



*COUNTRY LIFERS AND THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY:  
PARSING COMMUNITY IN THE TEXT OF THE REPORT OF  
THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S  
1908 COMMISSION ON COUNTRY LIFE*

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## **Preface**

One of the keys to a robust democracy is the presence of strong communities made up of individuals and organizations that have the capacity to work together to solve their problems. Practices and policies of the government and of higher education can serve to strengthen this capacity, or they can inhibit it. The foundation has an interest in the historical trends that have affected the opportunities for communities to build democratic capacity and the role of institutions in that effort. Professor Edith Ziegler has conducted a significant analysis and interpretation of the meaning of community from the era of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. She specifically examines the roles of both government and higher education in strengthening rural communities, which, from Roosevelt's perspective, were considered necessary to feed the world. Her view of this history is not romanticized; Ziegler clearly casts the sense of inequity that was present in this era. However, her analysis reveals that rural communities were considered the backbone of a strong nation. Thus it became an important mission of government and of higher education to strengthen rural communities, specifically, and to ensure that the farmer was an integral part of the networks that formed them. She provides useful descriptions and definitions of community that are relevant today.

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In August 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University and offered him the chairmanship of the Commission on Country Life. This special commission was charged with investigating the deficiencies of contemporary rural living, as well as potential remedies for such deficiencies.<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt believed that upon the farmer rested the heavy responsibility for “feeding a world which is never more than a year away from starvation,” while also preserving the fertility of the soil, preventing erosion, and properly using irrigation water.<sup>2</sup> After an inquiry lasting five months and involving a prodigious effort to gather data through questionnaires, public meetings, and solicited correspondence, the *Report of the Country Life Commission* (“the report”) was submitted to the president on January 23, 1909. The burden on the farmer, the commission found, was not being met with commensurate earnings or adequate “desirability, comfort and standing of the farmer’s life.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter included in *The Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 41-46. The report was initially published as a Senate document for the sole use of Congress. It became more widely available when it was published by the Chamber of Commerce of Spokane, Washington, in 1911. *The Report of the Commission on Country Life* (Reprint of Document No 705, 60th Congress, 2d Session), Spokane, Spokane Chamber of Commerce, 1911. (Hereinafter this will be cited as *Report of the Commission*). All page references are based on this version of the report, the exception being references to the “Special Message” from the President of the United States, which was an 11-page attachment to the original report submitted to the Senate and House of Representatives on February 9, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> Clayton S. Ellsworth, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission,” *Agricultural History* 34 (October 1960): 156.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 44.

While the report may be flawed in some ways, its vision of an ecologically based agriculture and a country life that could be both remunerative and richly fulfilling is regarded by present-day historians as “deeply democratic and forward looking, even prophetic.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, as 21st-century communities seek to foster democratic participation, to heighten understanding of the relation of people to their environment, and to build on practices that make communities more sustainable places to live, the commission’s recommendations have a fresh cogency and relevance.

The report eschewed the notion that partisan and special-interest politics would solve rural problems. Instead it called for the people of the open country “to learn to work together, not only for the purpose of forwarding their economic interests and of competing with other men who are organized, but also to develop themselves and to establish effective community spirit.”<sup>5</sup> It advocated broad involvement in public work on the part of all interests and classes. Rural teachers, librarians, clergymen, editors, physicians, and others were urged “to unite with farmers in studying and discussing the rural question in all its aspects.”<sup>6</sup> Thus they could perform their roles and employ their expertise in ways

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<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 30. See also Scott J. Peters and Paul A. Morgan, “The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History,” *Agricultural History* 78 (Summer 2004): 289, 311.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

that “place them inside civic life rather than above or apart from it.”<sup>7</sup> Through such involvement and through the sort of democratic participation urged by the commission, rural people would learn to collaborate and develop beneficial solutions for local deficiencies—albeit with the assistance of specialists and technical information as required. The commission recognized a role for government and recommended that Congress “remove some of the handicaps of the farmer” and “set some kinds of work in motion.” Such work related to land and water use, public health, the marketing of farm products, agricultural extension services, rural schooling, farm credit, free parcel delivery, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

The multiple deficiencies of America’s rural life identified in the report were, in a sense, old news. Members of the country life movement (“country lifers”), which included most of those who served on the Commission on Country Life, had been wrestling with them for at least a decade. Country lifers were a loose affiliation of individuals bound by a common interest in ameliorating rural social and economic conditions, rather than by an organizational structure.<sup>9</sup> They included urban sociologists, educators, journalists, government employees, church workers, businessmen, and other social reformers. Not all were motivated by the same anxieties, but they were generally intent on preserving the

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<sup>7</sup> Peters and Morgan, “The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History,” 312.

