Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission and the American Country Life Association

Essay by Gene Wunderlich on the second Country Life Commission

By Gene Wunderlich[1]

Introduction

Until 1900, rural meant farming or ranching, and vice versa. As the 20th century opened, concerns about education, conservation, and quality of life began to intrude on strictly economic conditions and policies. Telephone, rural free delivery, and roads began to relieve rural isolation. Criticism of schools called for reform in standards and methods of education. Muir and Pinchot delivered the message of conservation to the then fully settled nation. Rebellion against railroads, the financial system, and agricultural markets enveloped both farm economy and rural living.

But rural to urban migration in the early 1900s began to shrink the role of rural in the overall economy. Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission of 1908-1909 marked a cleavage between the strictly commercial aspects of agriculture and the quality of life and resources in open country America. After World War I, the distinction of issues relating to country life and commercial agriculture continued to grow.

Two organizations portray the differences, and connections, between the business of farming and the condition of rural people and resources. Both the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and the American Country Life Association (ACLA) were formed in 1919-20. Both have a Cornell University connection. But there the similarities end. The AFBF was created as, and remains today, a bricks and mortar pyramid of economic interests in agricultural production and marketing. The ACLA was a loosely strung, collegial, gathering of expressive personages representing broad range of country life interests. The causes and concerns of ACLA members outlived the organization. AFBF lives on.

ACLA was a product of its times. Times changed, and the descendants of the extinct ACLA now support organic farming, push for conservation easements, and oppose large feedlots. How well are the rural disadvantaged, small farmers, environmental stewards, and defenders of open land and endangered species served by their agents? And for how long?

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The End of Frontier and Rise of Progressivism

To fully comprehend the ACLA lesson, we need its context in the Country Life Movement during the closing decades of the 19th century and the opening decades of the 20th century. Closing the frontier, developing railroads and roads, regulating trusts, and conserving public lands were but a few of the changes wrought in a progressive political environment, the time of Republican Teddy Roosevelt.

In 1876, the hundredth anniversary of the Americans' statement against British rule, the combined tribes of the northern plains made their statement of resistance to American rule at Little Big Horn. The Native Americans achieved a pyrrhic victory. In 1890, a year after the two Dakotas entered the Union, the massacre at Wounded Knee completed the ethnic cleansing of North America. In April, 1889, the first of the "runs" of white settlement in Oklahoma had heralded the occupation of lands previously reserved for Indians; in little more than a decade whites occupied all of their territory, and in 1907 Oklahoma became a state. Immigration, farming, and politics flourished in the region.

Meanwhile, in the East, a natural disaster had a profound influence not only on agriculture of the Ohio River region but on the economy of the Mid-Atlantic. In 1889, the heavy rains that caused the famed Johnstown flood also washed out the financially faltering Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal. The canal was never linked to the Ohio River, and Washington, D.C., on the Potomac River never became the intended major port of entry to the Atlantic seaboard. Canal repair was not feasible in the face of competition from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The C&O Canal's demise, and its replacement by the railroad, heralded the revolution in transportation.

Railroads drove transportation technology in the 19th century. The technology, developed early in the century, contributed substantially to the movement of goods and troops during the Civil War and altered agricultural markets. The 1880s saw massive growth in railroad construction, an average of over 7000 miles per year. By 1916, America had 254,000 miles of main track operated by 1400 companies. Developmental chaos gave way to standardization. Small startup companies gave way to massive consolidation along with concentration of power and wealth. When roads were built for cars and trucks, spurs and small volume lines disappeared. By 1960, the nation had 220,000 miles of track and 600 companies.

The creation of immense concentrations of wealth and power in the railroad empires of James Hill, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and others at the end of the 19th century parallels the wealth concentrations from the computer/information entrepreneurship of Bill Gates and Michael Dell at the end of the 20th century. Some of the anti-trust violations by Hill in Northern Securities have a familiar ring in today's world of information and communication industries.

