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*Urging Back-to-Farm Movement for Better Distribution of Population as a
Remedy for Unemployment Distress*

It is not often that I come before an audience with such hearty willingness and even eagerness as I have come here today. I have come not to make a speech, but to offer a proposal and to ask for help, and you have provided

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the right occasion and have permitted me to present what I have to say to those best qualified to pass upon it.

The experience and the aims of those present here bear in two ways on what I have to present. I am able to speak to those who for more than a generation have been concerned with the attempt to plan in a rational way the conditions of our living in America and at the same time to men and women who have been especially concerned with rural life and rural economic conditions.

Perhaps at times it has seemed to you, Dr. Bailey, and to your associates of President Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, that you have been prophets without due honor in your own country, but I think the time is coming when full honors will be paid to you. You have been pioneers in a work that has never been fully understood by all who should have understood it, but has steadily been working its beneficent effect on the conditions of life in America. To many there may seem something ironical in the fact that the quarter-century in which you have been working for improvement in the status of the country dweller has witnessed a huge transfer of population from farm to city and has seen our civilization transformed from one predominantly rural to one predominantly urban. But the improvement in the standards of living, the extension of comforts and conveniences to American farms and rural homes where at least a quarter of our population lives removes all semblance of irony from it. Education, health safeguards, lightened labor, greater comfort and enlarged social opportunities have come to the rural dweller and they have come largely through the ideas and labor of men of vision rather than by accident.

But I think the improvement in the conditions of rural life has an importance today which transcends the advantages it has brought in the past, great as these are. We have a new situation before us and new need of planning.

We are faced with conditions which cannot be disguised or evaded by optimistic platitudes and which constitute in the belief of sane, well-balanced people a major national crisis. We are about to enter on a third winter of industrial depression and the outlook is one of certain misery among our people on a huge scale. All classes of the population are affected. Prices of all agricultural products are depressed and as to some of the most important—wheat and cotton as major instances—the prices recently have been the lowest for all time, while as to some others markets are almost non-existent.

Wage scales in the cities are nominally sustained comparatively well, but this is of no comfort to the huge army of unemployed, which promises to be far greater this winter than at any time in the nation's history, and although the economic difficulties of the farmers are grave, the greatest misery—the distress of lack of food and shelter and warmth—will occur among the industrial population in our cities. It is stating the situation but mildly and conservatively to say that it is viewed with the gravest apprehension and concern by all responsible people.

No one can say with assurance how long this crisis is likely to endure and that very uncertainty makes it all the more our duty not merely to give our support to measures for the immediate relief of unemployed men and women without instituting a dole of money, but to inquire with real energy and courage whether there isn't something that can be done—some steps that can be taken either by private initiative or governmental action, or both—if not to prevent such calamities in the future, at least to palliate their effects. I have in mind a course involving both private initiative and probably governmental action, which I wish to lay before you today. Let me make it entirely clear, however, that this is not a panacea and in my judgment no single remedy will bring the country as a whole back to normal conditions of employment. Rather must the Federal Government, with the hearty cooperation of State and Municipal Governments, work out a broad and comprehensive plan which will include many important efforts as component parts of the whole. That is why the suggestion I make today is to be considered as only one of many such components. As a prelude to what I wish to offer, let me tell you of an incident in my recent experience.

A few months ago I had a rather extended conversation with a prominent

citizen in one of the western cities of our State who has engaged in raising funds for the emergency employment of idle men and for other measures of relief. He quoted figures—staggering and dismaying figures—of the number of heads of families in that one city who were out of work and seeking earnestly for any kind of labor that would bring them in a little money to feed their dependents, but had been compelled to list themselves on the rolls of those needing public relief.

"Suppose," I said, "one were to offer these men an opportunity to go on the land, to provide a house and a few acres of land in the country and a little money and tools to put in small food crops—it was then early spring—what proportion of them do you think would accept such a proposition?"

"All of them," he said promptly.

From one point of view the reply merely served to add emphasis to what had been told me of the urgency of the plight in which thousands of families in that city and hundreds of thousands in the country at large found themselves. But I think there may be something more in it and that its implications are worth our very serious consideration.