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 20-22.

<sup>9</sup> The American Country Life Association was not formed until 1919.

deeply rooted agrarian values and ideals of traditional American society at a time of rapid social, economic, industrial, and cultural change—change that seemed to presage the end of an entire way of life.<sup>10</sup>

Country lifers had many specific concerns—for example, the inadequacy of rural schools—but it is possible they were also influenced by the same ancient myth that underpinned Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideal. Jefferson held that the countryside was the unique abode of virtuous people who lived unpretentious lives and tended their acres with careful husbandry. By extension, all admirable civic qualities were derived from living in the country, which was thus the home of liberty and democracy. By contrast, the city was a place of vice and corruption whose people should be viewed with suspicion or caution.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt himself said, “The men and women of the farm stand for what is fundamentally best and most needed in our American life. . . . We need the development of men in the open country, who will be in the future, as in the past, the stay and strength of the nation in times of war and its guiding and controlling spirit in times of peace.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900–1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 3-5. David Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture 1900-1930* (Iowa State Press, 1979), 25.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the agrarian myth in literature from classical times to the 20th century, see Paul H. Johnstone, “Turnips and Romanticism,” *Agricultural History* 12 (July 1938): 224-255.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Roosevelt writing in *Outlook*, April 19, 1910.

Roosevelt, who had elevated the executive office to be the dominant force in national government, was willing to employ a range of devices to focus on issues he believed to be of national significance and to rebuild faith in the value of political interventions for the public good. As one of these special initiatives, the Commission on Country Life quickly gained national prominence.<sup>13</sup> The commission's status and the publicity given to the report's findings conferred “an authoritative benediction” on the rural reforms that had long been proposed by professionals in multiple fields.<sup>14</sup> Over time, the influence of the commission led *inter alia* to the establishment of several federal agencies devoted to rural life and economics, to multiple pieces of legislation of direct benefit to farmers, and to the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which created a national system of extension education.<sup>15</sup>



The *Report of the Country Life Commission* may be relevant to those seeking to understand how democracy might work better in the 21st century and how people collectively can make a difference in what happens in their lives and communities. To understand that relevance, however, it is necessary to be specific about what, in 1908 and 1909, the commission meant when it referred to *community* and how this term would have

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<sup>13</sup> The commission was one of three special commissions in 1908. The others were the National Conservation Congress and the Inland Waterways Commission. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 190-191.

<sup>14</sup> Ellsworth, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission,” 172.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

been understood at the time. While the word's meaning continues to evolve and change today, the imprecision of the term when used in connection with rural communities had already been noted by sociologists in the first decade of the 20th century. In 1903, an article by G. T. Nesmith in the *American Journal of Sociology* stated:

Vague and conflicting conceptions of the definition of a rural community give rise to much confusion in the discussion of this problem. It is variously conceived as a mere farming neighborhood, a rural village, everything outside of cities, characterized by genuinely urban conditions, *i.e.*, cities of 20,000 population and over. Some of these conceptions are too broad, and others are too narrow. For convenience and mutual understanding, let us define a rural community as one that is characterized by genuinely rural conditions. This would include all farming neighborhoods and, according to the last census, all centers of population up to 4,000 inhabitants.<sup>16</sup>

Nesmith's definition might not have been “a vague and conflicting conception,” but it was still limited. Yet in his article, Nesmith went further than the Commission on Country Life, which provided no working definition for either *community*, or indeed for other key terms in the report, including *farmer*, *rural*, and *country*—all terms it used loosely, even interchangeably. This is surprising because at least one of the commissioners—Kenyon Leech Butterfield—had earlier recognized the need for definitions in published material. In a March 1905 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled “The Social Problems of American Farmers,” Butterfield had defined

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<sup>16</sup> G. T. Nesmith, “The Problem of the Rural Community, with Special Reference to the Rural Church,” *American Journal of Sociology* 8 (May 1903): 812-813.

