THE COST OF LIVING

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The cost of living has become so high that the problem of supplying the table with satisfactory food is becoming a serious one to the man of ordinary income. It is certain that the cost of living has increased greatly during the past fifteen years, but the causes that have brought this about are complicated and are not so easy to determine. It is even more difficult to prescribe remedies. While visiting various sections in connection with my work in farm management, my attention has frequently been called to some of the probable causes of the present economic conditions.

From what I have been able to observe, the following stand out prominently among the causes for the rapid advance in prices: Higher standards of living; the increase in the size of cities as compared with the gain in population in rural districts; the increased price of farm lands, which is out of proportion to their production; the fact that nearly all the desirable western land is already taken by settlers or is in the hands of speculators; the large area of land in all parts of the country that under our present management does not produce enough to pay the labor bills; the low average yields of farm crops; the low grade of average live stock; the high cost of transportation; the excessive profits of middle-men; the fact that those who pay their bills really have to support the "dead beats;" the relative decrease in the value of gold; and last, but not least, taxes, tariff, and trusts. Each of these topics would in itself be enough to furnish a subject for a long article, and I fully believe that it is our duty as well as our privilege to study each carefully and do what we can towards its solution.

The standard of living is gradually rising in the country as well as the city, and I doubt if anyone will advise that we try to decrease the cost of living by cutting down this standard. Our houses are better built, better furnished, have more of the modern conveniences, and are much more sanitary than the houses in which our fathers lived. At the present time we have rural telephones, free mail delivery, and we travel more and educate our children better than did the preceding generation. I would much prefer to see the present standard raised, rather than lowered to that of thirty years ago. We will go forward, and the time is coming soon when we will not be content to live in anything but a modern house with all modern equipments, such as furnace heat, gas or electric lights, and hot and cold running water in both the bathroom and kitchen. All these things cost money, and the earning of this money takes energy and thought, yet we wish to go forward in the way in which we have started. Consequently we can hardly look to the lowering of our standard of living as the solution of the problem.

The United States, during the past thirty years, has seen an unprecedented growth of her cities as compared with the increase in rural population. This has been brought about in part by the increased use of machinery on the farm, and by the great demand for all kinds of manufactured products. The high wages paid to those engaged in manufacturing has made it difficult to get good hired help on the farm at any price. In some cases the owners themselves have sold their farms that they might work in the machine shops in the cities.

There is also something of a movement from the city to the farm. Many
city people have an idea that the farmer is getting rich, and that all they have to do is to buy a piece of land and wait a few years for it to double and treble in value. We can hardly expect this migration from the city to the country to have any great effect on the cost of living. From what I have seen of this movement I am led to believe that it is caused chiefly by the flowery advertisements of the real estate men. My observation has also been that the greater number of these people are led into deals that no real farmer would bite on. Why a purchaser of real estate will pay $20 for undeveloped jack pine lands when he can buy the same kind of land close by that is fully as well located and certainly as valuable for $1.00 per acre, is something I do not understand.

Farm lands are rapidly rising in price. This has been brought about in part by the increased demand for farm products. In order to make interest on this increased value it is necessary that the products of the farm should be sold at high prices. As the best of the western lands are all taken, we can hardly look for values of farm lands to go down permanently. There may be a temporary fall in the price of land and in the prices of farm products, but the tendency will be upward. As the population of the country increases, there will be an increased demand for all kinds of raw material and for all kinds of farm produce. This will have a tendency to raise rather than lower the price of land and also what that land produces, consequently we must not look for cheaper lands to bring about a lower cost of living.

