

THE RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITY CENTER

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In the use of the phrase *social capital* I make no reference to the usual acceptation of the term *capital*, except in a figurative sense. I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit, the rural community, whose logical center is the school. In community building as in business organization and expansion there must be an accumulation of capital before constructive work can be done. In building up a large business enterprise of modern proportions, there must first be an accumulation of capital from a large number of individuals. When the financial resources of these several individuals have been brought together under effective organization and skilful management, they take the form of a business corporation whose purpose is to produce an article of consumption—steel, copper, bread, clothing—or to provide personal conveniences—transportation, electricity, thoroughfares. The people benefit by having such products and conveniences available for their daily needs, while the capitalists benefit from the profits reserved to themselves as compensation for their services to society.

Now, we may easily pass from the business corporation over to the social corporation, the community, and find many points of similarity. The individual is helpless socially, if left entirely to himself. Even the association of the members of one's own family fails to satisfy that desire which every normal individual has of being with his fellows, of being a part of a larger group than the family. If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community

as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors. First, then, there must be an accumulation of community social capital. Such accumulation may be effected by means of public entertainments, "sociables," picnics and a variety of other community gatherings. When the people of a given community have become acquainted with one another and have formed a habit of coming together upon occasions for entertainment, social intercourse and personal enjoyment, that is, when sufficient social capital has been accumulated, then by skilful leadership this social capital may easily be directed towards the general improvement of the community well-being.

That there is today almost a total lack of such social capital in rural districts throughout the country need not be retold in this article. Everybody who has made either careful study or close observations of country life conditions knows that to be true. Of rural social surveys there have perhaps been a plenty for the present. The important question now is, "How may these conditions be made better?"

A STORY OF ACHIEVEMENT

The story which follows is a concrete example of how a rural community of West Virginia in a single year actually developed social capital and then used this capital in the general improvement of its recreational, intellectual, moral and economic conditions. The community under discussion is a rural school district of 33 square miles, which embraces fifteen school communities, or neighborhoods. Three of these school communities are villages having graded schools; the other twelve are strictly rural, having one-teacher schools. The total population of the whole district is 2,180, of whom 771 are of school age, 6-21 years. The school organization consisted of a board of education (three members and a secretary), a district supervisor and twenty-three teachers.

This district supervisor, Mr. Lloyd T. Tustin of Hundred, West Virginia, was a new man in the district, coming from an adjoining county. He came into the district two weeks before the date set by the board of education for the opening of the schools.

He spent these two weeks going about the district, conferring with the local trustees, getting acquainted with the people, and having the schoolhouses put in order for the beginning of the school term. On the Saturday before the Monday on which the schools were to begin he held his first teachers' meeting. The board of education were present. At this first meeting definite plans were made for the year's work. Among the plans made the following are some that were carried through to successful conclusions:

(1) **COMMUNITY SURVEY.**—Each teacher made a survey of her school community, (a) to determine the physical and human resources of the people; (b) to learn the crop yield of the farms; and (c) to find what children in the community were not attending the schools and the reasons why they were not at school. These individual surveys were brought together and tabulated as a survey of the whole district. It was shown, for example, that of the 457 families 401 were taking at least one newspaper. One item of interest was the fact that there were in the district 331 dogs and 445 cats. These items were turned to very practical account as an argument with the people for a district high school, for it could be shown that if each dog and each cat cost their owners one cent a day for food, then the people were spending upon these animals an amount which, added to what the district may receive from the state as high school aid, would support a high school for their boys and girls. Of course, there was no disposition upon the part of anyone to have all the dogs and cats killed. The fact was merely used to emphasize the small cost of maintaining a local high school. While the high school has not yet been provided, there is very strong probability that it will be established soon.

(2) **COMMUNITY CENTER MEETINGS.**—This survey work proved to be of incalculable value to the teacher both in her regular school work and in her work for the community center. She was able to learn at first hand the home life of her pupils and she was able to become acquainted with their parents. Her work among the homes aroused the interest of the patrons of the school, for no teacher had ever shown so much interest in them before. When she announced that there would be a meeting at the schoolhouse for all the citizens, nearly all were interested and most of them came.

In order to show just what the nature of this first meeting

was, I submit below the program which was offered at one of the schools:

Song, led by the school choir.
Devotion.
Address, by the teacher.
Reading, by a pupil.
Current Events, by a pupil.
Essay, by a pupil.
Song, led by the school choir.
Reading, by a pupil.
Vocal Solo, by a local soloist.
Reading, by a pupil.
Debate.
Cornet solo, by a citizen.
Social half-hour.