*farmers* and *the rural community* as being synonymous. He also canvassed many of the issues addressed by the commission.<sup>17</sup>

The commission did state that its inquiry concerned “the general social, economic, sanitary, educational and labor conditions of the open country.”<sup>18</sup> To Roosevelt, “open country” meant “farm land” but “the people of the open country” included not only farmers but all those “intimately connected with those who do the farm work, ministers, school teachers, physicians, editors of country papers, in short, all men and women whose life work is done either on the farm or in connection with the life work of the farm.”<sup>19</sup>

This paper will thus seek to parse the meaning or meanings of *community* as used by Theodore Roosevelt and by the Commission on Country Life in the text of its report. It will also assess whether meanings varied according to who was writing a particular section and whether, through the selection and use of a specific definition, the report excluded certain other definitional possibilities. As well, it will explore whether the ways in which the commission understood the word correlated with contemporary sociological and other professional usage. Through such examination, the relevance of the commission’s report to 21st century circumstances can better be assessed.

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<sup>17</sup> Kenyon L. Butterfield, “The Social Problems of American Farmers,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 10 (March 1905): 606-622.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.



The completed report of the Commission on Country Life was introduced in Congress in February 1909. Attached to the report was an 11-page “Special Message” from Theodore Roosevelt which stated, in part, that the object of the commission was “not to help the farmer to raise better crops but to call his attention to the opportunities for better business and better living on the farm.” Roosevelt also said it was “not within the sphere of any government to reorganize the farmers’ business or reconstruct the social life of farming communities,” but governments could bring public attention to “the needs and the facts.”<sup>20</sup> He said further that the welfare of working farmers was “of vital consequence to the welfare of the whole community” and that the strengthening of country life would “strengthen the whole nation.”<sup>21</sup> President Roosevelt pointed out, however, that while the U.S. Department of Agriculture could and should put at the service of the farmer “useful knowledge that he would not otherwise get,” at the same time “our object should be to help develop in the open country community the great ideals of community life as well of personal character.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Special Message” from the President of the United States to the Senate and House of Representatives on February 9, 1909, attached to the *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 6. (Hereinafter cited as “Special Message from the President.”) Copy held as part of Core Historical Literature of Agriculture held in Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University, <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924081040259> (accessed August 28, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

In his original letter to Liberty Hyde Bailey, dated August 10, 1908, Roosevelt had covered some of these matters—though he did not use the word *community*. His focus then was more specifically on the farmer, the farm family, and life on the farm.<sup>23</sup> Midway through the commission’s inquiries, however, when Roosevelt again wrote to Bailey and clarified what he meant by *farmers*, his focus had sharpened somewhat. He listed topics such as the efficiency of rural schools, farmers’ organizations, good roads, farm labor, postal facilities, and sanitary conditions, but again he did not mention the word *community*.<sup>24</sup> In short, Roosevelt's use of the term in his “Special Message” appeared to be entirely new.

In his “Special Message,” in fact, Roosevelt used *community* in a number of different ways, suggesting that he had in mind a sort of loose hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> When he wrote about “the social life of farming communities,” he implied a cohesive group of people in units larger than a household, possibly linked by kinship but certainly linked by a common occupation and geographical location. Such a community also included those whose work was closely connected with that of farmers. Roosevelt also used the terms *society-at-large* and the *community-at-large* as a way of indicating an entity greater than

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<sup>23</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Liberty Hyde Bailey, August 10, 1908, included in *Report of the Commission*, 41-46.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Liberty Hyde Bailey, November 9, 1908, included in *Report of the Commission*, 50-54. This letter was not included in the initial copy of the report.

<sup>25</sup> “Special Message from the President,” 6.

the farming community's component parts of home, school, church, and so on, but whose interests depended upon the farmer.

Roosevelt's distinctions are similar to those of the well-known German sociologist of that period, Ferdinand Tönnies. In 1887, Tönnies published his influential book, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, which is usually translated as "*Community and Civil Society*." Tönnies described *gemeinschaft* as a world of family and kin where people have close ties, an attachment to place, and an ascribed social status, and where community life is cohesive, stable, and regulated. On the other hand, *gesellschaft* is the world of a much larger society in which relationships are based on rationality and calculated self-interest. This world tends to be urban, industrial, and characterized by mobility, heterogeneity, and impersonality. Roosevelt may not have known of Tönnies's work, but Commissioner Kenyon Leech Butterfield almost certainly did. Butterfield was a professor of rural sociology at the Massachusetts College of Agriculture at Amherst and, in 1905, both he and Tönnies published articles in the same issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*.<sup>26</sup> The *gemeinschaft* view of community—albeit imbued with the benefits of modern life—is that which appears to be favored in the commission's report.