In times of economic depression we expect to find a concentration of unemployed persons, and as a result of concentration of distress, in the cities. It is so normal and so usual that it doesn't seem to merit comment. It is there that the floating industrial population has congregated. There are the headquarters and factories of the luxury industries and the activities that depend upon flush prosperity. There is not only the greatest market for labor, but the center of the forms of employment that have the least economic stability. There the marginal undertakings abound, the hothouse growths that feel the chill winds of depression first. And because there is a large floating labor population and a constantly heavy labor turnover, industry is perhaps a little more ruthless in the urban centers in cutting its payrolls and trimming its budget to meet conditions of the moment.

And it is in the city, and especially in the large city, that unemployment most quickly results in acute need and acute suffering. The urban worker must pay out cash for all he consumes. He is expensively fed, for it requires the labor of many people to supply him. His housing cost is based on high urban land values and heavy taxation. He must have daily transportation that is time-consuming and costly. And he is able to build up little if any reserve against emergency.

There are many incitements to spend money in the city, even if it does not take every penny the worker can earn to maintain a decent standard of living for his family. The years of our vaunted prosperity have meant to many of our population only the opportunity to work hard and to spend all the income in an era of high costs for a rather meager living. Now millions are looking back on that opportunity as a great privilege that has been taken from them. Have we not been told, and with a great measure of truth, that our prosperity depended on this hand-to-mouth living, and have we not encouraged our workers to go heavily into debt for luxuries as a sound plan of domestic finance and a further stimulus to good times?

Our urban industrial economy is fraught with tremendous perils, as we now see. The faster the wheels of the economic machine turn the greater the disaster when it meets impediments. We now hear the cry of the millions who clamor not primarily for bread but for a chance to work that they may earn their food and their shelter.

Is there no surplus in the production of these necessities of life by which unemployed workers may bridge over from the slack times to the good? If there is, it is not in their hands. We must call upon the generosity of those who have accumulated the means to buy in order to alleviate the distress of those who have not.

But there are surpluses, as we all know. Wheat was lately quoted in the principal markets at the lowest money price ever recorded for this important basic food, and a real price much below that when comparison is made with previous years of low grain prices. There is a great abundance of milk and an exceedingly low price. There are vegetables so abundant that it scarcely pays to take them to market. Our whole agricultural plant is geared

to a basis of production more than adequate to feed the whole population abundantly. There are surpluses both of food crops and the means of growing crops. Why should any hungry person lack food?

A part of the answer, I think, is implied in what I have said heretofore. The difficulty is not solely that purchasing power does not lie in the hands of those who need to buy and must buy to live. There is a difficulty also in the situation that those who lack food and shelter are in the very places where it is most inconvenient and expensive for society to help them, for the cost of food in the cities is made up of many charges, the very least of which is the farmer's share in the production of the food supply. City workers must be fed on food transported to the cities and distributed there through an elaborate and highly systematized machine. Food in the country, at the farm, and food in the city are two very different propositions. One represents costs of production, or something much less than that in those times, the lowest price the farmer will take in a "seller's market" rather than permit his crop to rot in the field—sometimes barely enough to pay for his labor in getting it from the field to town. The other represents mainly distribution costs.

If all the food products necessary to supply adequately all the unemployed in New York City were to be offered free by the farmers of New York State, but the present charges for transportation and handling were collected all down the line, the reduction in the ultimate price to the consumer would be almost insignificant. The cost of distribution relative to the cost of production has been increasing all through the years of our boom period in industry. Farm prices are now below those of pre-war days. In cities, farm products are fifty per cent higher than their pre-war prices.

It is much easier to point out the anomaly, the economic unsoundness and the tragedy of this situation than it is to suggest any but a visionary remedy. We have had for decades past various "back-to-the-land" movements, but we have seen along with them a steady and continued increase in urban population as compared to rural. There have been good reasons for it in the constantly increasing efficiency of farming as an industry and the growth of agriculture surpluses which have constantly been forcing the less successful farmers to quit the soil and to take their chances in trade and industrial labor for hire. In the present situation of agriculture I don't think anyone could seriously suggest that we need to take men out of industry to put them to farming.

