

Rural America in Transition

A HUNDRED years ago a farm community and the small towns serving it were nearly self-sufficient. Most people farmed, and in one way or another farming supported the entire community. Now three of every five persons in rural areas do not live on farms, and 24 percent of our 3.7 million farms are operated by individuals who depend almost entirely on off-farm work or other income for their living. The trend to larger farms and increasing competition among commercial farmers for least-cost production have put severe pressures on the small farm. Thousands of farmers have turned to off-farm work since the Second World War. They have moved to cities if they could not find jobs near home.

In the face of these changes, which have produced difficult personal problems for thousands of farmers and their families forced to change their way of life, rural leaders are turning to area-wide development to maintain the economic well-being of their communities. This approach includes not only farm enlargement and improvement but also encouragement to industrial and other enterprises that add payrolls to the community. Dynamic programs having an area-wide impact also have been developed by Federal and State agencies concerned with farming problems and rural needs. New forms of extension service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, rural electrification, establishment of conservation districts, the small watershed program, farm security and credit programs, and Rural Areas Development are a few of them. The term "rural development" has gained increased acceptance as a method by which Government agencies and private groups and individuals can cooperate better to promote the economic development of entire rural areas.

The program started on a pilot or demonstration basis in a few counties in 1956. The Department of Agriculture in 1961 inaugurated a national Rural Areas Development Program. The Secretary of Agriculture established National and State boards and committees to help get work started in the localities as fast as their leaders wanted to move forward. The Secretary also ordered more emphasis on the programs of the Department that promote growth and expansion in rural America. The Rural Areas Development Program encourages rural and town leaders to take actions that will help their areas adjust to the farm revolution. The desires of local people to take the lead in their community's progress and growth are rec-

ognized: The program has the help of Federal and State agencies, but it belongs to local people.

An example is the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Once isolated by the Mackinac Straits, where Lakes Michigan and Huron come together, the 15-county Upper Peninsula has long been a supplier of raw materials for the industrial cities of the Midwest. The area is now joined to mainland Michigan by a 5-mile bridge, opened in 1957. Mining, lumbering, farming, and tourism are the principal industries. A tourist who drives the entire 300-mile length of the area will pass through only two towns of more than 5 thousand population. The problems of the Upper Peninsula are traditionally those of an economy that produces raw material for manufacture somewhere else. With prices of raw materials as the barometer, the area's economy is one of boom or bust. Most of the 7,500 farms on the Peninsula are so small they do not produce an adequate living for a family. As in other rural areas, chambers of commerce in the small towns, farm leaders, and county agents for a long time tried to meet and solve these serious economic problems. School districts were consolidated to provide better education. Local roads were improved. Farmers were encouraged to expand, try new crops, and market more efficiently. Much emphasis was put on bringing in new industry and promoting tourism.

The whole drive for betterment was given new impetus and direction in 1956 by Michigan State University, working with the Department of Agriculture and other Federal and State agencies. The entire Upper Peninsula was designated as a rural development area. Most of the 15 counties surveyed their resources, such as timber, farmland, water, minerals, manpower, and capital available for expansion. Long-range development plans were prepared. To meet the changing educational needs of local communities, the University merged its Agricultural Extension Service and Continuing Education Departments into one field service program for the area. Its purpose is to help communities improve farming and marketing, gain more jobs, and modernize local facilities, such as schools and county governments. Since the start of the work, more than 1,500 businessmen, farmers, housewives, high school students, and professional people have helped gather and analyze facts about their communities. One such study produced facts and figures that resulted in county-wide approval of a consolidated high school costing 3.5 million dollars. Because tourism brings in 150 million dollars a year to the Upper Peninsula, nearly a thousand persons received training in ways to make the tourists' stay pleasant. Two counties sponsored food service clinics. Restaurant operators started an association to improve their services. County agents, after a course given by resort specialists in the University, helped motel and hotel operators with their business problems.