By 1900, the mechanical, chemical, and biological foundations for the agricultural revolution had been laid. Productivity was increasing rapidly, and human labor was being replaced or enhanced by animal and especially coal-fired steam power. By 1890, most horse technology was in place, soon to be modified and then replaced in the first half of the 20th century by petroleum-fueled equipment. In the 1890s, power technology supplemented developments in fertilizer, insecticides, and medicines.

The period 1898-1919 was a time of economic prosperity, including agriculture. Sparked by the Ford Model T in 1908, the transportation revolution continued with nationwide road building. Trucking developed, and railroads adapted and consolidated. Radio and telephone began to connect people and enhance commerce. It was a time of great industrial growth, mergers and creation of giant trusts. It was a time for great fortunes, labor exploitation and reaction. Following the Spanish-American War, construction of Panama Canal, and World War I, the United States became a leading political power among nations.

Before the birth of the 20th century, agriculture became restive in the face of widespread social change. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, formed in 1862, achieved cabinet status in 1889. Research was expanded with the 1889 Hatch Act to extend the experiment station system. The Morrill Act in 1890 was created to develop an extension education system. The benign Granger organization made way for the populists and militant Farmers Union in 1902. Farmers were becoming a smaller part of the economy and society, and recognition of their shrinking position began to focus their attention. In 1880, farmers represented about half (49%) of the labor force. By 1920, farmers were only 27 %, and more than half of the nation's residents lived in urban areas. The United States went from debtor to creditor nation. Government became an important player in U.S. agriculture.

This period of technological, political, and social progressivism is easily identified with Teddy Roosevelt, reformer and Rough Rider. His thoughtful, activist leadership, while sometimes lacking in diplomacy, helped bring about major changes in public policy and outlook. A thumbnail view of his role in the transition to the 20th century explains how and why the CLC and later the ACLC were formed. George Mowry's *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (pp. ix, xii) describes the man and his times:

> The first dozen years of the twentieth century were important ones for the development of modern American society. They marked the birth and growth of the so-called progressive movement, a social quest which, in its broadest aspects, attempted to find solutions for the amazing number of domestic and foreign problems spawned by the great industrial, urban, and population changes of the late nineteenth century....

> We can see now that [Roosevelt] ushered in a ... fourfold revolution: in the relation of government to the economy; in the relations of the different elements of the economy—capital, labor, and agriculture—to each other; in the relation of the United States to the rest of the world; and in the social and economic thought about these and related matters. This revolution has gone on, not without challenge but without serious interruption, to our own time....

Roosevelt's progressivism uplifted and energized the Republican Party. William Howard Taft was Roosevelt's chosen successor, but for a variety of reasons, including the lead-footed conservatism of party leadership, Roosevelt had a falling out with Taft and his administration. Roosevelt bested Taft in the 1912 election, but split the Republican Party, enabling Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats to win the presidency.

The Country Life Commission

The short, vigorous term of the Country Life Commission (CLC) was, in many ways, the last hurrah of Teddy Roosevelt's administration and a culmination of progressive reforms that turned the century. Roosevelt formed the CLC in August, 1908, and its report was completed on January 23, 1909. The President presented the report to Congress on February 9, 1909.

Under the chairmanship of Liberty Hyde Bailey, CLC members (Kenyon L Butterfield, Gifford Pinchot, Henry Wallace, Walter Page, C.S. Barrett, and W.A. Beard) conducted separate studies in their specialties, held 30 hearings in all regions of the United States, sent 550,000 questionnaires to rural people, and solicited the results of schoolhouse meetings held on December 5 throughout the nation.

