H. L. Ewbank (Chairman):

This meeting is serving a two-fold purpose. In the first place it is a demonstration of a type of program that we hope you will like so well that you will want to use it in some of your local organization meetings. It provides for the cooperative study of the topic concerning which the club desires information. The results of this study are presented in a series of informal talks, followed by informal discussion in which all present are given the opportunity to take part.

We are especially fortunate in our choice of the subject for this demonstration. Few of us are fully informed on the workings of our county government, and most of us have very little knowledge about the types of local government that exist in different parts of the country. This meeting will serve a second purpose in bringing us information that is both timely and valuable.

Three of our discussion leaders live in Dane County, under the supervisory system of county government. The other three have come all the way down from Rusk county to tell us about their experience with the commission form of government.

Each discussion leader will have a maximum of ten minutes. The timekeeper will give a warning signal at the end of eight minutes and again when the total time has expired. Following the six talks, we will have half an hour in which we will all join in the discussion.

The first step in the investigation of any subject should be to learn as much as possible about its history. So, to begin our discussion, Mrs. Gertrude Anderson will tell us something about the four different forms of county government.

The Forms of County Government in the U.S.

and What Changes are Under Way

Mrs. Gertrude Anderson
Basco, Wis.

The county has been called the "Jungle of American Government". In no other unit are there so many independent and irresponsible elective officials. As a result, county affairs in many parts of the country are extravagantly and corruptly managed. An examination into the records of a certain county in New York State recently revealed county expenditures for such things as solid sets of silver, table knives and forks, for certain officials. In a county in our own state, a very prominent official who had held office for many years committed suicide last summer because he could no longer conceal his guilt in the misappropriation of the people's money. More recently, we have been amazed at the number of unscrupulous men who had themselves appointed to act as distributors for the C.W.A. fund in various communities in order to use it for personal or political purposes. In Michigan there is scarcely a county which has not had some official scandal sometimes bordering on criminality.
These evils are but few of the examples we could find of the widespread conditions promoted by a confused and decentralized form of county government existing in practically every state in the Union. And yet, what does the term "county government" mean to you and me? I venture to say that until recently it meant nothing more than that once every two years we went to the polls in April and checked a long list of names of candidates who were running for county offices. After the election, if we were at all interested in the outcome, we merely wondered if the names we had so haphazardly checked, happened by chance to correspond with the names of the successful candidates. Why this utter lack of interest? Conditions were good. The majority of us had enough money to spend for food, clothing, shelter, and plenty for luxury. What did it matter what any unit of government did with our tax money?

But the depression has changed things—we have become anxious about the ways and means in which our tax money is being used, because we find it so hard to scrape it together. As a result we have become more than mildly interested in county government and the men who guide it. In other words, we have become "government conscious" and for this I say, "Thank God for the depression". With this new consciousness comes the realization that we know but very little about the mechanism or set-up of the county government machine. I shall try very briefly to outline the various forms of county government in the U. S. today, the need for change, and the changes which are already under way.

The county, which is the largest division of local government, exists in all states except Louisiana. However, there is a great difference in the relative importance of the county in different sections of the country. In New England, the township is the leading unit. In the South and in the West, there are some twenty-five states where the township exists in name only and the county is the important unit. In the centrally located states, 17 in all, around the Great Lakes and west to Montana, there are both townships and counties. However, in the northern states of this group the township is more important than the county and in the south central section, the township is subordinate to the county.

The most important organ of the county is, of course, the county board, which is to be found in every state except Rhode Island. There are two general types of boards. First there is the large board of supervisors representing the various townships in the country; second the small board of commissioners generally elected at large. There are many variations from these two general types.

Throughout the country within the past year, there seems to be a definite sort of expanding in the people's thinking along the lines of county government. We pay a lot for our love of tradition. It is queer how easily we can junk a 1928 automobile or discard out-of-date clothing, though it may be perfectly good, and yet how doggedly we have held onto a 17th century form of government which may have been all right in the days of the spinning wheel and seventeen petticoats, but now belongs in a museum along with George Washington's ensemble of silk stockings and knee breeches together with his carriage, coachmen and all other accoutrements of the epoch. That the county government we have persisted in hanging on to is archaic
and, therefore, defective has been proven by numerous surveys made of counties throughout the nation.

