THE CASE OF KELLY AND HANNAH BELDEN: WHY OUR COUNTRY COMMUNITIES NEED MORE PLAY: BY WALTER A. DYER

When Kelly, our neighbor's hired man, appears in town, he is popped into the lockup at once to prevent trouble. He can get drunk quicker and get into more mischief than any other man in our hills. So they take no chances with Kelly. There are people down there in town who consider him a bad man. He isn't that at all; he is merely weak-minded and repressed. Getting drunk is Kelly's only outdoor or indoor sport; he has never learned how to enjoy himself in any sane, really happy way.

Now I maintain that Kelly's weakness is not his fault. Something is wrong with the scheme of things that has made him what he is. If something had not been left out of his make-up he would now be one of the most reliable and desirable farmhands in our neighborhood. My theory of it is that Kelly never has a chance to play, and so his natural hunger for recreation leads him through the swinging doors.

Hannah Belden is another example. Hannah doesn't drink, but she does dissipate in two other vices—gossip and that form of religion which is really hysteria. She will talk all night if any one will stay awake to listen to her; and she will follow an itinerant evangelist all over the county. She gets just as much wrought up at a revival today as she did thirty years ago.

Well, Hannah Belden has to have some fun, doesn't she? If you were to see the round contours of her face you would agree with me that the Lord made love of fun one of her chief ingredients. But what is a woman to do who has a lazy husband and a large family of her own, besides two boarders and a State ward to take care of? If you knew Hannah you would understand that she must simply explode if it were not for gossip and what she calls "religion." There's no other sport for her in our hills.

My conclusion is that unless something is done to make farm life more fun, we shall have to put up with gossip and hysteria and drunkenness—or explosions. Farm life has grown to be that way of late years. It wasn't always so. In the old pioneer days there were neighborhood husking bees, barn raisings, plowing contests, log rollings, house cleanings, sewing circles and quilting parties. There was a large element of fun in all these functions. The human animal's appetite for play found natural indulgence. In New England there was the old democratic town meeting, with its delight-
ful social features. People in the rural communities became well acquainted, and their normal need for recreation found expression in picnics, parties, spelling bees, singing schools, taffy pulls, barn dances, sugaring off, barbecues and camp meetings.

But those days have passed. The farmer has become more and more individualistic, more solitary. The labor-saving machinery that has made him more independent has also tended to increase his isolation. The old community gatherings have largely ceased, and the farmer's family has been cut off from many sources of social enjoyment and recreation. The farmer now goes forth to his fields alone. A rattling mowing-machine now takes the place of whistling companions with cradle and scythe. Kelly has no one to talk to all day long, sometimes, except the pigs and cows. Rural free delivery has rendered even the trip to the post office superfluous, and the newspaper makes the old-time neighborhood gossip and discussion seem a waste of time.

The farmer's wife has suffered even more. Alone in her house on the big Western ranch or in the Southern mountains, she shrivels and fades for want of social intercourse, for want of recreation. She is bound forever to the wheel, and her children grow up not knowing how to play. Hannah Belden will drive three and a half miles to town, with a sack of feed as her excuse, just for the sake of a glass of ice-cream soda and a few minutes' rustic persiflage with the fountain operator.

Man is a social creature, and cannot exist sanely and progressively without social contact in its lighter forms. For lack of these things the isolated mountaineer degenerates inevitably; Kelly takes to drink. Play is essential to the normal development of both individual and community, and it is because play has departed so generally from our hills and farms that insanity is more prevalent today in the rural districts than in the cities.

All work and no play is what has made many of our rural regions dull places to live in, and has driven the country young people to the cities. To reawaken the play spirit in such communities is to renew their youth. To organize and encourage sane rural recreations is a high duty confronting public-spirited citizens all over our land—to bring back some of the joy of living to the lives of farmers and little villagers and their families, and so to win back these people to a love of the country.

If play is not provided, there must be some other outlet—drink or other excesses, or insanity. The young men of Locust Valley, New York, understood this when they leased Neighbor Allen's barn,
fitted it up with a dance floor and pool tables and went into the 
amusement business in competition with the five saloons of the 
village. Locust Valley folk don't go out of town as much as they 
did to attend dances and moving-picture shows, and the saloons 
get less of their money. With the provision for play has come a 
more normal community life.

During the past few years far-visioned men and women have 
come to recognize the truth of this, and already the organization 
of community play has assumed the proportions of a national 
movement. I have been interested in making a few inquiries about 
these things, for I want to see the movement extended to our hills, 
so that life may be made richer for Hannah Belden and Kelly and 
the rest of our neighbors.