Completing the CLC's work in such a short time was a remarkable feat. Despite (or perhaps because of) the extremely short life of the commission, its report contained substantive recommendations. Those recommendations reflected many sought-after reforms of the period, and, with adaptation, would be appropriate today. From an extensive list of rural conditions in need of correction—schools, roads, parcel post, sanitation, farming technology—the commission noted three "movements" needed to bring about "permanent reconstruction" (Hearings 1958, p. 91):

- *Taking stock of country life.* There should be organized...under government leadership, a comprehensive plan for an exhaustive study or survey of all the conditions that surround the business of farming and the people who live in the country...
- *Nationalized extension work.* Each state college of agriculture should be empowered to organize as soon as practicable a complete department of

college extension, so managed as to reach every person on the land...

- *A campaign for rural progress.* We urge the holding of local, state, and even national conferences on rural progress, designed to unite the interests of education, organization, and religion into one forward movement for the rebuilding of country life....

The "movements" recommended by CLC, particularly the third, created the bases of the ACLA formed a decade later, after World War I. The most significant feature of the *Report of the Country Life Commission* and recommendations was the orientation toward education and provision of services to rural people, but without government intervention in the market for farm products. The strongest recommendations concerning the market were for the expansion of farm cooperatives. Roosevelt, in his transmittal to Congress, stated:

> The object of the Commission on Country Life therefore is not to help the farmer raise better crops but to call his attention to the opportunities for better business and better living on the farm... It is not within the sphere of any government to reorganize the farmers' business or reconstruct the social life of farming communities. It is, however, quite within its power to [call for] public attention to the needs and facts.

CLC's report helped clarify the dividing line between the romance of farming and country life and rank commercialism of production agriculture. In the last decades of the 19th century, urban life began to offer qualities of living not readily available to country people. Furthermore, a growing economy built on rapid developments in technology of transportation, communication, and energy created huge accumulations of wealth and wide disparities of income, wealth, and well being across social classes and regions of the country. Trust busting raised public consciousness of economic power, inequalities, and exploitation. Farmers, for example, felt exploited by railroads and financial establishments. In both quality of life and in economic well-being farmers were feeling disadvantaged, or so, at least, according to their spokespersons.

The cause of disadvantaged rural people was articulated with a powerful mixture of agricultural science and agrarian romance by a community of reformers, mainly educators and journalists. William Bowers (1974), in his study of the country life movement, 1900-20, compiled a list of 84 prominent reformers involved with rural affairs. Most had rural backgrounds. Only three were born in big cities, perhaps not too surprising given the population composition of the time. However, they held 70 bachelor's degrees, forty masters, and 25 doctors of philosophy, medicine, and science. Four had only a public school education, and two of them studied law and were members of the bar.

Bowers (1974) noted that the movement's leaders tended to be nonfarmers and city residents, well-educated and well off members of the middle class people who seemed different from farmers. They were largely concerned about declining agriculture and affirmed its virtuous values and institutions. Agents or representatives of the rural populace were predominantly connected with academic or clerical institutions. Their perspectives of the concerns of the rural disadvantaged very likely influenced their view of the nature of, and solutions to, the problems.

Context warrants mention of Roosevelt's concurrent commission on Conservation of Natural Resources, headed by Gifford Pinchot who was serving on CLC at the same time. In March, 1907, the Inland Water Commission had been created to study water transportation, but it also revealed broader problems in natural resource conservation. Following a White House Conservation Conference, Pinchot's commission undertook a systematic study of mineral, forest, water, and soil supplemented by local commissions in 41 states and reported in January 1909. As with the CLC, Congress failed to follow through. The National Conservation Association, a private body, was formed in 1909.

The Farm Bureau

AFBF's formation in 1920, helped to redefine the agrarian movement. It began an organizational separation between commercial agriculture and the remainder of a shrinking rural America, an increasingly urban, industrialized, and internationalized America. The Farm Bureau arose in part as an extension of reforms supported by the Grange, Farmer's Alliance, Farmers Union and other organizations. Among their concerns were education, which the AFBF molded to its particular purpose: to educate farmers in improved farm practices, better farm marketing, and successful farm business. Progress in farming included the adoption of methods developed in experiment stations and demonstrated by extension agents and model farmers.

