CONSTRUCTIVE RURAL FARM POPULATION POLICIES

by Carl C. Taylor and Conrad Taeuber

IT IS impossible to discuss farm population policies without considering trends, activities, and programs which involve rural nonfarm and urban populations and situations. We have narrowed the title of this paper because we want the focus to be constantly on those people who depend directly upon agriculture for their economic support in whole or in part. We are assuming as a guiding criterion that the farm population should be so distributed as to make the maximum efficient use of its basic natural resource—the land—toward the objective of attaining and maintaining the highest standard of living possible.

In order to come quickly to an understanding of the heart of the problems involved in suggesting constructive programs for reaching this objective, we shall assume that a discovery of maladjusted areas of the Nation is a good starting point. These areas are depicted graphically under the seven following headings:

1. Low income areas—including those counties in which 50 per cent or more of the farms in 1929 reported less than $600 as the value of all products, sold, traded, or used by the operator’s family—are shown in solid black in Figure 1. The mean value of all farm products for families with incomes of less than $600 was $375, of which approximately one-half represents the value of farm products consumed at home.

2. Farm labor areas—including those counties in which 50 per cent

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1 A paper presented at the Round Table on Population Studies, Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Milbank Memorial Fund, New York City, March 28, 1938.

2 Respectively: In Charge, Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, and Agricultural Economist, Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

3 For further information concerning these criteria and the procedure used see Taylor, Carl, C. et al: Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture. Social Research Report, No. VIII, United States Department of Agriculture, 1938.
or more of the persons whose gainful occupation was in agriculture, were farm laborers—are shown in Figure 2.

3. Farm tenancy areas—including those counties in which 50 per cent or more of the farm operators were tenants, or croppers, i.e., persons who did not own any part of the land they were operating—are shown in Figure 3.

4. Poor land areas—including those counties in which 20 per cent
or more of the farms should be replaced because of maladjustments in land use—are shown in Figure 4.

5. Migration areas—include those counties in which the rural population between 1920 and 1930 lost by migration a number of persons equivalent to 30 per cent or more of those there at the beginning of the period, taking into account the natural increase. Such a heavy exodus from the rural areas of a county, may, in general, be taken as evidence of serious maladjustments (Fig. 5).

6. Heavy relief areas—include those counties in which, in June 1935, the total number of persons receiving relief, financed in whole or in part from Federal funds, was equal to or greater than 30 per cent of the population of the county in 1930 (Fig. 6).

7. Areas of low rural farm standards of living—include those counties in which a standard of living index was 20 or less; the range for the index being from 0 to 100. The ratings were based upon the proportion of farm homes possessing such facilities as electric lights, water piped to the dwelling, telephone, radio, and the proportion of farms reporting an automobile (Fig. 7).

It is clear that to a large extent these seven items are interrelated and that in general they show persistent population maladjustment. The chief exceptions are that a high percentage of farm laborers is very often associated with a high agricultural income for the area,
Fig. 4. Areas in which it appears desirable to encourage permanent withdrawal of a part of the arable farming and develop constructive use of the land not to be in farms.
though typically not for the farm laborer, and that only the southern tenant belt should be considered in this discussion.

The mapping of each type of maladjustment clearly reveals areas in which population subjected to the condition being considered

Fig. 5. Counties in which the net migration from rural areas, 1920-1930, was equal to specified percentage of the rural population in 1920.

Fig. 6. Intensity of relief, June 1935. Ratio of persons receiving relief, June 1935, to total population, April 1930, by counties.
is concentrated. When these areas are compared with each other, it becomes clear that in certain areas in the Nation the farm inhabitants for one or more reasons are securing a level of living which is relatively very low.

In order to avoid the effects of isolated or accidental factors, only those counties which were classified in three or more of these groups will be considered here (Fig. 8).

Two hundred and forty counties are included in this group of most disadvantaged areas, two hundred and twenty-four of them in the southern states.

We shall not discuss in detail the areas outlined on these maps, but it will be well for the reader to have clearly in mind just where the chief areas of population maladjustment are located while we consider some of the generic problems and trends in such areas.

