

UNIQUE EXPERIMENT IN CO-OPERATION

POSSIBLY the above title might be considered somewhat of a misnomer, for the particular Co-operative Movement I have in mind, although inaugurated in comparatively recent years, is already far past the experimental stage. I refer to the St. Francis Xavier Co-operative Movement, in the Province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Its story reads like a veritable romance, but underneath it all it is easily seen that one of the chief factors at work has been unremitting toil and service on the part of its sponsors, for those less fortunately placed.

A few weeks before he passed away, the late Sir Arthur Currie, Principal of McGill University, Montreal, defining the role of the modern university in what he well described as 'the desperate battle of modern life,' said: 'The University of to-day must not be content to be a mere reservoir of knowledge, a storehouse of equipment, a base of supplies. Rather it must be a creator of forces for moulding human lives.'

The St. Xavier University, a Catholic centre of learning, in the eastern part of Nova Scotia, has in these late years been making a determined effort to do this very thing, and what is more, is succeeding. Unwilling to go on turning out graduates to seek, but not always to find, a place in the world, St. Francis Xavier has taken upon itself the task of endeavouring to lay more solid and stable economic foundations in this particular part of Canada. In other words, these university leaders are fashioning a new life-pattern for Nova Scotia.

The economic perplexities of Nova Scotia did not begin with the recent so-called depression. Long before factories commenced to slow down elsewhere, and people the world over began to realise that economic changes were imminent, Nova Scotia had begun to experience a different kind

of discomfiture. Many of the rugged Scots, whose forbears had toiled on her farms and in her fisheries, had yielded to the lure of opportunities created by rapid industrial development in Western Canada, and of course still earlier in the United States. They had given up hope of ever being able to make a comfortable living in their own communities, under conditions of hardship unparalleled in the annals of western civilization. To such extremes had the depletion of the rural population gone, that many districts had fallen below the minimum of man-power needed to sustain any efficient community effort.

It was at this point that some of the professors and other members of the Faculty of St. Francis Xavier determined to make their university something more than a college, set upon a hill, to preserve the treasures of the higher learning for the privileged few. Several members of the Staff at that time happened to be experts in the Science of Agriculture. Led by the vision of a new purpose, they first set themselves to teach the men on the farms improved farm practices. That was twenty-five years ago.

Following the preliminary activities of these men, were started Co-operative Creameries, Wool-growers' Associations, Co-operative Stores, and Study Groups, devoted to general improvement of farm procedure. Later, members of the Faculty established what was known as The People's School, an institution similar in part to the Danish Folk-Schools. Here were assembled large numbers of men every year, and given intensive education for a period of six weeks.

These missionaries were men of fire and vision. Given very little outside support, and forced to rely chiefly upon their own intimate knowledge of local conditions, they braved all sorts of weather, travelled to every corner of the diocese, and made themselves the eloquent spokesmen for a people sorely beset and exploited by ruthless middlemen. The work kept going on, in this way, until about 1928, when the authorities of St. Francis Xavier became con-

vinced that only a regular Extension Department, established at Antigonish, could efficiently consolidate and perpetuate a programme of adult education, aimed at achieving nothing less than an economic revolution.

Two members of the Faculty were elected to study adult education in Canada and the United States, especially those aspects of it that combine academic studies with the practical and intelligent working out of ways to overcome the basic economic handicaps under which the average man labours. The projected programme was to be concrete and pragmatic. It was realised that before an appeal for more education could be made effective, the proposed beneficiaries of that education must be assured of the five material necessities of any true civilization: *viz.* food, shelter, clothing, work and play.

And so something like seven years ago the newly-formed Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier, aided by a generous grant from one of the foundations, began to work on an intensive, as well as an extensive, programme. In furthering this work, not only have the Catholic clergy come into line, but leaders of all the religious denominations of the Province have co-operated enthusiastically, and laymen also, irrespective of religious affiliations—business and professional men from all walks of life—have taken part.

At first, the Extension Department confined its work to farmers and the fishermen who had been so ruthlessly exploited that they were barely able to exist on the scanty earnings of their perilous calling. The middlemen who merchandised their catch had reached the position where they not only garnered all the fishermen's profits, but in some cases even owned the tools of the trade. In this part of the country, however, are large numbers of coal-miners and steel-workers, now included within the range of the Extension activities.

The work proper started with the organizing of neighbourhood groups, each consisting of from five to fifteen

members. These small groups selected their own leaders and commenced to meet weekly, in some convenient place—the home of one of the men, a hall, a schoolroom, or even a loft or a tumble-down old boathouse. Monthly debates and discussions were carried on. These larger meetings were usually addressed by some one from the Extension Department.