All of these surveys agree in at least four of the major defects. They are: 1st, the county lacks an executive; 2nd, the number of elective officials is too large; 3rd, its administrative methods are poor; and 4th, in many counties, the boards are too large to operate efficiently. With these defects in mind, let us see what definite progress has been made and is being made in county government throughout the nation. Realizing the need of a single responsibility at the head of the county unit, two counties in California and one in Virginia have adopted the county manager plan, 41 counties in 15 other states are considering it. This plan is undoubtedly the newest pattern in county government, it functions much as the city manager plan which operates in Janesville, and Beloit, and, as the clerk of San Mateo County, California, writes in a recent communication "It is the ideal plan of local government, if the people will keep the political boss and his dirty hands out of the dough."

Various remedies for the second defect, namely that the number of elective officials is too large are being tried. We find that in Missouri, West Virginia and in Ohio, certain county offices are consolidated. Consolidation of counties likewise would do away with a great number of elective officials in that the same number of officers required to do the work of one county would then do the work of two or three counties. Consolidation measures have been considered by at least 20 states, but as yet, the original 3072 counties in the U.S. still numbers 3069. Consolidation, therefore, seems to be still just in the minds of people rather than in legislative action.

Third, administrative methods are poor. In many counties in various states, methods are being improved by installing the budget system, centralizing the purchasing and using up-to-date accounting methods. In others, some of the functions of the county have been taken away entirely and given to the state. This is what Virginia and North Carolina have done with highways and schools. This leads us into another line of thought - may not the county disappear entirely? Don't you think with me that in a state the size of Rhode Island where the entire area is smaller than that of a county in the west, people could think in terms of state rather than country?

Fourth, many boards are too large. In Minnesota each county has five commissioners who are elected from districts. Even Hennepin county where Minneapolis is located has but five commissioners. In our own state, Rusk, Vilas, and Burnett Counties have adopted the commission form which reduces the membership of the boards by a large number. Reports from counties using the plan show that it works efficiently.

Changes are bound to come though ever so slowly. The old form of government in any unit, large or small, is on its last legs and the hullabaloo we witness today in Germany, Italy and Poland and even in our own glorious republic is but the death gurgle of an organism that has served its day of usefulness. A new social order is upon us and the old must get out. Social progress must not be thwart-
ed. If this is to be accomplished all forms of government as we know them today must pass off the stage. Perhaps to perform this huge task by beginning with county government may seem as impossible as trying to slaughter an elephant with peanut shells and our work at it may seem as ineffective as the efforts of a canary bird trying to chisel away the Rock of Gibraltar. In spite of that, it behooves you and me to study the possibilities for progress in county government because it is also true, that "Tiny strokes fell big oaks". In any case, even tho it be on a micro-metric scale, we must go FORWARD and not backward in our new awakening.

Mr. Embank (Chairman):

We are now ready to take up the different forms of county government so that we can consider the advantages and disadvantages of each. We in Wisconsin are most familiar with what we have called the supervisory system. Mr. G. H. Stehr, who has had first hand experience with this system, will tell us about the work of the county board.

The Work of the County Board of Supervisors.

G. H. Stehr,  
Cottage Grove, Wis.

The work of the County Board of Supervisors consists of governing the County. Let us view briefly the procedure. At the spring election, the voters of each township, incorporated village, and city ward, elect a supervisor to represent them on the County Board, which in this county, consists of 81 members.

This body meets in three regular sessions during the year, but is subject to the call of the chairman at all times. Their pay is limited to 20 days for the year. The first of June session is the organization session, when the board elects its officers and organizes itself into a working unit. This is a five day session. The November meeting, a ten day session, is the business session when the budget must be prepared, taxes levied, etc. The January session of five days is mostly to gather up loose ends and wind up the business of the year as much as possible. Their first duty when this body meets to organize is to elect their officers. They then proceed to elect a committee on committees whose duty it is to appoint the members of the seventeen standing committees. As most of the work is done in these committees, I shall try to give you a brief summary of some of their most important duties.

The Highway Committee consists of three members who are elected by the County Board. It is their duty to buy and sell road machinery as authorized by the County Board, to determine whether state aid construction projects shall be let by contract or be done by day labor, and enter into proper contracts for the construction and maintenance of highways and bridges. They have a right to enter private lands with their employees and agents to remove weeds and brush and to erect snow fences, to keep the highways reasonably free of snow. They have supervision over the expenditures of all gas tax funds. They must meet from time to time at the County seat, and together with the County Clerk, audit all payrolls and material claims resulting from state aid highway work.