UNPLANNED TENDENCIES TOWARD POPULATION ADJUSTMENTS

Under the influence of modern means of transportation and communication and in light of the fact that the American people have always been highly mobile, it would be expected that there would develop tendencies to adjust population to economic and
social opportunities. Let us therefore give brief consideration to these tendencies or trends. In the 224 counties located in southern states, referred to above, the population has shown the following changes since 1920:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1920-1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td>4,260,663</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural Population</strong></td>
<td>3,575,561</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Farm Population</strong></td>
<td>2,579,053</td>
<td>+6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Per Cent Change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Per Cent Net Rural Migration</strong></td>
<td>-23.3</td>
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The number of persons leaving the rural areas was equal to 23 per cent of the number of rural residents. Since the natural increase amounted to 16 per cent, there was, therefore, a net decrease of about 7 per cent. Comparable figures for the period 1930-1935 are not available, but it appears that the farm population increased 6.8
per cent, compared with a national average of 4.5. Not more than
two-thirds of this increase can be attributed to the back-to-the-land
movement; which in these counties was proportionately less than
the national average. The rate of natural increase is relatively large
and part of the total increase is to be attributed to it. In common
with other areas of maladjustment, and in contrast to the better
farming areas, these counties in addition to receiving migrants from
villages, towns, and cities retained a goodly portion of their natural
increase during the depression years.

Thus, assuming that a considerable migration from these areas
between 1920 and 1930 constituted an unconscious, or at least un­
planned attempt at adjustment, it is clear that the migration was
not of sufficient magnitude to effect the needed adjustments and
that developments since 1930 have contributed to further intensifi­
cation of the existing maladjustments.

In addition to the tendency of southern farm population to move
away from farms and even away from the South, there has been a
considerable upward trend in southern industrial development.
Opportunities in other than the extractive industries have been in­
creasing in the southern states more rapidly than in any other part
of the country. Although the South is still more rural and more
agricultural than any other part of the country, it has had a more
rapid growth in its urban population and in the proportion of its
workers in nonagricultural occupations than any other section.

The case of cotton textiles is most striking. In the crop year 1921-
1922 there were 35,707,000 active cotton spindles in the United
States, of which 44 per cent, or 15,906,000, were in the fourteen cot­
ton growing states.4 By 1936-1937 the numbers had changed to
23,808,000 of which 73 per cent, or 17,439,000, were in the cotton
growing states. Taking the number in 1921-1922 as 100, the num­
ers fifteen years later, during 1936-1937 are:

4 Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri,
North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.
The greatest increases occurred in Alabama, 100 to 140, and Georgia, 100 to 122, but North and South Carolina also reported increases from 100 to 108 and 110 respectively. This trend has continued during the depression years, and it is significant that in a number of industries—cotton goods, dyeing and finishing textiles, knit goods, shirts, silk and rayon, woolen goods, worsted goods, men’s clothing, boots and shoes—the number of wage jobs in the South Atlantic states actually increased between 1929 and 1933, although in each of these industries the number of wage jobs in the entire country showed a decrease.

During this same period, the East South Central states increased the number of wage jobs in knit goods, worsted goods, men’s clothing, pottery, tin cans and other tinware, glass and rubber goods and tires, industries which reported a net decrease for the entire United States during these years. Although none of the increases reported in the southern states is large, and in no given industry did the increases exceed 7,000 wage jobs, the significant feature is that there were increases during a period when the same industries in other parts of the country reported decreases.

It must not be overlooked that some of the industries involved in these shifts of wage jobs are highly mobile, shifting from one area to another as the relative costs shift. Any change in the relative levels of costs, especially of labor costs, might be followed by move-
ment to some other areas. The competition for industry within the South, where low wage areas are competing with areas that have had industrial plants longer, and therefore have a relatively higher and more stable wage level, is a case in point. Should the South lose much of its present competitive advantage through low labor costs, the observed shift of industry to the South may be stopped or reversed.

At the present time, however, it is clear that those areas in which the adjustment between natural resources and population has been least adequate have been experiencing both migration to other areas and an expansion of nonagricultural opportunities.

The reflex of southern population migration is felt in those areas to which migrants flow. The counties in solid black on Figure 8 include a larger part of Kentucky's area than of any other state, and the present locations of persons born in Kentucky will therefore illustrate the course of the out-movement of population from disadvantaged areas. In 1930, 30 per cent of the 3,300,000 persons born in Kentucky were living outside their native state. Of those, two-thirds were in northern and northeastern states and one-fourth were in the South. Classified by residence, they show 61 per cent in cities and only 18 per cent in rural farm areas, the remaining 21 per cent being classified as rural nonfarm. The four large cities of Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Detroit together contained 143,000 Kentucky-born persons, and the nearby cities, Evansville, Indiana; Dayton and Hamilton, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri, each reported more than 10,000 Kentuckians. Kentucky had also contributed to the movement to California, Los Angeles alone reported 13,000 of them, as many as either Dayton or St. Louis.