But the question I think we need to examine is whether we can't plan a better distribution of our population as between the larger city and the smaller country communities without any attempt to increase or any thought of increasing the number of those who are engaged in farming as an industry. Is it not possible that we might devise methods by which the farmer's market may be brought closer to him and the industrial worker be brought closer to his food supply? A farm and a rural home are not necessarily the same thing.

Conditions have changed a great deal since the great rush of workers to the cities began. They have changed materially even since the war period. There have been great changes in means of transportation, changes in the facilities surrounding rural life and changes in industrial methods and conditions, all of which offer enlarged opportunity for rural living.

One of the most significant transformations is that wrought by the automobile and the improvement in highways that has come along as a consequence. It is a familiar fact that distances have been tremendously shortened in terms of time, effort and expense. Except for such congestion of traffic as one encounters in and about New York City and in a limited area in the heart of other cities, a distance of ten miles has become only the equivalent of a few city squares under old conditions. Communities once a day's journey apart have become close neighbors.

It is no longer necessary that an industrial worker should live in the shadow of the factory in which he works, and as a matter of fact many of them do not. Especially where factories are situated on the outskirts of cities or in smaller communities the worker should have a wide range of choice for his home in terms of physical distance.

Industry, too, has been freed of a great many old restrictions as to location. It doesn't need to be located close to a water power, nor does it need to be located in most cases near a fuel supply. High tension transmission of electric current has opened a new era in the transportation of power. The application of electric current to industrial uses has made other advancements. It is not necessary any longer to use power in large quantities or units to use it effectively. The typical factory of a generation ago had huge steam engines driving great line shafts belted to a multitude of machines. Today in the typical installation every machine unit has its own motor and can be placed where it can be used most effectively and conveniently in the process of manufacture. Enlargement of a factory often can be accomplished merely by adding new machine units. In many lines of manufacture small factories have become more feasible economically than before and some large manufacturing institutions have found it advantageous to erect in scattered localities branch plants where a portion of their manufacturing processes are carried on.

Improvements in transportation, too, have had an effect on factory locations. Railroad facilities have been extended and improved to the advantage of lesser centers of population and in New York we have the great resource of the Barge canal which brings cheap heavy transportation to many communities across the entire State, in effect almost making them seaboard points. The automobile, the bus and the automobile truck have become as important in the transportation of finished products and in some cases of materials as in the movement of workers. Huge vans of manufactured goods travel great distances from factory to market on the public highways.

Communication time between factory and administrative offices and between factory and market has been shortened by telephone improvement and extension, and in this item of administration the automobile and improved highway again play an important part through the means they afford for quick travel from plant to plant and from an administrative center to a plant. Sources of supply of most raw materials, too, have been more widely developed and there is much better organization of facilities for distribution, this in spite of the fact that, in the case of many other products besides those of agriculture, there is still much too great a spread between production costs and consumers' prices due to the product's passing through too many hands from producer to consumer.

All of these circumstances seem to indicate that industry of its own volition is likely to seek decentralization. They seem to point to the probability that we shall see more factories established in small communities and in agricultural regions and fewer comparatively in the largest centers and in old manufacturing communities. Already there has been a trend in that direction. Factories have found it profitable to move from New England to the West and South seeking to divorce themselves from conditions for which their own individual management was partly but not exclusively to blame.

Industry has plainly been feeling its way toward something better in the way of factory location and what has been called for lack of a better term a "labor market", an expression whose implications I detest for the reason that it seems to ignore all human considerations. One of the difficulties of old-established industry today, I am convinced, is due to the fact that it has too often ignored social considerations, has failed to consider that success in industry must in the long run be built of cooperation of human beings on terms which will give all its workers a chance to live decently.

Certainly we want nothing more to do, if we can help it, with the factory town of the old type with its miserable tenements and box-like company houses built in grimy rows on dirty streets—abodes of discouragement and misery—although I could point out examples of the sort in our own State.