When Roosevelt refers to "the whole community" in his "Special Message," he equates it with the nation overall and claims that America's welfare would suffer as a result of dysfunction in any of its component parts, namely the farming communities

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<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, "The Present Problems of Social Structure," *The American Journal of Sociology* 10 (March 1905): 569-588. Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Social Problems of American Farmers," *The American Journal of Sociology* 10 (March 1905): 606-622.

themselves and the ways in which they manage their lands.<sup>27</sup> Later he writes, “Our object should be to help develop in the country community the great ideals of [country] community life as well as of personal character.” One can infer from the context that Roosevelt believed the “country community” was larger in scope than a collection of farming communities, something distinct from other (probably urban) communities, but not that it was the nation as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt’s seamless transitions in focus from the farming community to the country community to the national community might allow several interpretations, but when he discusses “community life,” Roosevelt is more specific. He confidently asserts that rural community life is expressed through the members of farming communities who can exercise reliably their parental duties, demonstrate marital regard and consideration, keep up-to-date with farming methods, derive fulfillment from participating in local activities—particularly those of the country church—and live in a state of wholesomeness and prosperity.<sup>29</sup> Roosevelt’s criteria for membership in a farming community was framed in the terms of responsible middle-class citizenship.

Roosevelt attached to his “Special Message” a Missouri farmer's answers to the commission’s questionnaire. The responses included folksy observations and pungent comments about other farms and farmers in his neighborhood, but Roosevelt focuses on

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<sup>27</sup> “Special Message from the President,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

and commends “the shrewd commonsense and good judgment they display.” “The man,” says Roosevelt, “is a good citizen; his wife is a good citizen; and their views are fundamentally sound.”<sup>30</sup>

Butterfield’s views were in accord with Roosevelt’s. In 1905 he wrote, “the American farmer has been essentially a middle-class man. It is this type we must maintain.” He said that only by understanding the farmer and his class “can we understand the social difficulties of the rural community” and “the significance of the social agencies designed to meet those difficulties.”<sup>31</sup>



All seven members of the Commission on Country Life had professional backgrounds in, variously, education,—in Bailey’s case, agricultural and horticultural education—sociology, journalism, publishing, forestry and conservation, and farmer politics. William A. Beard, editor of *The Great West: A Journal of Development and Progress*, published in Sacramento, California, served to represent Western interests. Charles Simon Barrett of Georgia, president of the Farmers’ Union, served to represent the South.

The commission included no women nor anyone to represent the interests of what today might be called “minorities.” The absence of such representation would almost inevitably exclude from the commission’s report any concept of a “community of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>31</sup> Butterfield, “The Social Problems of American Farmers,” 622, 607.

interest” based on, for example, color or gender. This exclusion was not a matter of oversight but one of policy: when the civil rights advocate and academic W. E. B. Du Bois asked the commission to take special notice of black peonage in the South, Bailey told him, “the Commission is not putting itself in the hands of any persons or any special class. It is trying to hear impartially from as many persons as it can.”<sup>32</sup>

One of the commissioners, Walter Hines Page, was the editor of a serious opinion journal called the *World's Work*, which had recently published two articles by the black educator Booker T. Washington. These articles concerned rural communities developed by black farmers, and Page may have felt he had enough information for the commission’s purposes.<sup>33</sup> In 1907, Washington’s notion of a black rural community involved a racially circumscribed group of land-owning farmers and their families who were necessarily self-reliant and in control of building their own institutions such as schools, churches, banks, newspapers, and stores. This was a reflection of Washington’s own precepts and ambitions for African American “uplift.” He disparagingly described “communities of tenant farmers,” characterizing them as “not very permanent.”<sup>34</sup> Though

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<sup>32</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to L. H. Bailey, Nov. 23, 1908, and Bailey’s reply in Liberty Hyde Bailey Papers, #21-2-3342, Box 22, Folder 27, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>33</sup> Booker T. Washington was the famous black president of the Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama. Booker T. Washington, “The Rural Negro Community,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 40 (March 1912): 81-89. The articles appeared in *World's Work* of July 1907 and September 1907. Washington also published an article in *Outlook* on January 4, 1908.

<sup>34</sup> Washington, “The Rural Negro Community,” 84.

they shared a geographic area and made use of local services and institutions, Washington saw tenants as a community apart—not fully paid-up members of the community proper.