Data for other southern states reveal similar results. Thus one-fourth of the persons born in South Carolina were living outside their native state in 1930, although two-thirds of these were in other southern states. However, New York with 38,000 leads all other cities outside of South Carolina in the number of natives of that
State. Philadelphia with 29,000 is next. Charlotte, North Carolina, leads other southern cities with 19,000. Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Augusta and Savannah, Georgia; Jacksonville, Florida; and Washington, D. C., each reported more than 10,000 natives of South Carolina.

Native Georgians showed a similar distribution outside of their own state. Among those who had gone to northern states there were 29,000 in Detroit, 27,000 in New York, 25,000 in Chicago, and 25,000 in Philadelphia. More than three-fourths of these persons were Negroes. Furthermore, one-half of those who had gone to other southern states were living in urban areas; among them 34,000 were in Jacksonville, 27,000 in Chattanooga, and 20,000 in Birmingham.

It thus appears that the migrants from the areas described as showing greatest population pressure contributed to the stream of migrants to the northern and eastern cities. The migrations of Negroes from southern states during the twenties and the last half of the preceding decade built up the large concentrations of Negroes in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities. In passing, it may be remarked that whatever the facts concerning the whole back-to-the-land movement during the depression years may be, almost none of the Negroes who had gone to northern cities before 1930 returned to southern farms after that year.

The destination of migrants from disadvantaged areas during recent years cannot be outlined with certainty. The migrations to the West Coast states from areas harassed by persistent and severe drought have received widespread attention. This movement has been paralleled and possibly exceeded by a continued shifting within and between the states in the drought area. As has been pointed out, the areas in which agriculture is primarily concerned with production of crops for the market continued to send out emigrants between 1930 and 1935. Some of the areas in which population pres-
sure was greatest in 1930 increased their farm population by 1935 through the combination of a marked restriction of migration of the numerous young people coming to maturity during those years and of a movement from cities and villages to farms.

Thus it is seen that in recent years the unconscious, or at least unplanned, trends toward adjustment of farm population have reflected themselves chiefly in currents of migration, primarily from rural to urban areas, and especially to the metropolitan districts. The movement has been to a large extent from southern to northern states, with the destination of migrants chiefly in the industrialized northeastern states and the states on the Pacific Coast. These currents have also flowed from southern farms and villages to southern cities which grew with exceeding rapidity between 1910 and 1930. Urbanization has taken place more rapidly in the South than in any other section of the Nation and is apparently destined to continue. Southern industries whether indigenous, transplanted, or vagabond are creating jobs for an ever-increasing number of persons, many of whom will come from southern farms.

These unplanned trends in migration from practically all overpopulated rural areas have by no means accomplished complete adjustment by the absorption of excess farm population in growing urban centers and expanding industries in some of the maladjusted areas, as can readily be seen from the facts presented in Figures 1 to 8. There is, therefore, ample reason to give consideration to what may be called planned adjustments.

PLANNED PROGRAMS OF ADJUSTMENT

In considering possible programs of adjustment or programs for alleviating pressure of farm population on natural agricultural resources, three broad lines of attack present themselves. We can attempt to decrease birth rates in such areas; we can attempt to move part of the population out of the areas; and we can attempt to assist those living in the areas to make better adaptations to and
higher uses of their present, but as yet not fully developed, physical, economic, and social resources. Or, of course, we can choose to do nothing and let the inhabitants of these areas pay the price of continually handicapped lives and let the general public pay the price of tremendous relief expenditures.

We shall not discuss the fourth of these choices because we assume that it is daily proving its impracticability.

It is not a digression at this point to state why unlimited and uncontrolled production of farm products will not solve these problems. The reasons are simple. They are: First, that national welfare demands the conservation of the land above all other natural resources as a cure for too exploitative a system of production in the past and a prophylactic against its continuance in the future; second, that if maximum efficiency in producing volume of farm products is practiced, it is already clear that commercial agriculture cannot absorb population in excess of that which is now engaged in the production of farm products for the market. Half the farms of the Nation in 1929 were not needed to feed and clothe the nonfarm people. This half produced only 11 per cent of all products sold or traded. Since 1929 there has been a restriction of export markets, a tendency toward concentration of commercial production on the more fertile lands, and an increase in mechanization of agriculture. The present prospect is that there will be no reversal in these tendencies, and that we are not likely to witness any increased demand for man power in commercial agriculture in the immediate future. During the period between 1930 and 1935, when the migration from farms was considerably less than during the twenties and when in some areas farms were receiving many migrants from cities, the commercial farming areas—the corn, cotton, and wheat belts—not only absorbed less than their share of the migrants to farms, but in some cases actually lost farm population.

