Mr. Ewbank (Chairman):

I have recently learned that we now have three counties in Wisconsin with the commission form of government. Mr. C. J. Justus will tell us how this system works in one of these counties.

How the Commissioners Run the County

G. J. Justus
Holcombe, Wis.

Commission form of government, from the standpoint of economy, shows from our own experience, that there is a decided saving. In Rusk County, from 1922 to 1926, the County Board of Supervisors expended $14,086.26. Under the new three (3) man commission from 1928 to 1933, the total expenses were $5,640.24, saving of $5,446. or an average of $907.67 each year.

Under the fifty-fifty plan the county pays half of bridge and road construction and the town the other half. In 1927 the town paid their share in full, but the county could not meet the appropriation and was behind $3,285. In 1928 the commission form came in and in 1932 the county's deficit was only $1,804. showing greater efficiency in handling highway matters. For road construction the deficit was $22,840. in 1927, but by 1930 the county had paid up this sum and expended another $7,268. At the present time there are no deficits in any of the highway accounts and the combined credits to that department are approximately $15,000. This is a record any county might well be proud of.

In the bonded indebtedness, Rusk County has $9,000. Compare this with some of the other counties. Last year we built a new bridge in Ladysmith, our county seat. The state highway engineer condemned the old bridge and figured that a new one would cost $120,000 of which the County of Rusk and the City of Ladysmith would have to raise $60,000. The commissioners turned down the proposition because they knew the county could not afford to pay that much money. The bridge job was then left to the lowest bidders and it cost $73,000 and the state paid the entire cost.

From the standpoint of efficiency in operation, we also contend that a County Board of Commissioners is better than the Board of Supervisors. Under the old form, a careful and well-planned budget was almost impossible because of lack of cooperation among the members. As will be pointed out to you by a later speaker, each supervisor is a political officeholder out to get everything he can for his particular village, town or city ward so that he can corner enough votes to be reelected next spring. He certainly isn't going to vote for anything in the line of economies that will cause the loss of any of these votes.

When we have only three men who are dealing with the affairs of the county as a whole, there are no political favors to be considered and they work from the standpoint of what will benefit the entire county. Let me cite to you an example of how money is saved...
today by our County Commissioners. A few months ago the Town of Grow raised $2,000 at its annual meeting to build a new bridge and under the fifty-fifty plan the Town Board asked the County Commissioners to appropriate an equal amount. The County Commissioners refused to raise the amount and the bridge was repaired for $175.00 and guaranteed by responsible engineers to last for 20 years. Another similar example occurred in the village of Hawkins. The village board asked for $400. appropriation for a bridge. The County Commissioners were willing to appropriate the money but ordered the bridge inspected by the highway commissioner which was done and the bridge was repaired for $66.00 and is good for another sixteen years. With the balance of the money one and one-half miles of road in the Town of Hawkins was gravelled. This certainly shows efficiency in handling expenses.

From the standpoint of responsibility to the people and the ability of the people to keep informed about their county government, we believe that a small body of commissioners is much better than the old large body of supervisors. Under the old system, the board met twice a year, committees were appointed according to political plan, proceedings of the board as a whole, discussions, etc. were published in the county papers and in the Official Proceedings of the Board. Probably the interests of a fair number of people were really aroused as to what actually was done. But after that, how many people bothered to find out what those committees did, how many meetings were held or if the members really performed their duties or not? By the time the next meeting rolled around, the people had forgotten all about the original issues and consequently very few had a clear understanding of just what laws were being made by the County Board.

Now let us see what happens under the three-man board. First they meet regularly twice a month and special meetings may be called at any time. Any citizen who has any business to take up or any questions to ask may attend the meetings. All current bills are audited and a full and complete account of all matters acted upon at the meeting is published in the county papers the following week. Consequently any citizen who wishes to be informed, has only to read and talk with some one who has attended the meetings. As in the case of the old board, there were too many people who had no understanding of government functions or who worked only from selfish or political motives. Many of these men had difficulty in keeping the affairs of their town straight. Responsibility for various departments was spread among too many people. With a three-member board, the entire board acts as a committee for each department. When trouble arises or information is desired, no one member can shirk or pass the responsibility on to another's shoulders.

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Mr. Ewbank (Chairman):

Two questions that always arise concerning the small board or commission are: (1) Do political influences creep into the work of the board, and (2) Can the few commissioners do all the work of the county government efficiently? These questions will be discussed by Mr. Henry Sillman.