In November 1908, when Anna Howard Shaw of the National American Woman Suffrage Association wrote to Bailey desiring “to know whether any women are to be appointed to this Committee of Investigation and what attention is to be given by the Commission to woman’s share in this important industry,” Bailey fobbed her off, saying the commission would be meeting “with representative men and women whose opinion and suggestions on this subject matter will be received by the Commission.” The rural community was to be treated as an integrated whole.<sup>35</sup>



The complete report of the commission comprised an “Introductory Review or Summary”—a précis—and the “Full Report of the Commission” written by Liberty Hyde Bailey. The “Introductory Review” was written by Walter Hines Page and Gifford Pinchot, both of whom prepared it with an eye to its use by the press.<sup>36</sup> In all probability, Page and Pinchot shared an understanding of the meaning of *community*, a word they used seven times in the “Introductory Review.” Similarly, as the “Full Report” was

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<sup>35</sup> Anna Howard Shaw of Moylan, PA, to L.H. Bailey, Nov 6, 1908. Reply from Bailey dated Nov. 9, 1908. Both letters in Liberty Hyde Bailey papers, #21-2-3342, Box 22, Folder 4, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>36</sup> Ellsworth, “Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission,” 164.

judged principally to be Bailey's work, its 60 mentions of *community* presumably mirrored Bailey's own concept of the notion.

The commission's first initiative was to devise, with assistance from the Census Bureau, a tool for data collection. A questionnaire was eventually distributed as a circular to more than 555,000 people whose names were supplied by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state experiment stations, farmers' societies, and women's clubs. The circulars were also sent to rural physicians, clergymen, and others, so that the mailing list correlated with Roosevelt's meaning of *farmer*. Every question in the survey was framed with reference to *neighborhood*. For example, the first question asked, "Are the farm homes in your neighborhood as good as they should be under existing conditions?" The Census Bureau's notion of a community was apparently based on its own system of rural data collection beats. These beats were county neighborhoods for which, each 10 years, a census canvasser was made responsible.<sup>37</sup>

The "Introductory Review or Summary" comprises four principal subsections: "The Most Prominent Deficiencies," "The Nature of the Remedies," "The Underlying Problem of Country Life," and "Recommendations of the Commission." Like Roosevelt, Walter Hines Page and Gifford Pinchot used the term *community* with some inexactitude.

In the subsection on "prominent deficiencies," the commissioners noted many reasons for the lack of "a highly organized rural society," but asserted that a prime cause

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<sup>37</sup> Ever since the 1870s when it first introduced the categories of "urban" and "rural" to describe the U.S. population, the Census Bureau had used different definitions from one census period to the next.

was the farmer's disadvantage in relation to established business interests. The commission alleged that these interests prevented farmers from securing adequate returns for their products, deprived them of the benefits of unmonopolized rivers or the conservation of forests, and “deprived the community, in many cases, of the good that would come from the use of great tracts of agricultural land speculatively held.”<sup>38</sup> In this context, *community* seems to denote the “general public,” or at least those members of the public interested in purchasing arable land for production. This statement was likely written by Gifford Pinchot, whose small corps of Forestry Division scientists was spreading the gospel of rational land use throughout the country. While Roosevelt had more than doubled the acreage of the public reserve, Pinchot and his colleagues were rapidly extending a system of contracts for its professionally regulated but private development. Pinchot was famous for fighting those who wanted forests to remain unmanaged so they could be exploited for commercial gain without oversight. He strongly believed that conservation was about the commonweal or public benefit, beyond mere economic return.<sup>39</sup>

Under “The Nature of the Remedies,” the commissioners wrote that they had received such a large number of suggestions covering every phase of country life, that they decided to enumerate only the most fundamental or essential. Some remedies to the problems of country life, they explained, lay with governments (both federal and state),

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<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, 191.

some with voluntary organizations, and some with “communities acting in their corporate capacity”—that is, (possibly) local or municipal representative government.<sup>40</sup> The commissioners suggested that Congress could remove some of the handicaps of the farmer and set in motion actions like “a system of extension work in rural communities through all the land-grant colleges with the people at their homes and on their farms.”<sup>41</sup> In this instance it is fairly clear that *rural communities* include the locality-based groups of farmers Roosevelt referred to in his “Special Message” and those professionals or service providers he had described as “intimately connected with those who do the farm work,” such as local villagers or townspeople.

The commissioners make further remedial suggestions in this subsection, including “a quickened sense of responsibility in all country people, to the community and to the state in the conserving of soil fertility and in the necessity for diversifying farming.” They further urge better organization for economic and social purposes so that “all the people may share equally in the benefits and have voice in the essential affairs of the community.”<sup>42</sup> These statements suggest two distinct interpretations of *community*. The assertion of country people's responsibility “to the community and to the state” suggests a community that is synonymous with “the general public” or “the nation” and implies a civic duty to be performed for a public good. In contrast, the second passage implies that

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<sup>40</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

*community* is a rurally based group and urges its members to participate in (possibly) local government, or its Grange chapter, its Farmers' Institute, the YMCA, or similar organizations.