One feature of AFBF's foundation is the extension work of Seaman Knapp with the "Farmers Cooperative Demonstration Work" of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1902. Knapp brought his long agricultural experience in New York, Iowa, and Louisiana to the problem of boll weevil depredations in Texas, emphasizing the importance of learning by doing. USDA developed cooperative agreements with state agricultural colleges to support demonstration work. By 1912, there were 858 agents in the South, and similar projects had begun in the North. W.J. Spillman of USDA's Office of Farm Management created the North's first regular county agricultural agent in Bedford County, PA.

The local farm organizations that gave rise to the county agents took a variety of forms and drew support from a variety of sources, often financial and commercial interests who saw their own success tied to the successful farmers. The term "farm bureau" began as the agricultural "bureau" of the Binghamton, NY, Chamber of Commerce and

spread as the county organizing unit, later "crystallized" into state organizations. The bureaus were tightly networked with the county agents, Land-Grant colleges, USDA, railroads, industry, and commerce. The Farm Bureau orientation from earliest beginnings has been toward the business of commercial farming.

In 1914, with the Smith-Lever Act, the extension model based on cooperative agreements between USDA and the states was expanded to a broad range of instruction, demonstration, and publication to benefit agriculture, home economics, and rural living. The Cooperative Extension Service, funded and supported at the local, state, and national levels, became a unique educational institution. It and similar agreements for research, education, marketing, and land use has provided a local presence of USDA nationwide throughout the 20th century. The ties of Extension and the Farm Bureau remain today.

The American Country Life Association
Congress failed to support the 1909 CLC recommendations, and the Department of Agriculture disposed of many of the commission's records. Nevertheless, the Country Life Movement continued; many reform measures did result in significant programs. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 substantially aided the development of the state extension in Land Grant colleges and the system of county agents for farm and home improvement. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 supported vocational training in agriculture and home economics. While much of the spiritual and cultural elevation sought by the reformers may have been bypassed in favor of the cold cash farm production and household management features of the educational program, improvements were made in farming and rural life.

The rural reformers were not satisfied with the state of things, and ACLA was formed at a national conference held in Baltimore, MD, April, 1919, a decade after the original CLC report was issued. Actually, much groundwork was done at a meeting in Washington, DC, in November, 1917. At the Baltimore conference, the organization was called the National Country Life Association; by the next meeting in November, 1919, it had become the ACLA.

World War I and vastly improved transportation and communication systems played important roles in the massive rural-urban migration. Soldiers, sailors, and their families became aware of a larger world beyond their rural communities. Even those who returned to farming were more keenly aware of national and world markets. An era of relative prosperity enabled farmers and rural people to invest in machines and methods to increase their farms' profitability and improve their homes and quality of living.

Migration, while enabling the expansion of the size and profitability of remaining

farms, created changes in rural business and community institutions. Rural churches, schools, and social organizations continued to be depopulated. Danbom (1995), in his insightful history of rural America, noted how urban-based intellectuals and other public figures were concerned about out migration (now called the brain drain) that might cause the countryside to become blighted, with severe national implications. The country life movement's leadership was concerned that rural life and communities were destined for steep decline unless major reforms were undertaken. Perhaps because most of this leadership was either university or church supported, the solutions were largely educationally or spiritually oriented.

Butterfield, who served on the CLC, was a prime mover in the first ACLA conference. He served as ACLA's president from its founding through 1928, its longest standing principal officer. Indeed, his leadership strongly influenced ACLA's mission and orientation. He was a highly regarded educator, president of Massachusetts Agricultural College, and acknowledged leader of the Country Life Movement. In his article in the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Gerald Vaughn extensively documents Butterfield's involvement in rural church affairs and his close relationship to Wilbert Anderson, his pastor at the First Congregational Church in Amherst. Throughout ACLA's entire life, national church denominations played an important role in the organization's policies and leadership. Joseph Ackerman, former Director of the Farm Foundation, for example, served as ACLA president in 1947 and 1948, and coauthored the book *Town and Country Churches and Family Farming.* ACLA's last president, Osgood Magnuson, was employed by the Lutheran Church.