One cannot study these unplanned trends and not know that the solution offered by some people of retaining on the farm all of the
population that originates there and asking agriculture in times of depression to absorb the unemployed of the city, simply will not work in terms of social welfare. Such a solution would result not only in low farm prices for all farmers, because they were over-producing their markets, but would mean that the excess farm population, swollen by those who return from the city, would pile up in the poor land areas of the country.

We have little to offer by way of suggestions for reducing the birth rate in these problem areas. This is a subject which requires much further study before engaging upon any policies toward that end. Furthermore experience in this country indicates that the breaking down of the isolation of rural areas and the increased amount of education have so affected attitudes toward family size and reproduction that a reduction in rates of increase has followed. At the present stage of our knowledge it is not clear that rates of natural increase are subject to planned manipulation. Our view is based on the assumption that the basic adjustments must be made with the persons already born and growing to adulthood now. If these adjustments can be effected, the solutions to some other long-range problems will assume different proportions than they do at present.

Furthermore, it is clear that a decrease in the birth rates in these disadvantaged areas will not quickly alter the situation, or decrease the necessity for other remedies, for it is obvious that even if there should be a precipitous decline in birth rates, its major effect would not be felt until eighteen to twenty years hence. In the meantime, in the states most affected, the available openings on farms due to death or retirement are only about one-half to one-third as numerous as the number of young people reaching maturity and becoming available for these jobs.\(^9\)

\(^9\) Woofter, T. J., Jr.: Replacement Rates in the Productive Ages. The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, October, 1937, xv, No. 4. The replacement rates given there are in terms of rates of increase in the age group 18-65, but can be adapted to the form of the statement made above.
Nor does it seem profitable to view with alarm the fact that disproportionately large numbers of our population are born in areas which on the basis of past performance are classified as problem areas. The place where a person is born is not a measure of his innate capacities, any more so than the month of his birth. To argue that emigration from problem areas to cities should be encouraged as a eugenic measure—the poorer stocks being thus brought into the cities where they reproduce less and thus eventually die out—is scarcely tenable. An ideal social system would be a relatively fluid one, selecting its leaders on the basis of competence of the individual rather than his ancestry. This requires a degree of mobility—both horizontal and vertical—which we do not have fully today. Demonstrably hereditary and serious defects can and should be prevented by a program of negative eugenics. Beyond that the most profitable policy at present would appear to be one of facilitating the adjustments of population to resources by a program dealing with the people already here.

The most universally applicable remedy for farm population pressure is the development of the highest degree possible of balanced farming in which "live-at-home" farming on the best as well as on the relatively poor lands of the Nation is practiced. The promotion of such a system of farming is not, as some argue, an attempt to turn back the pages of progress. It is an attempt to write the greatest degree of security under the lives of millions of farm families who have their destinies in their own hands to a greater extent than any other segment of our national population. It is based upon the theory that complete economic specialization and geographic division of labor in agricultural production increases freight, storage, financing, and middleman costs to such an extent that farmers of one region do not provide good markets for family consumption products grown in other regions. It is based further

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upon the fact that even on the best lands of the Nation, where commercial crops utilize practically all of the tillable land, it would be a safer program of human welfare to balance production for the market with the maximum extent of production for home use. The direct result of not doing this in the South, where the standard of living is low, and population maladjustment is most obvious, is the absence of milk, eggs, and fruit in the diet of cotton producers. The remedy is the production in the South of these products for home consumption. This means a greater degree of self-sufficient farming. It is a problem in planning and promoting a definite type of rural culture in the same intelligent and vigorous fashion that we now promote programs of soil conservation, rural rehabilitation, agricultural production and price adjustments, and better land use adjustments.

There is no question that many of the more than three million farm families which in 1929 produced only 11 per cent of the market farm products could make a better living if they would move to better lands. Nor is there any question that better lands can be found for them. If they had twice as good a land base as they now have and would use the land to produce the maximum usable products for home consumption they probably could raise their material standards of living by at least 50 per cent without becoming involved in the market to any greater extent than at the present. The issue is not, however, primarily one of finding better land for these self-sufficient farmers, for that would be comparatively easy; it is not the issue of increasing their capacities for producing more home consumable goods, for this could be accomplished not only by getting them on better lands, but by their learning more about canning and preserving foods, and home crafts of all kinds. The real issue is whether these people would retain their self-sufficient culture if they left their relative isolation and settled in the communities where commercial farming is universal. Unless they exercised conscious control and unless there was promoted in these
Communities a planned program of self-sufficient farming they would probably, within a generation be attempting to "make a killing" in cotton, wheat, tobacco, or some other commercial crop and thus would destroy their old self-contained culture while they increased the volume of farm products offered to the market. This is exactly why some of the worst rural social conditions exist on some of the best lands of the Nation and is one of the chief causes of low standards of living among the share croppers of the South, who live in a climate where they can guarantee themselves a pretty decent material standard of living by practicing "live-at-home-farming."