There is no doubt that social considerations have had a great part in keeping workers in the cities. City life has had its advantages as well as an attractiveness not based on any actual benefits. Our urban civilization is new enough not to have entirely outworn its lure and its novelty for a population that was once predominantly rural. But the advantages of city life today are less comparatively than they were ten years ago and they will probably continue to grow less, for city conveniences are very rapidly being brought to the country.

We have seen how transportation has reduced distances and made rural living practicable today where it was not a generation or more ago, in the days when the pattern of the factory town of the old style was devised. But there are a hundred other things that contribute to the comfort and practicability of rural living. There are electric lights and electric refrigeration, there are new methods of sanitation for rural homes, there are gas and electric cooking, there is the operation of household power machinery; there is the rural delivery of mail, including the parcels post which puts housewives in close touch with distant shops; there are modern consolidated schools equipped to supply as good primary and high school education as can be had in the city; there are rural parks which furnish better playgrounds than city people can enjoy; there are the radio and the rural moving picture house showing the same films that the city workers enjoy and there is the opportunity for a freer and more natural community life than can be found in the city streets.

The country has added advantages that the city cannot duplicate in opportunities for healthful and natural living. There is space, freedom and room for free movement. There is contact with earth and with nature and the restful privilege of getting away from pavements and from noise. There is an opportunity for permanency of abode, a chance to establish a real home in the traditional American sense.

But, more than all this, there would be the great advantages for the worker of the opportunity to live far more cheaply and with a greater degree of economic security. The materials for healthful living in the country are cheap and abundant. Established in a country home in an agricultural district the worker, even if he were to grow nothing for himself, could buy a week's supply of healthful food for little more than a day's supply would cost him in the city.

With a considerable movement of workers from city to country there is every reason to believe that the total consumption of agricultural products would be greatly increased. City workers pay 16 cents for a quart of milk for which the farmer receives just now about three. It is well known by health authorities that the city consumption of milk is far less than it should be, that adults and children alike of workers' families would be healthier if they could afford to use more of it. The city price of one quart would buy them at least three in the country. Vegetables whose city price is made up mainly of the costs of many handlings could be obtained with like savings. City workers do not eat enough fresh green vegetables, mainly because they cannot afford them. Many families have them no oftener than twice a week when they should have them twice a day, and could have them that often if they were close to the supply.

The condition of the typical city worker is one of speculative living, with practically no safeguards against the disaster of unemployment that has now fallen on so many of his class. I believe our ingenuity ought to be equal to finding a way by which that condition could be swapped for one of stabilized living in a real home in the country.

Today in fact many city workers have become country dwellers. Both our great and our smaller urban communities are spreading out into the country. It is really surprising to find how many of our country villages are largely inhabited by men and women whose business activity is in some fairly distant city. What is painful about this situation is to see in how many cases families are finding rural homes without finding the real advantages of country living. They are paying more than enough for what they need and desire but are not getting it.

When I see the cheaper city type of houses built on narrow lots of some real estate development far out on the highway, many miles from a city limits, it occurs to me that those who have bought them have been betrayed and that there is urgent need of country life planning for city dwellers. Let us cite the instance of a worker in Poughkeepsie who longs for a pleasant home in the country. He listens to the alluring talk of a real estate promoter and goes miles out in the country to buy a lot in a region where land is selling for agricultural purposes for \$100 an acre. An acre is approxi-

mately 208 feet square. The city worker pays \$500 and gets, not an acre, but a plot 60 by 100 feet, of which it would take eight to make an acre. The gross return to the developer is \$4,000 for an acre bought for \$100. Let us hope, for the sake of being charitable, that some considerable part of this \$4,000 is being spent for development of the property for residential purposes, but even so the man who bought the land is being cheated because he is not getting any of the benefits he should have from a country home. He has bought simply a city lot in rural surroundings. A real estate developer who considered the needs of the people with whom he dealt and who planned wisely could sell full acre plots in such a locality for \$500 each, give them the improvements they ought to have in that location and still make a handsome profit. That acre would mean eight times as much land as the uninformed buyer now gets.