The subsection on “The Underlying Problem of Country Life” addresses diverse topics, including what the report refers to as “Spiritual Forces.” In the 1903 article by G. T. Nesmith referred to earlier in this paper, Nesmith claimed that without the rural church’s influence, “the spiritual condition of the community falls correspondingly lower” and “other spiritual influences such as the home, school, vocation and social life lose their incentive to struggle and sacrifice.” The commission’s report similarly stresses that the best way to preserve ideals for private conduct and public life in the country is to build up the institutions of religion. The report further states “the country church has a social responsibility to the entire community as well as a religious responsibility to its own group of people.”<sup>43</sup> The community, then, was not just a parish or the members of a denomination—not a “religious community”—but a larger group of undifferentiated churchgoers (and perhaps non-churchgoers as well).

In “The Call for Leadership,” the final subsection of the “Introductory Review or Summary,” commissioners make a clarion call for “a new social structure, developed from the strong resident forces of the open country.” They suggest that “the entire people need to be roused to this avenue of usefulness,” but “most of the new leaders must be farmers who can find not only a satisfying business career on the farm, but who will

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28.

throw themselves into the service of upbuilding the community.”<sup>44</sup> The commissioners saw this community as locality based and similar to the one serviced by the country church. It is a community bound by values, in addition to geography and reciprocal need, and energized by committed teachers and clergy working to establish a new “rural civilization.” As active opinion leaders of a revitalized community, the farmers are likely to be landowners. They thus live up to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal of the superior yeoman—“the most precious part of the state”—and a fundamental core of American democracy.<sup>45</sup>



As principal author of the “Full Report of the Commission,” Liberty Hyde Bailey wrote eight drafts before the document received final approval from all the commissioners. Still, Gifford Pinchot remained convinced that Bailey had overridden the contributions made by Henry Wallace, Page, and himself.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, there were advantages to single authorship, including a consistency and continuity of terms in the “Full Report,” which differed slightly in format from the “Introductory Review.” In the following discussion of the “Full Report,” Bailey is accorded nominal authorship.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison on October 28, 1785.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Wallace was a lay preacher and the publisher of a popular farm journal called *Wallaces' Farmer*. Martin Nelson Geary, *Gifford Pinchot: Forester-Politician* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 101.

In a “General Statement” about the prevailing economic and social conditions in rural areas, Bailey set out the “Purpose of the Commission,” categorized the problems of country life to be ameliorated, listed the methods employed by the commission (the questionnaire, the hearings, the schoolhouse meetings), and then described “The Main Deficiencies in Country Life” under a number of subheadings.<sup>47</sup> When Bailey mentioned *community* in the “Full Report,” he usually meant an agricultural locality or neighborhood occupied by farming families and serviced by a rural town or village, which might include institutions like churches or schools. Any information collected about the community was “a collation of community experience.” Some of the community's local institutions were described as “the community’s natural organic centers.” Mutual cooperation would establish a “community spirit.” Shared local services, such as packing-houses, creameries, or laundries, were “community” facilities. Local schools must “represent and express the community.” Libraries should take responsibility for stimulating “the reading habits of the community” and provide a social center. And so on.<sup>48</sup>

The clear and sustained vision in the “Full Report” of what communities and their institutions should be was a reflection of Liberty Hyde Bailey’s long experience in

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<sup>47</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 33-58.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 138, 121, 119, 128, 133, 97, 124, 115.

horticultural and agricultural extension and his experience with rural schools.<sup>49</sup> In 1898, Bailey had been named chief of Cornell University's newly created Bureau of University Extension of Agricultural Knowledge and held this position until 1903, when he was appointed dean of Cornell's College of Agriculture. Partly through his own rural background, but mainly through his extension work with the farmers of New York, Bailey had developed a deep knowledge of their needs, their lives, and their aspirations.<sup>50</sup> He learned that a farmer's social and spiritual needs and the needs of his family were as important to his welfare as were improved crops.

In "The Main Special Deficiencies in Country Life," Bailey's first enumerated deficiency was the widespread disregard of the inherent rights of land-workers—the men who owned and worked agricultural land. He described the discriminatory taxation of farm property and the iniquitous habit of towns and cities of driving out their "hobos" into the country leading these undesirables to become a "vicious community." In this context *community* means "fringe-dwellers" or outsiders who were not to be regarded as part of the civilization to be built in rural America.<sup>51</sup> The idea of the outsider also crops up in the report's discussion of foreign land-workers.

