

**Introduction:
Two Essays on Country Life in 20th Century America**

***Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission
and the American Country Life Association***

***Teddy Roosevelt’s Silent Echo:
The Second Country Life Commission***

By Gene Wunderlich¹

Preface

By the time Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission (CLC) in August, 1908, an enormous immigration, supported by rapid developments in transportation and communication, had settled vast areas of North America’s farm and ranch land. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the end of the American frontier at a meeting of the American Historical Association. At the turn of the century, pioneer settlements on the heartland were into their second and third generation, and more remote corners of the nation were in final stages of occupation. Trends toward urbanization were already underway.

Within a couple of generations, the fruits of the 1862 enactment of Homestead, Land-Grant College, and Department of Agriculture legislation had been reflected in agricultural productivity and quality of rural life. The Hatch Act in 1887, by supporting agricultural experiments and education, further enhanced rural development. Farm settlement had risen above subsistence and was producing growing markets. Yet, many challenges remained in rural areas. Farmers, among others, were exploited by ruthless, often corrupt, industrial giants.

The agrarian uprising of the 1870s and 1880s pushed the fraternal Grange and a widespread cooperative movement toward the more militant Farmer’s Alliance. As the Alliance declined, its banner was taken up by the Farmer’s Educational and Cooperative Union. Freight rates, farm prices, and interest rates were economic issues that promoted the rise of populism and eventually reforms such as the Interstate Commerce Commission (1887), and the Sherman Anti-trust Act (1890). Roosevelt asserted that economic conditions of his time called for strong government control of trusts; he acquired a reputation as a “trust buster.” Meanwhile, industrial and commercial centers were attracting rural labor and talent.

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Wunderlich – Intro to two essays

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Cities were growing in ways that were not always uplifting. Impacts of massive immigration from Europe complicated the problems of rapid urban growth. Problems of urban crowding, crime, labor exploitation, and moral decay that stemmed partly from rural to urban migration supported a latent agrarian fundamentalism that underscored the need for enhancing the attractiveness of rural life and living.

Another significant public policy area in the Roosevelt era was conservation. The American Forestry Association was initiated by private citizens in 1875. John Muir inspired an interest in America's wilderness and natural resources. The establishment of Yellowstone Park in 1872, the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, Reclamation Act of 1902, and creation of the Forest Service under Gifford Pinchot in 1905 are few examples of an extensive, diverse land policy in America in the times leading up to the CLC. Indeed, national resource policy was the subject of the 1908 White House Conference on Conservation in May, followed by the June creation of the National Commission on Conservation chaired by Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot, who served also on the Country Life Commission, was influential in selection of its chairman, Liberty Hyde Bailey.

When the CLC was created, many of the post-Civil War issues of agricultural development, rural settlement, public lands, natural resources, and nation building had been addressed. CLC's report was presented in a new context of population, technology, and international relations. But the report was presented by a president leaving office to a Congress indifferent or hostile to its recommendations. No organization or institution had been left with the responsibility to carry out the recommendations. The commission's legacy was about to be buried.

However, under the leadership of one of the commission's members, Kenyon L. Butterfield, concerns of rural America were re-examined by a small group, largely educators. In 1917, they addressed the problems of rural life in the light of another social, technical, and political environment amidst the turmoil of World War I. In 1919, at a conference in Baltimore, MD, they created the American Country Life Association.

Generations succeeding the CLC were bridged by the ongoing American Country Life Association. Each generation faced a new set of problems—or old problems in a new setting with new challenges. Each year for over half a century, annual proceedings would report on changing themes, changing perspectives.

The two brief essays that follow describe: 1) the American Country Life Association's mission and legacy; and 2) a mid-century effort to create a new Country Life Commission. The essays are independent and can be read separately, but, in places, they cover some of the same ground with different emphases.