Despite many of ACLA's moral and spiritual biases, its policies and programs were frequently directed to earthly economic and social problems, passionately if not always rationally. Conference themes included rural health and sanitation, recreation, government, planning and road building, education, and information. ACLA stressed social improvement and community development.

Two Generations of ACLA

ACLA lived as an organization for a bit over half a century, about two generations. Its first generation was an extension of the Country Life Movement launched during President Theodore Roosevelt's administration. Mission and missionaries were products of the CLC. The first generation oversaw a post-World War I transition from a rural to urban nation, economic prosperity, and the Depression. The second generation, following World War II, faced a new America with rural electrification; interstate highways; the GI Bill and educational democracy; Social Security's extension to farmers; civil rights; and increasingly rapid communications. Chemical enhancement of farm productivity yielded pollution and outrage by environmentalists.

In the decade after WWII, ACLA was struggling to find itself, as were the rural

communities and institutions it was seeking to serve. Plunging farm numbers and the reciprocal enlargement of farm size were the leading features of the seemingly constant restructuring of agriculture. Villages and their small businesses deferred to regional centers. Schools consolidated. Medical services concentrated in larger towns. Distances among farms and to processers were closed with improved roads and communication, but pockets of poverty and some social, if not geographic, isolation remained.

By the end of the 1950s, ACLA recognized the radical changes taking place in agriculture and the rural countryside. The association, perhaps sensing its impotence in the face of new problems, pulled together to lobby for a Second Country Life Commission. Hearings before the Subcommittee on Family Farms of the House Committee on Agriculture were held in July, 1958. Testimony was led by Roy Buck for ACLA. Other organizations supporting ACLA included the National Education Association, Grange, National Lutheran Church, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and University of Wisconsin Department of Sociology.

A letter from Ezra Benson, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, intoned some praise for ACLA's intentions but then repeated the Budget Bureau's lack of substantive support for a Second Commission. With the 1960 change in administration, ACLA reexamined its proposal for a second commission. Despite several efforts by ACLA to gain support in Congress and the administration between 1958 and 1965, the prospect of a Second Commission eventually faded and died. In the words of chairman of the ACLA committee for a Second Commission, *Prairie Farmer* editor Paul Johnson:

> [The] changing agricultural and rural community scene and the many different approaches to our rural problems have raised serious questions as to whether such a commission should now be established... My recommendation [is] that we ... study other approaches to the problem of making rural America more articulate and consider other types of strategy for assuring our town and country communities of their proper place in the nation's affairs.

John F. Kennedy's Administration arrived in a period of restive politics. Striking farm workers and the commodity withholding actions of the National Farm Organization drew from the more aggressive methods appearing as civil rights behavior in urban areas. National attention in the 1960s was directed to space flight, the Cold War and Cuban missile crises, riots by blacks, urban development, and the "War on Poverty." Rural life concerns were not ignored, but other problems received higher priority.

The People Left Behind

In the early 1960s, while prospects for a second CLC faded, ACLA undertook a self examination, revealing in its conference minutes the need for change in its purpose and

methods. At the 1965 meeting, a paper by G.B. Gunlogson envisioned rural life through the country town and began a search for ACLA's revival. In 1966, a task force was created. It announced that the "main objective...of the ACLA is to improve the form and performance of local government in order to provide adequate services to people living in the countryside."

