Seeds of Understanding

By WILLIAM J. CALDWELL
Chief, Public Relations Branch, OLC Bavaria

The tall, slender youth half slid, half rolled down the bulging mound of fresh-cut hay.

"One thing you've got to admit," he said with a grin, "work is work wherever you are. Yeh, and there isn't much difference in people, either."

He drew a strand of hay and clenched his teeth on it. A little boy, clad only in loosely-fitting leather pants that hung precariously above his knees from stained leather straps draped over his shoulders, trudged toward a nearby field of ripening cabbage. They exchanged a friendly wave of the hand.

"That's Hans," he said, pointing toward the youngster, "a great kid - reminds me of the kids back home. He'll work if you keep an eye on him - but the minute your back is turned... A great kid! We had trouble at first getting acquainted. Just couldn't understand each other. But it's amazing how you can get to know and like another person even though you can't sit down and have a real bull session."

C. Dean Allen, a horticulture student at Michigan State College and son of Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Allen, who have a farm near Grand Rapids, Mich., was having a unique experience — and enjoying it. He had come to western Germany along with two other American rural youth last summer on an international farm youth exchange program sponsored by his 4-H Club and the US Department of Agriculture, to live and work with German farm families.*

Before returning to complete his senior year at Michigan State in the fall, he spent a month each with a rural family in each of the three southern states of the American zone, and with one family in the British Zone.

Up until a couple of months ago," the handsome 21-year-old youth declared, "I had never been out of the States except for an occasional visit to Canada. Germany was just a page in my history and geography books. Oh sure, I've spoken to GI's who were over here for the last war and some who served in the occupation. I also got to know 10 German PW's who worked for a while on Dad's farm, and now and then I spoke to an immigrant and refugee from Germany. I thought I knew Germany, but now I realize I didn't know the German people."

* See "Farmers from America" in Information Bulletin, September 1950 issue.

"I didn't realize," said C. Dean Allen, 21-year-old horticulture student at Michigan State College, after a couple of weeks on a farm in Bavaria as an exchangee, "that the people here live much as we do back in Michigan." Dean spent four months in Germany, one each on farms in Hesse, Wuerttemberg-Baden and Bavaria, enjoyed the experience thoroughly, learned new methods of farming and was able to pass along, in exchange, some useful hints.

Young Dean was speaking on the farm of Mrs. Theresa Wieser, which lies alongside Bavaria's Munich-Riem Airfield. A C-47 swooped low over the nearby clump of trees as it glided in for a landing less than a half-mile away. The youth raised his hand to shield his eyes from the hot Bavarian sun as he followed the course of the descending plane.

Then he glanced at an air raid shelter built in the ground, where members of the Wieser family had crouched during air raids when the nearby field had been a key German air-force base. The shelter's opening now was cluttered with sprawling weeds. The rustling twisted fuse-lage of a former German fighter was partly imbedded in the ground a few feet from the air raid shelter. Weeds and grass were growing over it.

"The natives around here had their fill of war," he declared. "Mrs. Wieser lost her husband and a son, the oldest of her 11 children, during the war. Her son, an air-force fighter pilot, was shot down over Holland, and her husband was killed during a bombing raid on the airfield over there.

"But instead of just feeling sorry for herself and closing her eyes to the outside world, she's now doing her share toward making this world a better and more understand-
ing place to live. Just now she's in the States on a HICOG farm women's exchange project. As a matter of fact, it was at her request that I was sent to her farm here."

Young Dean said that Bavarians in the district were friendly, but at first a few were suspicious of him.

"But when they learned I wasn't here to force ideas on them," he pointed out, "they began accepting me. I've made many friends during the couple of weeks I've been here already, but most of all I'm learning that the people here are much like our own people back home — they're generally hard working and sincere and want to be friendly."

He said members of the Wieser family at first hesitated to give him farm chores to do.

"But when I assured them I wanted to work with them," he said, "they let me help with the haying, operate their tractor and do other jobs. I also offered to help with the chickens, but the fellows here pointed out to me that in Bavaria at least, feeding chickens and milking cows are jobs reserved for women and children. The heavier work is left to the men."

Dean said that he was learning new farm methods from the Wiesers and modestly admitted that he was passing on some helpful tips to them.

"I've also learned to have a greater appreciation for classical music," he added. "We've attended several concerts in Munich and I've enjoyed them. Even the kids here know more about classical music than I ever hope to know."

He has also spent evenings with the youth in the district, bowling, taking long walks, or going to their local club in the village for an old-fashioned gabfest on the day's events.

"Somehow," he said, "I didn't realize that the people here live much as we do back in Michigan. They've had their fill of war and now are doing their little part in helping to maintain a peaceful world. Their direct part is small but still important. They go to town hall meetings, for example, and discuss their common community problems. They'll argue back and forth for hours before reaching decisions. It makes the people feel they are more a part of the community, and they do take pride in being able to express their own views publicly.

"The folks around here tell me it's a new experience for them — that in the past they didn't dare. Since coming to Germany I've seen several town meetings and am quite impressed with the way the people jump to their feet to present their views, defend another's point of view or argue vehemently against a proposal. Then, after the meeting, off they go together for their mug of beer."

Dean said since coming to Germany, he's been following a daily routine — rising in the morning about seven, having breakfast of coffee, rolls and eggs, and then going into the field to work alongside his German colleagues until noon. After a lunch that may consist of roast pork or chicken, potatoes and an assortment of vegetables, he resumes work until around six. After dinner, he spends his evenings attending town meetings, going to the theater or a concert, walking to the nearby village, or just staying home to catch up on his letters.

"I had to get used to the cooking," he remarked. "Germans don't use much salt for flavoring food, but I soon got used to that. And German farmers also get along with a breakfast of only coffee and rolls. But the Wiesers had heard that farm families back home went in for a larger breakfast, so they have eggs for me each morning."

He said his limited knowledge of German was probably the biggest handicap.

"I'd give anything if I could speak their language," the youth mused. "But it is surprising how one can manage just the same. This experience is certainly teaching me that if people would only open their eyes they would see that there are really far less differences between people than they imagine."

The youth's eyes caught young Hans emerging from the cabbage patch. Dean called out in words that resembled neither Bavarian nor English. Hans grinned and waved his hand in a symbol of understanding.

"See what I mean," Dean declared, swatting a fly which was nibbling on his arm. "Hans and I speak different languages, but we understand each other perfectly. I can't really explain it — and I guess he couldn't either. But when people want to be friends, they usually can find some way of communicating with each other."

A day on a farm in Bavaria is a long one, just as it is on farms in the United States and elsewhere, young Dean Allen found. Up early, he worked until six o'clock in the evening with only a break for lunch. Dean reported he learned much about people and music as well as farming.