An Upper Peninsula Industry Development Conference is conducted each year to promote industry. Businessmen, county officials, members of chambers of commerce, and county agents meet to plan programs to strengthen present industries and attract new ones. Enterprises processing potato products, canning vegetables, turning timber into pulp, and producing handicrafts for tourists have started operations in the past few years. Much time and effort have centered on finding solutions to the local farm problems. Industry and tourist development are helping by providing new markets and off-farm work for some farmers. Some families have been able to put together a unit efficient enough to compete in the modern farm market. The dairy industry has grown in size and become more efficient. New crops, such as cranberries, have been introduced as an experiment. Small plants to process fruits and vegetables have grown. Besides the usual crops, many farms in the Upper Peninsula produce timber. Six demonstration woodlots were established to show farmers how to grow high-value timber. Extension workers send reports on the timber market regularly to local farmers. Several small wood-producing industries provide markets and work. A cedar fencing plant employs 50 men.

In just a few years, leaders in the Upper Peninsula and the public employees assisting them have worked out a comprehensive program of resource development. The key to their success, here as elsewhere, is the realization that farm development and improvement often depend on lifting the level of opportunities throughout the community. The leaders know that as long as markets are few, communities isolated, capital scarce, and opportunities for off-farm work limited, most farm families will be forced into a pattern of low-income, subsistence-type farming or will be forced out of the area entirely.

The rural development approach is taking hold in many different ways and in many different areas. About 4,500 farming and nonfarm rural communities were taking part in 1962 in organized programs of community improvement in the Southern States alone. Projects included building meeting places and recreation areas and ways to increase farm production and local markets. According to one estimate, 9,700 privately financed development groups (chambers of commerce, industrial committees, and utilities) were active. Probably the majority operated in small towns serving broad rural areas. Most of the 1,760 rural electric and telephone systems have a policy of promoting area development. They serve 2,700 counties.

Federal programs have been developed to reinforce these local-initiative activities. Other programs have been modified to be of greater service. The Rural Areas Development Program has helped greatly to get projects started in rural communities and small towns, especially in areas of extreme low income. State and Depart-



ment workers provide technical help that enables local groups to begin and maintain the work. Other Federal agencies also supply services and aid. Loans for small business, urban renewal in small towns, land reclamation, stream improvement, highway construction, vocational training, and employment services are some. The President in May of 1961 signed the Area Redevelopment Act, designed to deal with the specific needs of areas hard hit by declines in mining, railroading, farming, and other basic industries. Loans for industrial building, loans and grants for public works, technical aid in establishing new industries, and retraining are major features. In 1962, 686 primarily rural counties, 143 "labor market areas," and 47 Indian reservations were eligible to participate.

The great urban complexes of the Nation apparently will continue to increase in size, numbers of people, and difficulty of administration. If so, it will become evident to planners and policymakers that decentralization, economically viable countryside towns, and Rural Areas Development must be promoted in the interest of the big city. Indeed, the average citizen, struggling daily with problems of commuting, suburban sprawl, and the social and other



A new road is constructed in Monroe County, Ohio, as part of a rural development program.

costs of poverty in the central city may feel that a major national policy to promote decentralization is long overdue. The Secretary of Agriculture in a report on rural development in 1960 said: "During the next 10 years the Nation will turn increasingly to rural areas and the towns serving them. For here will be found the resources, manpower, living and working space, and recreational facilities needed to support economic growth and maintain a stable, vigorous national life." Within the next few decades—certainly before another century has passed—a new economic and social unit may grow up to rival the city in our civilization: The town-countryside area. This would be a balanced group of large and small towns and rural residential areas, with commercial farms, processing plants, and industrial enterprises interspersed among them. The area would be united by good transportation, common economic interests, and eventually perhaps by a common local government. The majority of families in the area would not farm for a living, although many might reside on small farms by choice. The rural revolution of recent years has already taken many parts of the Nation far in this direction. *(Joseph C. Doherty)*