It seems to me evident that the time has come for public authority to assert jurisdiction over housing conditions in the country and over the character and planning of rural real estate developments. We have precedent for this in the housing and zoning regulations of cities and a beginning of zoning authority in the counties. But I think, with competent advice, we should be able to go much further than this in moving toward an adjustment of the whole problem of distribution of population and the living conditions of workers in the State, which I have been discussing.

With that purpose I propose to appoint a Commission on Rural Homes, to be made up of a group of prominent citizens of the State, all of them having a record of interest in the improvement of social conditions, and to ask the heads of six departments of the State government to serve with them as ex-officio members so that advice and data on various phases of the problems to be considered may be made available to the commission. Those whom I have asked and who have consented to serve on this commission include men and women with distinguished records of public service who will bring to their new task experience in dealing with housing problems, with conditions of rural life and with industrial affairs on a large scale.

The task I am placing before this commission is, broadly, to determine to what extent and by what means the State and its subdivisions may properly stimulate the movement of city workers to rural homes if such a movement seems desirable; to determine what facilities may be furnished by public authority to assist these workers in getting the right kind of homes in the right locations, and to inquire what encouragement may be offered for the movement of industries from urban centers to rural locations or the establishment of new industries in such locations if such a movement of industry seems desirable.

While the commission will govern the course of its own inquiry I have fixed in my own mind certain definite objectives which will serve to make the undertaking somewhat more concrete. These are:

1. That the commission be prepared to recommend legislation for village, town and county zoning for the whole State, but on a permissive basis, and for village, town and county permanent planning commissions.
2. That the commission explore the possibilities of the enlistment of private capital to aid in the establishment of rural homes within a reasonable distance of industry.
3. That the commission make recommendations as to experiment by the State alone or by the State with the cooperation and assistance of private capital in establishing wholly new rural communities of homes for workers on good agricultural land within reasonable distance of which facilities shall be offered for the establishment of new industries aimed primarily to give cash wages on a cooperative basis during the non-agricultural season.

If we find that the movement of workers to rural homes ought to be encouraged, then it seems to me that we ought to find means of meeting the needs of those who wish to establish themselves in the country. Their requirements suggest themselves to me as follows:

First: Information as to the right type of home to build.

Second: Guidance and assistance in obtaining the most economical use of funds in acquisition and construction.

Third: Advice as to the right area of land to be acquired.

Fourth: Assistance in financing.

The question how best to establish agencies for providing service along this line is within the scope of the commission's task and problem as I have outlined it. I have no doubt that many specific plans for the establishment and organization of rural communities, extending possibly even to suitable types of architecture, layouts of roads and sanitary facilities, planting schemes and methods of community cooperation, will be suggested to the commission. These should furnish valuable data for such temporary or permanent agencies as may be set up as a result of the commission's recommendations.

It will be borne in mind that the objective is to furnish rural homes of an inexpensive sort for unemployed workers and those of small earnings, not to provide for the needs of those who are able to invest ten thousand to fifteen thousand dollars in a country home.

I think I scarcely need to say that this plan doesn't contemplate any coercive use of State power or any attempt to force either industry or private citizens into a fixed pattern of conduct. On the contrary, it involves merely cooperative planning for the common good. In that cooperating planning it will be essential, naturally, to seek the advice of thoughtful industrial leaders on the trends of industry as to location, character and seasons of employment, and to seek the advice of representatives of labor on other features of the proposal.

I shall ask the commission to report to me about December 1, so that legislation which may be proposed may be placed before the Legislature at the beginning of the regular session in January. I shall be prepared to recommend not only legislation but an appropriation if that is found desirable.

While the membership of this commission is representative of the highest type of citizenship and of the sort of expert knowledge that, it seems to me, ought to be brought to bear on the solution of these great questions, I hope sincerely that the problem will not be regarded even for the moment as theirs and mine exclusively. I count upon their being able to call freely on others for advice and aid. I have learned in my own experience that there is a wealth of wisdom and good counsel and willingness to serve the public interest available to any administrator of public affairs who will but ask for it and I expect this commission to be the beneficiaries of that same generous spirit.