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<sup>49</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, "The Outlook for Agricultural Teaching," *The Cornell Countryman* 1 (December 1903): 3, quoted by Ann M. Keppel, "The Myth of Agrarianism in Rural Education Reform, 1890-1914," *History of Education Quarterly* 2 (June 1962): 103.

<sup>50</sup> Scott J. Peters, "'Every Farmer Should be Awakened': Liberty Hyde Bailey's Vision of Agricultural Extension Work," *Agricultural History* 80 (Spring 2006): 191-192.

<sup>51</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 61.

During the course of the commission's inquiries, Bailey had made an earnest attempt to ascertain the actual circumstances of immigrant farmers. For example, he wrote to Frank Frugone, the editor of a New York Italian emigré newspaper, *Bolletino della Sera*, and asked, "Conceiving the farming population to be a distinct body, is the immigrant working his way into that body and in what different ways? ... Where he does appear in a farming community, what influence, social, moral, or economic does he exert?"<sup>52</sup> As a result of the information from Frugone and others with a direct knowledge of immigrants, an early draft of the "Full Report" contained favorable comments about foreign farmhands; Bailey dropped these from the final draft, however, owing to objections from Charles Simon Barrett. Apparently Barrett did not want to give any endorsement to immigrant workers, noting that "the overwhelming majority of the farmers in the south and west are unalterably opposed to foreign immigration."<sup>53</sup>

Charles S. Barrett's anti-immigrant sentiment was unremarkable in the Progressive Era, partly because, for the first time, the United States was experiencing large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe, which was rapidly changing the ethnic composition of eastern seaboard cities. Sociologists, such as Edward Alsworth Ross; writers like Jack London and Frank Norris; and historians, including Frederick Jackson

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<sup>52</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey to F.L. Frugone, ed., *Bolletino della Sera*, October 6, 1908, in Liberty Hyde Bailey Papers, #21-2-3342, Box 23, Folder 6, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>53</sup> Ellsworth, "Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission," 163.

Turner; all believed that America's greatness was built on its Anglo-Saxon origins. Part of the Progressives' concern for country life (including that of Theodore Roosevelt) was based in the agrarian's deep-seated suspicion of cities and a sort of revulsion at the alien nature of the urban community. One interpretation of the national preoccupation with temperance in the early 20th century—which was reflected in the “Full Report”—is that the Prohibition movement seemed “a nostalgic means of preserving idealized, puritanical, rural values that appeared to be threatened by godless, immigrant ridden cities.”<sup>54</sup>

According to many Progressives, the real America was rural and could not afford to suffer “folk depletion”—Edward Alsworth Ross's term for America's supposed sociocultural rural decline and the deterioration in the quality of its rural population.<sup>55</sup>

Despite Bailey's more rational attitude toward immigrants, the final draft of the “Full Report” displayed some wariness as to whether the commission's vision of an integrated rural community could accommodate a foreign element—at least in the near term. According to the report, “We have farmers from every European nation and with

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Weinberg, *Edward Alsworth Ross: The Sociology of Progressivism* (Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1972), 169. Intemperance was found to be a burning question by the commission, which recommended that saloons be banished from all country districts and rural towns. *Report of the Commission*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 92-94. Edward Alsworth Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18 (July 1901): 67-89. Weinberg, *Edward Alsworth Ross: The Sociology of Progressivism*, 126-127. Ross was Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska. Although the science of heredity was undeveloped at this time, there was a belief that, if intelligent rural people moved to the city, those remaining would be of inferior capabilities.

every phase of religious belief often grouped in large communities, naturally drawn together by a common language and a common faith, and yielding but slowly to the dominating and controlling forces of American farm life.” In this context, *large* suggests “unassimilable.”<sup>56</sup>

The remainder of the “Full Report” covers much the same ground as the “Introductory Review or Summary”—but does it at greater length. Under “The General Corrective Forces That Should Be Set in Motion,” the report expands on the potential value to a rural community of having an effective rural church. The pastor of such an institution would be able to work beyond his denomination and parish so as to reach every individual in the community and become “one of the great community leaders.” Such a person could give direction to the aspirations of the community for the “highest possible development of its spiritual needs.”<sup>57</sup> References to the community's spiritual tone, its ideals, its conduct, and its morals appear over several pages in this later part of the report, echoing the discussion of Spiritual Forces in the “Introductory Review,” where it was suggested that churches could help develop in individuals the ideals for private conduct and public life. The “Full Report” suggests that a community itself possessed collective spiritual qualities that were more than the sum of those of its human members.

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<sup>56</sup> *Report of the Commission*, 110.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, 138.