Perhaps more important to ACLA as an organization was the task force's recognition of the need for "a small national office with a director..." and administrative resources. It saw the need for funds and recommended building "positive relationships between local and larger political units." ACLA began to see that the virtues of good country life required more than revelation. Organization, connections, staff, and money are needed to further the social, academic, and moral virtues of country life. By the mid 1960s ACLA had the glimmering of organizational success.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, however, not only were not opposed to ACLA, but were directed precisely to the problems concerning ACLA. The Rural Poverty Commission preempted ACLA's task group mission. ACLA's momentum was lost, and its focus on local government was reasserted at the national level. The Rural Poverty Commission saw rural problems as an extension of larger national issues. The preeminence of the commission report *The People Left Behind* (1967) is revealed by Jim Hildreth's extensive quotations from the report in his 1968 presidential address to ACLA.

Despite the prominence of *The People Left Behind*, its recommendations were not implemented despite passage of the 1972 Rural Development Act. Rural development is a curiously ambiguous inheritor of many of the intentions of the Country Life Movement addressed more through economic than cultural policies. ACLA as an organization was impacted by these ambiguities, as rural development energies became redirected toward other entities and programs.

ACLA's effort to redefine itself through creation of a second CLC failed from lack of USDA support and a diluted effort in Congress. The second and fatal reason for failure resulted from the ironic appearance of *The People Left Behind,* ironic because it echoed ACLA's platform of over 60 years. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War and its domestic fallout, moon and Mars landings, information and biological technology, environmentalism, and other concerns left ACLA with a baffling collection of new issues–issues taken up by other groups and organizations.

Critiquing ACLA

What can the story of ACLA teach us about organizations, particularly organizations furthering noble causes? Why do groups such as ACLA succeed or fail? At the philosophic or academic level, even the meaning of success or failure can be debated.

Here we mean simply survival or cohesion. Many of the good works championed by ACLA and its members came to pass. In contrast to a century ago, country living today is not *per se* disadvantageous. The quality of life in rural America, however, is no longer in surveillance by ACLA. Why?

In the face of countless possible answers, to say nothing of ways to ask the question, let us simply assemble an array of conditions that supported the ACLA organization for a time but then fell away over time. This is less rigorous, less formal, than, say, Mancur Olson's theory of searching for simplified propositions to understand change, but is a way of describing the career of the ACLA organization. Identifying the elements of the ACLA condition help to explain its demise. These elements include: *purpose(s)* clarity, consistency, and continuity; *organization structure*, commitment, accountability; *membership* size, composition, and motivation; and *instruments* of activity such as power, money, information, and endorsement.

ACLA faced no threatening opposition of purpose. After all, who could oppose better health, education, and communication for country people? Annual conferences were ACLA's primary activity; each year the organization would adopt a theme usually focusing on one or a few urgent concerns. These conferences gathered persons of like minds and positions, so the challenges of opposing views and proposals were often lacking. Indeed, the conferences tended to emphasize concerns and neglect programs or actions. With rare exception (such as the 1958 Second Country Life proposal) did the organization, as such, undertake an action. Leadership and management of ACLA was essentially volunteered by persons employed or involved with occupations and causes perhaps related to, but nonetheless located in, other organizations or agencies. Likewise, staff were affiliated with other organizations and either donated their time or were nominally reimbursed for expenses. Connections to other organizations were personal with little accountability to ACLA, which, in any event, had no instrument of power other than perhaps its largely unrecognized moral standing.

Compare ACLA with the Farm Bureau. AFBF grew from a national network of local bureaus, which, in turn, cultivated commercial and educational institutions. The county agent worked closely with farm bureaus and with farmers focusing primarily on farm production and marketing. The first president of AFBF was a farmer who had been a demonstration agent, among other things. Farm Bureau philosophy and organization faced vigorous competition from other farm organizations. Although off and on again supportive of many ancillary causes, including ACLA, the Farm Bureau remained focused on commercial agriculture, particularly larger and economically successful farm enterprises. In the AFBF, issues were defined sufficiently for differences to arise, stakes were evident, and power struggles could erupt; for example, a January, 2000, debate on farm concentration resulted in the replacement of the Farm Bureau's president. Such a struggle would have been unthinkable in ACLA.