In the first place, the boys and girls need playgrounds. Many 
people, doubtless, still think of a public playground as a distinctly 
city need, since country children have all outdoors to play in. But 
it is the country people, not the people of the cities, who have for-
gotten how to play. It is a curious fact that out in the open country, 
where land is plentiful and cheap, there is practically none devoted 
to parks and public playgrounds, and public recreation fields are 
seldom to be found in our smaller towns and villages. Even the rural 
baseball team must pay rent for the use of some pasture lot.

The first move in the direction of constructive recreation in the 
country is to create a definite desire for it in the popular rural mind—
not always an easy matter. Then comes the need for the invention 
and development of forms of amusement at once wholesome, absor-
bing and distinctly rural. The centralized school, the country church 
and the rural or village park are all institutions which may be used 
in this recreation movement.

Where the country school has been developed along the lines of 
community service, it offers perhaps the best starting-point for 
recreation work. The Farragut High School at Concord, near 
Knoxville, Tennessee, is the best example I have seen of a school 
that serves as a social and recreation center for a farming community. 
The baseball ground, tennis and outdoor basket-ball courts and the 
shower baths in the basement of the school are all well patronized 
during the summer, while the assembly hall, with its piano and stage, 
is in frequent use the year round. The school's Commencement 
Day is turned into a general field day and community picnic, to 
which many former residents and pupils return. I have seen similar 
schools in Wisconsin and in North Carolina, and I know that they 
exist elsewhere, but there is no reason why every district in the 
country should not develop its school building as a recreation center.

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THE awakened country church is also offering a solution of the recreation problem in places where the pastor has assumed the right sort of leadership. Playgrounds, gymnasiums, reading-rooms and social organizations are provided and maintained by such churches, which have outgrown the old idea of an austere religion for the Sabbath only.

The old Licking Church, situated in open, farming country about ten miles southeast of Newark, Ohio, is a good example of the social rural church. Under the leadership of a progressive pastor, it has provided means for an active social life for the people of the community in the winter and for outdoor recreation in the summer. Social and study clubs and a lecture course are conducted, and in the summer months a spacious playground is provided, with facilities for baseball, basket-ball, tennis and croquet. A two-weeks’ camp for young farm people is conducted on the shores of Buckeye Lake.

Another pastor who does more than preach and take up a collection is Rev. Silas E. Persons, of Cazenovia, New York, a village of two thousand people. Formerly aristocratic and conservative, the church now conducts mission services and Sunday schools in four country neighborhoods some miles from town, and has taken part in organizing their recreations. Even card parties, dances and pool are taken under the wing of the church, and there are bowling teams in the village. Church banquets are held for sociability’s sake, and an annual outdoor field day. Last year the field day was broadened to include the competitive exhibit of produce, and so became a country fair. A plowing match was added and a lecture on agriculture. Side shows, fakers, gambling and liquor were excluded. In the winter a social club and entertainment course are conducted.

Rev. M. B. McNutt of Plainfield, Illinois, is another playing parson. Children’s parties, social clubs for older people, baseball teams, a winter singing school, summer lawn festivals, plowing matches in September, amateur theatricals and village reunions all form part of a successful program.

In Hanover, New Jersey, the church has organized the recreative life of the countryside, and all the holidays are now celebrated at home instead of in a neighboring city.

Rev. E. Fraser Bell, pastor in an Adirondack summer resort with about four hundred permanent inhabitants, finding a dearth of village interests in the winter, established a gymnasium which has become the social center of the community. He organized an athletic club and raised money for the building by means of socials, plays and donations. The children have possession in the afternoon
and the older folk in the evening. A reading-room has been added, and the gymnasium has been a real quickener of community life which includes some fun for the young folks.

In some places the most effective work in organizing community recreation has been done by independent, non-sectarian organizations, such as lodges, granges and improvement associations. A noteworthy example is the County School Athletic League of Ulster County, New York, organized by Dr. Myron T. Scudder while principal of the New Paltz State Normal School.

An interesting field day is held each year in August at Amenia, Dutchess County, New York. Here, too, the genius of the affair is an individual—Professor J. E. Spingarn. It is a big community picnic conducted on a cooperative basis, the whole countryside turns out simply to have a good time. Athletic contests of various sorts are held, but the tendency is toward general participation rather than toward a spectacle engaged in by a picked few. A parade and pageant in the morning is followed, after luncheon, by athletic events, games and races for all ages of both sexes, trap shooting, baseball, folk dances, Boy Scout contests and exhibitions and various outdoor shows, interspersed with addresses by prominent speakers. In the evening there is usually a band concert, a torchlight procession, fireworks and a dance.