The second most applicable remedy is probably the combination of farming and other occupations. This can be "subsistence homesteading" not only near large cities but near smaller cities and towns and in rural villages. Because of modern means of transportation and recent developments in transmissible power, there can be a considerable decentralization of industry; and by a little nurture and guidance there can be a great expansion in handicraft production. Handicrafts are being slowly eliminated from our rural districts because no one is giving adequate attention to markets for them. This means not only the loss of possible income to thousands of farm families, but the elimination from our rural civilization of one of the most creative elements in it.

A third program can and should be that of resettlement, an intelligently conceived and conservatively conducted program of guidance for already highly mobile populations in their attempts to find better orientation to the land resources of the Nation. Such a program should include employment services, vocational education, actual loans, and farm and home supervision to help "resettlers" establish themselves in new locations.

Some steps have already been taken in this direction.

The Subsistence Homesteads program was the first. This was followed by the so-called "submarginal land" purchase program, then
the "rural-industrial-community" program of the F.E.R.A., and finally by the Rural Resettlement program. In addition to these was the relocation program of the T.V.A., necessitated by the evacuation of areas flooded by the water reservoirs created by power and flood control dams. All of these programs have been more successful than is generally believed by the public. The Subsistence Homesteads program not only established a number of suburban settlements, but also a number of small farm projects. The suburban projects promote the combination of urban employment and subsistence gardening at the periphery of cities. The farm projects assist stranded coal miners and southern tenant farmers to become self-sufficient farm owners. The "Rural Industrial Community" projects make a definite attempt to encourage the decentralization of small industries; and the "Sub-marginal Land Purchase Program" removes from wrong uses lands where soil wastage is taking place so rapidly as to jeopardize the standards of living of the population in these areas.

Since the lands acquired are ordinarily devoted to more extensive uses, such as forestry, water conservation, wild life refuges, range, and parks, they can under their new use support only a fraction of the families now residing there. In some cases lands better suited to agriculture have been made available to the persons in the purchase areas; in other cases they have been assisted in going to new locations which they themselves found. Finding suitable locations for the displaced families has hitherto proven one of the major problems of this work, and its successful solution is a prerequisite to such a program if it is to make a contribution in connection with the population problem outlined.

The limits of such a program of land acquisition become readily apparent if it is borne in mind that the National Resources Board recommendations in 1935 called for the withdrawal of 75,000,000 acres from agricultural production. There need therefore to be added to the Land Purchase Program other ways of controlling
land occupancy in those areas where it is probably evident that the land as a natural resource will not support the population now resident there. Zoning probably furnishes the best approach to this problem.

Zoning has been developed in the state of Wisconsin to a considerable extent and is now being initiated in other states. By September 1937, twenty-three Wisconsin counties had closed by ordinance over 5,000,000 acres to agricultural settlement. Eight other states have enacted laws similar to those in Wisconsin, and it seems likely that rural zoning will, in due time, prove to be a form of land control of major importance. For the time being, it will probably have to be primarily negative in scope, that is, it can probably do nothing more than prevent new settlers from moving in to areas that should not be occupied or returning to areas which have been partially evacuated. Like the relocation of settlers from land purchase areas, this is a problem urgently calling for a solution.

CONCLUSION

It is more than likely that sooner or later a turn in economic trends will again stimulate a marked flow of farm population to industrial centers. But even though this movement should become as great in magnitude as in the decade between 1920 and 1930, the data presented in the early part of this paper would seem to prove that there would still exist rural population problem areas. Unguided migration has not solved, but in fact created most of the problems of these areas in the past. There is no reason to believe it will solve them in the future. Increase in the mechanization and commercialization of farming has done somewhat the same thing. Crop control and price adjustments only slightly affect one-half of the farms of the Nation. Relief, unless it is something more than "made work" or the "dole," probably tends to stabilize populations in

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areas which should be migrative. Something more is needed if we would attack farm population maladjustments by means of constructive and rehabilitative policies. The programs suggested here are:

1. The promotion of balanced or “live-at-home” farming, i.e., the maximum expansion of home-produced home-consumable products.
2. The encouragement of combined farm and industrial enterprises.
3. The intelligent guidance of the relocation, into both farming and industrial opportunities, of those who in the future, as in the past, will each year, in great numbers, move to new locations.