The purposes of ACLA taken from bylaws and, more importantly, from papers and conference declarations conferences were often individually clear. Taken collectively, over time, however, the purposes were ethereally general and widely diverse. Roosevelt's stated purpose in creating his Country Life Commission was to provide a list of recommendations for legislation; each bill would tackle a specific problem such as health, education, and roads. ACLA, modeled after the CLC, then, had many missions requiring either an immense, departmentalized organization or a selection and focus on one or a few of the purposes.

In early years, ACLA may have kept some focus through the singular leadership of Butterfield. More likely, the organization never acquired the scale and resources needed to support a broad, diverse action program, largely because of its reliance on volunteers and its alliances with other organizations. Commitment, therefore, was a reflection of interests of other organizations whose business and concerns lay elsewhere. Support was modest, always tentative, and in the nature of grants or one-way transfers. In short, ACLA had little currency with which to negotiate with supporters and members, attendant and potential. Management and staff reward and accountability was largely internal, that is feelings of duty, value, and priority, with occasional recognition by the membership. From the records, it is apparent that ACLA was served by many dedicated, committed, selfless individuals. However, the level and composition of staff was not remotely commensurate with the broad mission and many purposes of the organization. By contrast, the AFBF developed resources to support a large staff of full-time professional organizers and lobbyists. They are a continuous, not just annual, source of information and pressure.

As Bowers (1974), Danbom (1995), and others have noted, dues-paying ACLA members who attended annual conferences were primarily an educational, institutional elite. Their concerns about rural poverty, inadequate schools, and poor health services were on behalf of others, not themselves or their families. ACLA was an umbrella of agents, most commonly departments of churches or universities. Farm organizations, variably, and USDA usually had some representation. Unlike, AFBF, ACLA was not underpinned with a network of farmers, service employees, rural businessmen, or persons with a direct financial stake.

When, late in its life, ACLA began to recognize its inability to accomplish many of its cherished goals, it developed a program of actions, and a budget for full time staff. In 1966, a task group under the leadership of E.W. Mueller and R.J. Hildreth proposed a program that would raise its annual budget from $4,300 to $110,000, still modest in terms of ACLA goals. The fund solicitation process brought forth a number of innovative suggestions, enlargements, reductions, and alternative plans but, in the end, no resources sufficient to compete in the world of worthy cause enterprises.

In July, 1976, ACLA held its last conference in Morgantown, WV. It died with its president, Osgood Magnuson, and became a footnote to Teddy Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life.

Legacy and the 21st Century

Another generation passed. In March, 2000, the "Rally for Rural America" was held on the Mall in Washington, DC, "to provide a wake-up call to alert members of Congress and the Administration to the perilous state of the rural economy, and to advocate for policy changes that benefit farmers and ranchers and rural communities," such as education, rural health, conservation, fair prices for farm products, and revitalization of farm families and rural communities. Prayer services were held, celebrities performed, speeches were made. Key members of Congress appeared.[2]

The new century has lost its grandparents' rural America. Other changes have taken place; space has changed. The problems of *isolation* have been so successfully overcome that now space is sought to provide *insulation*. Suburbanites, in their desperate search for living room, clean air, and a little green, have devoured farms, forests, and grasslands, thus destroying the very qualities of environment most eagerly sought. Indeed, a whole set of rural problems emerges from the proximity and relation to cities. Rural America, or what is left of it, resides in what is now an urban nation.

Because America is an urban nation, it is not surprising that most rural problems are simply variants of the same problems found in cities and towns. Support services for an aging population, for example, are much the same for people in urban and rural areas, but the means for and costs of delivery in remote or less densely settled areas differ. The same for health services: Few health problems are unique to rural areas, but timely delivery and availability of highly specialized services can be a problem.

