A SUMMER FARM SCHOOL FOR CITY CHILDREN

Of most of us, the word “culture” has a more or less superficial meaning, as something apart from daily work and life. When we speak of “education” and “learning” we think instinctively of schools and colleges, textbooks and classrooms, around which all our studious traditions have grown. And so deep-rooted are these ideas and associations that our attention is always arrested by anything as unusual as a farm school.

This being the general attitude, it is no wonder that considerable initiative is required to launch anything in the shape of an outdoor school, where a few acres of fertile land take the place of a small, shut-in classroom; where spade and hoe, not pen and ink, are the tools; where seeds and bulbs take precedence of books, and actual productive work is rated higher than theories and memorizing. Every effort that succeeds in breaking through the popular prejudice and inertia, and gives to agriculture a serious place upon the school curriculum, is to be eagerly welcomed. For apart from the country’s need of efficient farmers, such healthy training has a definite value for every schoolchild, whatever may be his or her future career.

So earnestly have we believed in the wisdom of bringing the boys and girls of America into close touch with the land—with our gardens, fields and forests and all the natural sources of supply—that we have always been eager to record in THE CRAFTSMAN any signs of progress in this important field. And during the last few years we have published many articles showing how successful the new farming movements have proved—how practical and inspiring have been the achievements of the agricultural colleges, the school gardens, the vacant lot societies and similar forms of enterprise. For they have helped to win back many city-bound people to the wholesome work and freedom of the soil, and have turned the energies of thousands of boys and girls into happy, healthful and productive channels.

There is one phase of agricultural education, however, which seems to be only a recent development—and that is, the carrying on by the pupils of actual truck farming, for profit, on land available by the public schools. This has been worked out successfully in connection with Public School No. 4, in The Bronx, New York. Although the experiment is being tried at present on a comparatively small scale, with a restricted class of pupils, the enthusiasm of the little farmers and the success which they have already attained, makes the undertaking worth recording. For it often happens that a single practical example of this kind furnishes initiative and inspiration for other schools and communities, sowing the seed for a vigorous and widespread movement.

Simon Hirsdansky, the principal of the school in question, describes the work as follows:

“We have in our school,” he says, “four classes of ‘ungraded children’—those who are mentally backward or defective—and it is with a number of these boys that the farming has been successfully tried. This limitation, however, does not lessen the value of the experiment, for there is no reason why it should not be extended to sickly and anemic pupils as well as to those who are physically and mentally sound.

“Next to giving the children a good physical start, there is nothing that the school can do for them which is of greater value than fitting them for earning their livelihood. Realizing this, we had already taught them various handicrafts—basketry and shawl-making—in which they had turned out remarkably clever and salable products. But this was not adequate; they needed outdoor activity and also an occupation in which they would be sure of making good financially in the future—in other words, a field that was not crowded by over-competition. We decided, therefore, to teach them truck farming.

“Funds were raised by the Child Welfare League and the New York Foundation, and a course was planned to extend from April 1st to October 1st. Through the kindness of Commissioner Thomas Whittle—a man who is always ready to cooperate with any progressive undertaking—we were given the use of four acres of land on Hunter’s Island, in Pelham Bay Park. Reasonably good farming soil was chosen, in a spot sufficiently secluded to prevent the products from being tampered with.

“In this delightful spot the work began. Mr. W. R. McHargue, who had farmed in Florida and Montana and studied at the University of Stetson, Florida, was chosen as instructor. Seventeen pupils, ranging
from eleven to seventeen years old, were taken daily to the Island by Miss Elise Sey- 
farth, whose interest and enthusiasm are so unfailing that she is staying in town all the 
summer to carry on the work. And so dili- 
gent have the boys been in cultivating their 
land and caring for their crops, that they 
have already grown enough vegetables to 
supply a nearby inn. In fact, from the very 
first, the work was put on a substantial, 
profitable basis, and contracts were made 
with several neighboring households who 
promised to buy all the vegetables the boys 
could raise.

"Superintendent Maxwell, recognizing the 
importance of the little farm, has arranged 
to have it placed upon the list of summer 
schools and to have teachers assigned to it. 
The land is also being used for camping 
during vacation, so that it has the double 
attraction of a paying farm and a pictur- 
esque pleasure-ground."

As Mr. Hirsdansky points out, the value of a farm school of this character is by no 
means confined to the backward pupils for 
whom it was originally planned. Like man- 
ual training, physical culture and many an-
other branch of modern education, the ac-
tivity that has proved so beneficial for pu-
pils below the normal standard will prove 
even more advantageous for those of aver-
age development. An experiment like this 
opens up a new vista for public educators 
everywhere. Why cannot every one of our 
schools have not only its garden but its 
strip of farm land and agricultural instruct-
ors? Why cannot pupils be taught to grow 
their own fruit and vegetables, not as a 
merely dilettante study, but for actual use 
and profit? The contact with the soil, the 
exercise and the interest that always at-
taches to productive work, will form an ex-
cellent basis for future success in any field, 
while those who wish to make agriculture 
their life work will have the foundation of 
practical experience.

The organizers of such farms will find, 
as did Mr. Hirsdansky, that the parents 
will welcome such a program, while the real 
estate owners and park commissioners will 
be only too ready to place at the disposal of 
the school unused land that is fertile and 
early enough to be of real service. Nor need 
this outdoor work be separated entirely 
from the regular courses. Chemistry, bot-
any, mathematics—these may all be studied 
with relation to soil, fertilizers, plant 
growth, and the marketing of the products.

The value of a farm school during the 
summer is well nigh incalculable, especially 
for the boys and girls of the crowded city 
tenements. It takes them away from the 
stifling, unhealthy streets and dingy rooms 
out into the open air, among green fields, 
beside shady woodlands and pleasant wa-
ters, where their bodies and souls have a 
chance for that wholesome growth and ex-
pansion which their city environment can 
never give. It transforms them from idlers 
and mischief-makers and members of de-
structive "gangs" into busy, happy little 
farmers, proud of their responsibility, eager 
to work as well as to play in this novel out-
door "classroom."

When once a few of our public schools 
have included such a farm as a permanent 
part of their equipment, when once they 
have proved how much physical and mental 
benefit first-hand agricultural experience 
holds for boys and girls of practically all 
types and ages, surely the boards of educa-
tion in other towns and cities will see the 
wisdom of such training, and farm schools 
will eventually be, not the exception, but 
the rule.

There is one point about the farm on 
Hunter's Island that is worth particular no-
tice—namely, that the boys actually sell 
the vegetables they grow. Perhaps this ac-
counts partly for their success. If the work 
were done merely because "teacher said 
so," or because the parents wished it, or the 
child simply liked to make things grow, the 
enthusiasm would probably be much less 
and the results not nearly so encouraging. 
But when the boy knows that his crop of 
corn or lettuce or tomatoes is not only go-
ing to add to the relish of his own home 
dinners, but is also going to prove a mar-
etable product that will reward him, in 
actual money, for his toil, he is apt to work 
with considerably more zest and take 
greater pride in his crops.

What a contrast, moreover, is presented 
between this farm school and the average 
business college where the students are 
trained by means of "mock" buying, selling, 
correspondence, bookkeeping and other 
clerical work. Although it teaches them 
the principles of trade and business man-
agement, such a system lacks the interest 
and incentive which the realities possess. 
How much more satisfactory for the chil-
dren to feel that they are, even from the 
start, real producers. To "learn by doing" 
—that is after all the most effective plan.