But these study clubs are only a preparation for the co-operative enterprises. . . . Wherever Co-operation has failed in the world, in nine cases out of ten it has been where the people did not understand its philosophy, did not understand its technique, and did not genuinely believe in it. These study clubs, leading later to co-operative enterprises, have meant for these Nova Scotians a completely new approach to life.

After a sufficiently long period of this preliminary campaign, all the men in the community were called together for a mass meeting, at which the whole situation was explained to them; that, for example, with a working knowledge of the co-operative movement, they could materially improve their economic condition; and that study is vastly more than merely a pastime for leisure hours, unrelated to the practical realities of everyday life, but may be a real means for bringing about a much-needed economic change. Recent reports give a total of over one thousand such study clubs, with an approximate membership of about ten thousand.

Study Clubs give birth to local co-operative stores, or buying clubs, credit unions, processing and manufacturing plants, and other undertakings, co-operatively controlled. Primary producers of all kinds are able to get further control of their own business, by organizing for marketing purposes. Not only is group action necessary in this field, for greater economic returns, but it is impossible for small producers in any other way to have volume of quality and standard goods without it. A large portion of the people we are speaking of are small farmers and fishermen, and

their success will be determined in great measure by the growth of this Movement.

The field of finance opens up great possibilities for the average worker and so, to give the people some measure of financial independence, the Credit Union has been promoted and forms an integral part of the Co-operative machinery. Of the Credit Union idea, Sir Horace Plunkett once said that 'it is a discovery as important for the financial order of the world as steam was for the industrial order.' So over thirty small Credit Unions have been formed, the total money controlled by these little groups coming to about \$100,000.

In similar fashion, the Extension Department has put the matter of co-operative marketing before the people, and such powerful organizations as the Canadian Live-stock Co-operative (Maratimes), the Canadian British Island Producers' Co-operative, and the United Maritime Fishermen are the result. The wisdom of carrying on industry co-operatively has been clearly demonstrated by the twelve co-operative lobster factories that are already owned and operated by communities of fishermen. Five communities are operating fish-plants in which they can and process their own catch; two own their sawmills. These enterprises have not only made work, but they have also improved the conditions of labour materially.

It is a thrilling experience to hear about—and still more to visit—these scattered communities of Nova Scotia where but a few years ago all hope had died, and despondent reliance upon Government relief had taken the place of all active efforts towards self-help. Take the story of Little Dover, for instance. This tiny fishing community was composed of fifty-five families, poor and simple folk. In 1929, they joined the organisation of fishermen; in 1931 they went to the woods and hauled out to their boats—by hand, since they had no horses—the lumber for a new lobster factory. They built a wharf and a factory, and were ready for the Spring operations of 1932. When the banks re-

fused them credit, they obtained the money needed for equipment from a few good friends. In the first year their profits amounted to \$4,000. With this money they paid off the whole of their debt, and they shared, as a bonus, what was left. But they did not stop with the lobster factory; having no milk for their children, they bought goats. Later they built two good-sized boats. They next opened a school for men and women, and twenty of their number took up special studies. It is reported that they have since built an annexe to their school building. They have become alert and interested in public affairs. Most of the people have formed steady reading habits, and the entire morale of the settlement has changed. The story of Little Dover could be matched with stories of at least a dozen other little villages along the coast-line.

Something new has come into the life of the people of these parts. Surely something is fundamentally wrong with our present way of training for citizenship. Our churches and our schools have worked incessantly for generations, but their efforts, judging by results, have been nullified to a great extent by the system under which we are living. This St. Francis Xavier programme was, therefore, initiated for the purpose of organising the people to explore their inherent economic possibilities. Simple people are not likely to study just for study's sake. They must of necessity see their mental activities issue in some concrete results. Again, the economic question looms so big to-day that one might say that it is *the* great social, political, and even religious question of the hour.

Looking ahead, the leaders of this remarkable movement see more co-operative stores, more credit unions, more study clubs (chronologically these come first), more and better libraries, ownership, partial or complete, of the basic industries, the development of other lines of industry where possible to supplement that of mining and take care of the need for employment during slack periods; the organising of industries such as laundries, shoe-repairing

shops, poultry farms, and numerous other enterprises. Study, however, is the first requisite. The men and their wives, along with their sons and daughters, are aware of this. What is gratifying is the fact that they not only study for the purpose of preparing for this work of economic development, but realise it is but a means to an end, the road to a fuller spiritual development.

To quote from an official of the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia: 'The history of the movement is simply the story of how an entire region, once in despair of soul, because of its economic despair, has been given a new standard of living and a new spirit of courage and hope. It is nothing short of a miracle!'

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