Despite the lack of definitional clarity in the report of the Commission on Country Life, the community it envisaged most often was a neighborhood of land-owning farming families living in a locality somewhere in the open country—i.e. in farmlands well separated from any urban area but probably serviced by a rural village or small town. These families, and those who serviced them, were linked by economic interest, occupation, class, race or ethnic background, cultural or religious tradition, kinship, or by any combination of these. In addition to their primary purpose, the community's institutions, including schools, churches, and libraries, provided social centers for community interaction and a vehicle through which the community's needs and ideals could be expressed. As an entity, the community was expected to have an identifiable *esprit de corps*. At its best, the community represented middle-class values, responsible citizenship, piety, social engagement, and the intelligent use of resources with respect for their conservation and the relevant ecology. Although it was implicitly white, its interests were not explicitly differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity, or religious denomination.

The commissioners recommended that communities be supported and strengthened, citing their essential role in saving individuals and families from isolation and helping to develop social relationships through communication, interaction, and engagement. In turn, such engagement could influence action for community betterment, including educational betterment, and achieve through cooperation outcomes not available to unorganized communities or to non-community members. These views were consistent with those of contemporary sociologists like Kenyon L. Butterfield and G. T. Nesmith, as

well as educators like Harold Waldstein Foght, Olly Jasper Kern, and Booker T. Washington.<sup>58</sup> The notion of an interdependent, organic, and mutually supportive community was similar to that which was defined by German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, as *gemeinschaft*.

Theodore Roosevelt, who at times seemed to operate an imperium rather than a presidency, had the most expansive view of community. In his “Special Message” to Congress when he presented the commission’s report, he spoke of the nation as a community whose whole was greater than the sum of its parts. He cast himself as the man who had identified the risk that rural decline and poor agricultural practices presented to the nation. In adopting the role of “farmer-in-chief,” Roosevelt was, either consciously or unconsciously, emulating George Washington, who had actually been a farmer and was often presented as such in the iconography associated with his presidency. Roosevelt’s appointment of the Commission on Country Life was an act of husbandry, a means of identifying the weaknesses in the wider community—the nation—and implementing the actions needed to maintain and protect its interests.

The report indicated that in many parts of rural America, communities did not measure up to either Roosevelt’s or the commission’s ideal and that some were compromised by tenancy, vagrancy, criminality, intemperance, unassimilable enclaves,

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<sup>58</sup> Harold W. Foght, *The American Rural School, Its Characteristics, Its Future and Its Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1910). O. J. Kern, *Among Country Schools* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906). Washington, “The Rural Negro Community,” 81-89. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

or economic blight.<sup>59</sup> These countercommunities might have been those G. T. Nesmith had in mind when he described some rural life as tending “towards idleness, vulgarity, animality and drunkenness”—the outcome, he said, of communities that have “no broad, rich social life, no general intellectual activity, no religious inspiration, no initiative to political self-consciousness and no community action.”<sup>60</sup>

The implication of the commission’s report was that, while governments can initiate inquiries, establish agencies for research, regulate to alleviate market inequities, and help with technical and other resources, communities themselves need to be active in identifying their own problems and planning their own survival and development. These ideas remain as relevant today as they did in 1909, even though the rural environment is vastly changed. Communities based on family farms and small rural villages have all but disappeared. Rural centers are now much larger than a century ago, with different economic and service structures and institutions. They support diverse communities whose needs and expectations are multifaceted and more complex. Yet, as if taking their cue from the Commission on Country Life, the successful leaders of these communities recognize the importance of distributing research knowledge, supporting local schools and other educational activities, facilitating the building of interpersonal networks,

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<sup>59</sup> *Report of the Commission: (re tenancy, 38, 39, 62, 86, 87, 89, 92, 93, 100) (re vagrancy, 61) (re criminality, 114-115) (re intemperance, 98, 101) (re immigrant enclaves, 110) (re economic hardship, 85, 87).*

<sup>60</sup> Nesmith, “The Problem of the Rural Community, with Special Reference to the Rural Church,” 816.

encouraging participation in civil and political activities, and helping to improve the quality of a sustainable rural life.<sup>61</sup> More than a century later, while the definition of *community* continues to evolve and regularly needs fresh definition, many of the essential lessons of the Commission on Country Life still resonate with an enduring validity.

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<sup>61</sup> Timothy Collins, “Rural Community Development and Sustainability: The Lasting Legacy of Theodore Roosevelt’s Commission on Country Life,” *Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs*, <http://www.iira.org/clc> (accessed on August 28, 2010).

### **About the Kettering Foundation**

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