Education in sparsely settled areas presents special problems of teaching staff, facilities, transportation, and student development. Distance learning can fill important niches in a broad educational program but cannot substitute for basic educational institutions. Technology and transportation enable greater access to cultural, artistic, entertainment activity, but great opportunities remain for rural areas. Charitable and special interest organizations often lack the scale and resources to cope with large or persistent problems.

Rural areas continue to present great challenges in economic development. Employment alternatives to agriculture are key ingredients for the improvement of,

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[2] C-Span documented the event: http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/156103-1. Accessed August, 2010.

indeed salvation of some rural villages, towns, and communities. Nevertheless, agriculture, forestry, and other extractive industries are the mainstays of rural economies and the regions they support.

Moreover, the owners and operators of farms, ranches, and forests are stewards of a very large share of the nation's land. Agricultural and forest land represents 95% of the land surface of America. Of the 2.3 billion surface acres, for example, about 900 million acres are "land in farms" owned by 1.9 million farm operators plus another 1.4 million nonfarmers. About 1% or less of America's people are caretakers for about 40 percent of the land. Depending how corporations are counted, forest lands may be the responsibility of an even smaller percentage of people. The basic, first order, care of the land and other natural resources, is in the hands of a small number of land owners.

Problems of rural areas are not without the attention of vast number of organizations and individuals. The Center for Rural Affairs, Lyons, NE, for example, was to be the next host to the expiring American Country Life Association in 1977 and is still going strong. The Rural Policy Research Center in Columbia, MO, is an umbrella organization with researchers in 67 universities and many other institutions and agencies. Smaller, more tightly focused organizations such as the Leopold Center in Ames, IA, provide unique attention to particular issues as they arise. New organizations such as the International Association for Society and Natural Resources (2001) are formed to accommodate new concerns and approaches.

Rural problems have evolved, as have the institutions to address them. Theodore Roosevelt, through his Commission on Country Life a century ago, and his Commissioner, Kenyon L. Butterfield, with the American Country Life Association a decade later, confronted rural living, learning, playing, growing, communicating, working, issues as presented at the time and anticipated in the future. What's different? What's the same? Is it time for a Centennial reexamination of what is becoming and what is to become of rural America?

Bibliographic Note

Quotations are shown with general attribution in the text. Many general and agricultural history sources were used as background and orientation. Only a few of the sources are listed here – those on which I have depended heavily. They are an excellent entry into the subject:

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For details on the American Country Life Association, the prime resource is Proceedings of the Association, Nos.1 & 2 in 1919, then annually to 1976, except for WWII years 1941-1943. For the Association in context of rural America in the 20th century see my book, *American Country Life: A Legacy*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2003.

For further flavor of the turbulent period for rural America and public policy two other books might be of interest:

H.C. Taylor. *A Farm Economist in Washington 1919-1925,* University of Wisconsin, 1992; and

Olaf Larson and Julie Zimmerman. *Sociology in Government: The Galpin-[CC] Taylor Years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, 1919-1953, University Park PA: Penn State Univ Press, 2003.

Henry Taylor, Charles Galpin, and Carl Taylor all served as officers of the American Country Life Association.

Particularly helpful journal articles include:

William Bowers, "Country-Life Reform, 1900-1920: A Neglected Aspect of Progressive Era History," *Agricultural History,* Vol. 45, No.3, July, 1971, pp 211-221.

Clayton Ellsworth, "Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission," *Agricultural History,* Vol. 34, No. 4, 1960, pp 155-172.

Olaf Larson and Thomas Jones, "The Unpublished Data from Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life," *Agricultural History,* Vol. 50, No.4, Oct 1976, pp 583-599.

Gerald Vaughn, "Massachusetts Gave Leadership to America's Country Life Movement: The Collaboration of Kenyon L. Butterfield and Wilbert L. Anderson," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts,* Vol. 24, No. 2, Summer 1998, pp 124-144.

For two contemporary views of rural life issues, read or read in:

Emery Castle (Ed). *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places,* Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995

David Brown and Louis Swanson (eds.). *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century,* University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003.