In Paton, Iowa, a little town of five hundred inhabitants, the annual carnival, the community's one expression of its play hunger, began to develop decidedly objectionable features. So the Commercial Club of the town organized and promoted a Play Day, when the stores were locked up and the people made a general holiday. There were four baseball games for village and farm boys and men, a picnic dinner, field sports, group games for little folks, etc. Nearly two hundred people actually took part in the sports, and the whole thing cost less than five dollars. It is an annual affair in that town now.

The Windsor County Play Picnic and Athletic Meet is held each year in June at Woodstock, Vermont, under the supervision of Mr. A. C. Hurd, County Secretary of the Y. M. C. A. It is participated in by two or three thousand people, old and young. Windsor is but one of eighty-nine counties in the United States that have been organized by the County Work Department of the Y. M. C. A., and in all of them social intercourse and rural recreation are made a feature of the Association's program.

In many sections of the country the active agents in this movement are the community betterment and village improvement societies, which are steadily increasing in numbers.
THE Civic League of Bennington, Vermont, affiliated with the Village Improvement Society, is a body of young women organized to study local social problems. A playground for children was the first experiment, and the village corporation later took this over and employed a trained play leader. This was the first public playground in the State of Vermont. In nineteen hundred and eleven a successful historical pageant was held, and following that a recreation survey of the village was made by an expert under the auspices of the Board of Trade, and a permanent secretary of recreation was employed. The secretary conducts organized play and athletic work for girls after school, including races, basketball and folk dancing; she provides similar recreation for evening classes during the winter, uniting young women of different interests on a democratic basis. During the summer months organized play and athletics are arranged for both boys and girls, including baseball matches for the boys and volley ball for the girls, and during the winter suitable sports are arranged. Among the special events of the year are a Christmas play, Christmas cotillion, valentine party for the evening classes, Washington party for the girls' athletic clubs, a Washington's Birthday entertainment for Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, a folk dance festival in March, mothers' day and baby contest in August, annual athletic meet and various hikes, concerts, socials and entertainments.

Some workers in the field of organized recreation are urging that every town and village should provide a community commons or park as a recreation center, with athletic field, bandstand, picnic grove, children's playground, etc. Already this idea is taking form in a few localities. At Etna, Ohio, the town square has been used as a common playground and recreation center by the people of the township for half a century. In a dozen mill villages in South Carolina the Welfare Department of the Parker Cotton Mills Company furnishes the motive power, and largely through the Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A. conducts May festivals, garden clubs, athletics, and mothers' meetings.

Suggestions as to methods of organizing rural play are to be obtained from the Recreation Department of the Russell Sage Foundation, New York, and from the Playground and Recreation Association of America, New York. Some of our agricultural colleges, too, have taken cognizance of this movement—notably Cornell University and the Massachusetts Agricultural College—and offer summer courses in organized rural recreation, folk dancing, etc.

The latter college recently introduced this feature of its summer
school. Lectures were given on festivals and pageantry and courses and demonstrations conducted in organized play and folk dancing. The Extension Service of the college also conducted a boys’ camp under military discipline, where country life subjects were taught. During the morning instruction was given in agriculture, hygiene, and citizenship; the afternoons were devoted to organized play, recreation, games, tramps, and evening camp fires, all under expert guidance. Following the summer school came a conference for rural community leaders, where rural sociology, organized play and folk dancing were among the topics considered.

“You have got to make the country as attractive socially as the city,” says Professor Spingarn, “if you want to keep the young on the farms. The main thing is play. And the community should help to run its own recreations; its festivals should be not only for the people, but of and by the people.”

“Properly supervised play,” says Dr. Scudder, “is one of the most important concerns of every household, of every school, of every community.” Play makes for health and contentment, and a more kindly community life.

There is something about playing together that produces a closer human fellowship than any other act except fighting together. With the departure of social play from our farming communities, there vanished also the community spirit, the local pride, that counted for so much in the early upbuilding of the nation. The decay of many of our rural communities forms one of the saddest pages of our history. It is by the revival of community play that the race of American yeomen can most readily be brought back to its own and the sleeping spirit of the American rural community re-awakened.