Note that this first program was rendered almost wholly by the pupils. The teacher took occasion to speak of the work of the school and to show some of the possibilities of such meetings. The people enjoyed this program and expressed a desire for another meeting soon. The next program at this same schoolhouse was primarily for the older folks. It was entitled, "Ye Old Time School Days." These older citizens took great delight in relating the school experiences of their day, and the children were interested listeners. As time went on the weekly community center meeting was becoming more and more a feature of the regular community activities—in fact the only coöperative activity of the community. In due time, when some social capital had been developed, these meetings occasionally took the form of discussions of problems of a constructive nature. The people discussed such subjects as:

Should West Virginia have a more effective compulsory attendance law?
Should there be a small tax on oil and gas for the support of schools and roads?
Is it more profitable to grow hogs than to grow cattle in this community?
Do boys and girls have better opportunities in the city than in the country?

But entertainment and discussion alone will not hold the interest of a community indefinitely. A definite purpose common to all must become the reason of this coming together. Fortunately, the community under discussion soon passed through the stages of entertainment and discussion to the stage of action. The people

themselves under the leadership of their supervisor and teachers began to look about them for something which they might do towards personal and community improvement. The social capital developed by means of the community center meetings was about to pay dividends.

(3) AGRICULTURAL FAIR AND SCHOOL EXHIBIT.—The first big meeting of the year was the agricultural fair and school exhibit, which brought together the people of the whole school district. The local community center meetings gave the supervisor and the teachers an opportunity to explain the purpose and the plans of this undertaking. In October, two months after the opening of the schools, this fair and exhibit was held at the most central schoolhouse in the district. The people came in large numbers. They brought baskets of food and had a community "spread." Prizes were awarded for the best products of the farm and the kitchen and for the best work exhibited by the schools. It was a great day to everyone present. It was the "pooling" of social capital developed in the local community centers, the first meeting of the people of the whole district ever held up to that time.

(4) COMMUNITY HISTORY.—At each school the pupils of the classes in United States and State History wrote up the history of their local community—who the first settlers were and when they came, when the first church was built and when any others were built, when and where the first schoolhouse was built and important changes made in the schools since then, who had first introduced improved live stock, the silo, farm machinery and other items of local historical interest. This work, of course, was under the direction of the teachers. When the histories had been prepared, the children of each school gave a program entitled, "History Evening," when the community history was read by the pupils who had written it. This proved to be a very popular program, since most of the citizens or their ancestors were personally mentioned. It had a marked effect upon the pride of the people in their home community. After these programs had been rendered, the several histories of the local communities were compiled into a history of the whole school district.

(5) SCHOOL ATTENDANCE.—It will be recalled that one object of the community survey was to determine what children were not attending the schools. While visiting the homes upon that occa-

sion the teachers were able to interest a good many absentees in going to school, or to persuade their parents to send them. Subsequent visits by the teachers at the homes brought most of the children into the schools. Then at the community center meetings, the subject of school attendance was discussed from time to time as a part of the programs. By means of this personal work of the teachers in the homes and of the discussions at the community meetings the percentage of average daily attendance was actually increased by 14 per cent over that of the preceding year. This increased attendance was accomplished without resort to the courts in a single case. The parents came to realize that the schools cost them the same whether their children attended them or not. They came also to see more clearly than ever before what the schools meant to the future welfare of their children and to the credit of themselves as fathers and mothers. Be it understood, also, that these parents were not "preached to" about sending their children to school. They were led into discussions of school attendance among themselves and they arrived at their own conclusions.

(6) EVENING CLASSES.—While making the community surveys the teachers quietly learned also the number of adult illiterates in their communities, though this information was obtained indirectly, so as not to be embarrassing to anyone. When their reports were brought together it was found that there were in all 45 adults in the whole school district, who could not read and write. At first it was thought best to organize night schools of the Kentucky "Moonlight" type for these persons alone. But in talking with the people at the community center meetings the supervisor and teachers came to the conclusion that what would best meet the educational needs of the whole adult population were evening classes for any who would attend them. Accordingly announcement was made at the community centers that at certain centers evening classes would be offered one night each week in addition to the regular community center meetings. These centers for evening classes were so selected that the teachers of near-by schools could assist the local teacher in this work—in effect a consolidation of schools for evening classes. The plan was eminently successful. The English subjects (reading, writing, spelling), arithmetic and agriculture constituted the course of study, not the usual textbook study, but just the things that the people were interested in learn-

ing. Nothing was said about illiteracy, for that would have been very embarrassing to those who had unfortunately failed to attend schools when they were boys and girls. Any who could not read and write joined the English classes and began at the very beginning. They had individual instruction and, therefore, learned very fast.

