain soil fertility and ensure that good crops of vegetables are grown without relying on external sources of manure and compost. The herd is maintained for most of the year on the farm’s own grass and hay.

In order to sell surplus produce and meat on the organic food market, the farm has attained Demeter certification for biodynamic produce (which includes full organic status).

Trip to grocery store can’t compare
Members have the option of picking up their produce directly from the farm or from a local pick-up point.

Jade Bashford picks up her produce every Tuesday, using scales there to weigh the posted, per-share allotment of the week’s harvest. “It’s really a treat to come here,” she says of her trips to the farm, which she greatly prefers to the “chore” of going to the grocery store.

But the co-op is more than just a source of organic produce and meat. It sponsors social events to mark the turning of the agricultural year and build a sense of community among the members.

“All members of the cooperative can choose to get involved with the life of the farm and join specific working groups,” says co-op member Molly Scott Cato.

Activity revolves around the farm with picnics, shared meals, bonfires, night-time walks, seasonal festivals and children’s activities.

Members do not have to contribute work on the farm, although many do, and regular community workdays are scheduled.

As for the future, “We want to encourage the development of more CSAs in our area to feed more local people, and also across the world” says Cato. “We will also look to extend the range of produce we offer.”

The core principles of Stroud Community Agriculture

• To support organic and biodynamic agriculture;
• To pioneer a new economic model based on mutual benefit and shared risk and ensure that the farmers have a decent livelihood;
• To be fully inclusive. Low income shall not exclude anyone;
• To encourage practical involvement on all levels;
• To be transparent in all our affairs. To make decisions on the basis of consensus wherever possible. To strive towards social justice;
• To offer opportunities for learning, therapy and re-connecting with the life of the earth;
• To network with others to promote community supported agriculture to other communities and farms and share our learning (both economic and farming);
• To encourage members, in cooperation with the farmers, to use the farm for their individual and social activities and celebrations;
• To develop a sense of community around the farm;
• To work cooperatively with other enterprises that share our principles.