The evening classes were in themselves community center meetings: (a) because they brought together three or four neighborhoods at one of the centers, thus enlarging the circle of acquaintances; (b) because the demonstration work in the agricultural subjects attracted a great many who would have come out for no other reason; and (c) because the class exercises were either preceded or followed by a social half-hour, and in some cases followed by the serving of refreshments provided by the families represented, sometimes merely a basket of choice apples from one of the farms.

(7) LECTURE COURSE.—Closely related to the work of the evening classes was the lecture course. Now, when we speak of a "lecture course," we usually think of a series of lectures and entertainments given by persons brought into the community for that purpose and paid by the sale of tickets of admission. The lecture course in our rural district was a very different proposition. The lectures were free. They were given at the schoolhouses by the teachers of other schools in the district and by citizens of the community who had messages for the people. The subjects were of a very practical nature, dealing with improvements of agriculture, roads, schools, sanitation, morals. For information these lecturers drew upon the United States Bureau of Education and the United States Department of Agriculture, the State Agricultural College, the State Department of Schools, and the Public Health Council. Wherever possible, bulletins of information on these subjects were handed to the people to be taken home with them. These lectures were in reality community center meetings. The teachers themselves benefited greatly from them by the preparation they made for them.

(8) NATIONAL PATRIOTISM.—In view of the military strife abroad the time was ripe for a revival of national patriotism among the people. Accordingly, one of the programs at each of the community centers had national patriotism as its central theme. By a little guidance upon the part of the teachers this program led to the

placing of a flag upon every schoolhouse in the district. The people themselves purchased the flags, cut and hauled the flag poles, and observed "Flag Day" at the schoolhouses when the flags were raised. This demonstration led later to the placing of a small flag in each school room so that when "The Star Spangled Banner" was sung, every child leaped to his feet and saluted his country's flag—another factor of community improvement.

(9) SCHOOL LIBRARIES.—Another interesting outgrowth of the community center work in this district was the raising of \$282 for school libraries. This amount was raised at box suppers, pie socials, and public entertainments. Every school in the district now has a small collection of books approved by the State Superintendent of Schools. In addition to the books purchased, the teachers secured a large number of free bulletins upon subjects of agriculture, roads, schools, and other subjects of interest to the community. Here again the community center meetings were the means of providing these school libraries.

(10) SCHOOL ATHLETICS.—As stated in the first paragraph of this article there were in this school district three graded and twelve one-teacher schools. The three graded schools were made athletic centers, and to each were assigned four one-teacher schools. At each of these three centers a baseball team was organized, the players being chosen from among the pupils of the graded school, and its allied four one-teacher schools. These three athletic centers were then organized into a district school baseball league. One who did not get information at first hand by observation could scarcely conceive of the benefits derived from the baseball contests. The baseball games were almost the only source of outdoor amusement provided the people of the district. Rivalry among these three athletic centers was keen, but yet wholesome. The activities of the baseball league were a strong factor in the development of community social capital. There were a good many boys who had not been in school for two or three years, who enrolled now to play baseball. But in his account of these baseball contests, the supervisor says: "They (these older boys) stayed in school not only to the end of the baseball season; they got a taste of books and have been regular in attendance to the end of the year. Some who had not been in school for over two years won their Free School Diplomas this year and are planning to go to high school next year."

(11) GOOD ROADS.—In two or three places I have made mention of roads. The subject of improved roads was discussed at each of the community centers, that is, it was discussed by the people themselves. Waste of time and money occasioned by the bad condition of the roads of that district and the cost of improving them were figured out, even mathematically, by the citizens at these meetings. The crowning event of this notable year's work was the voting of bonds in the sum of \$250,000 to improve the roads—a very large dividend paid on the social capital developed during the year.

CONCLUSIONS

The reader may question the propriety of discussing such subjects as community surveys, school attendance, evening classes, and good roads in an article whose title is "The Rural School Community Center." I will admit that they are subjects not generally thought of in connection with community center work. Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that the supervisor and teachers, whose achievements I have described, have struck bed-rock in community building. It is not what they did for the people that counts for most in what was achieved; it was what they led the people to do for themselves that was really important. Tell the people what they ought to do, and they will say in effect, "Mind your own business." But help them to discover for themselves what ought to be done and they will not be satisfied until it is done. First the people must get together. Social capital must be accumulated. Then community improvements may begin. The more the people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment.

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