In traveling over some of our western states one is surprised to see so much apparently rich land that is really doing nothing. This is especially true of large areas of central and western North and South Dakota. The traveler, impressed with what he sees, inquires as to why such land is idle. He is informed that this quarter section belongs to a man in Illinois, that that section was recently purchased by an Iowa farmer, and that other quarters and larger areas are in the possession of certain real estate dealers. He may then ask as to what these owners expect to do with the land, and he almost invariably receives the information that this land is being held for higher prices. The prices at which the land is now held are so high as to be practically prohibitive to the real farmer, but as land is considered a safe place for one to invest his money the owner of the land feels that he can afford to wait until somebody pays him his price. During this time the land produces nothing and land prices are constantly increasing. In short, the owner does not develop the land and he puts the price so high that no one else can develop it. This is one of the great problems before us now, but I do not know its solution. If all the unproductive idle land could be brought under a high state of cultivation, the effect on the cost of living should be considerable.

Throughout Northern Michigan, Northern Wisconsin and Northern Minnesota there are large areas of cut over lands, and in many of the states of the Central West the area of unproductive swamp land is very extensive. These areas will eventually be brought under cultivation and will produce large amounts of food. The cost of clearing Northern cut-over lands is high, and the expense of draining swamp lands makes their reclamation difficult. When these millions of acres are brought under cultivation they will provide homes for a large population and assist greatly in supplying our people with food.

Instead of adding to the acreage of the farm, the time is at hand when we must make each acre produce more. The low average yield of farm crops and the poor grade of live stock keep down the profits of the farmer and add greatly to his cost of living as well as to the cost of living of his city friends. It will require extra labor to increase the yield of crops, but in most cases the net profits will be greater. People in the city sometimes complain that everything is being done by the government to help the farmer, while nothing is being done to help the people of
the city. If our department can in any way bring about increased production this increased production will not only enrich the farmer, but reduce the cost of living to those whose homes are in the city. Besides making the productive acres yield more, there are many farms on which the cultivated area can be considerably increased. The office of farm management is doing what it can to assist farmers in planning their farms and in getting more out of their land.

Whether the railroads are receiving more than their share for transporting the products of the farm I am not prepared to say, but I am certain that it is costing the farmer too much to haul his produce over the average country roads to market. The improving of the country roads would cut these losses down appreciably, and would be of great advantage to all the people.

I am pleased to note that the state of Wisconsin proposes to take a hand in the improvement of roads generally throughout the state. As long as the maintenance of country roads is in the hands of local parties, just so long will we have poor roads. I have often seen a dozen men working on the roads of Wisconsin and the whole dozen doing less work than two able bodied men could easily do. Their ability as story tellers and their ability to assist in keeping alive neighborhood gossip was far superior to their ability as bridge builders or highway improvers. The improvement of the roads which now seems assured for this state will cut down the cost of farm products appreciably and on the other hand will make the farms more valuable.

It is unfortunate that so far we have been unable to bring the producers and the consumers closer together. Middlemen will probably always be necessary, but the fact is that at the present time we have too many of these middlemen to support. On the average these men are not making more than a good average living, but there are so many of them and the farm products have to pass through so many different hands before they reach the consumer, that it really costs more to get many farm products into the hands of the consumer than it does to produce these products.

In every city there are certain people who do not pay their bills. In order that storekeepers may make up for these losses it is necessary that they charge higher prices to those who do pay. That means that honest people not only have to support themselves, but they are obliged to help support the lazy, shiftless, good for nothing class of the city. Whether it will be possible or practicable to enact a law that will do away with this form of dishonesty or not I do not know, but I am satisfied that an attempt should be made to make the law severe enough to stamp out this class of cheating altogether.

As gold is our standard in determining values, its increase or decrease has a marked effect in determining the price of all other articles in dollars. In a general way it may be said that the price varies in direct proportion to the quantity of gold. As gold is becoming cheaper and cheaper and from appearances will continue to do so for some years to come, this cause for higher prices is likely to be increased rather than diminished. There is probably no other one cause that has had so great an effect in increasing the price of farm products and in increasing the price of land.

Taxes appear to be on the increase, but as we demand better roads, better bridges, and greater efficiency generally, and the city people demand paved streets, cement sidewalks and other improvements, we must expect to pay for these things in our taxes. On account of the greater publicity of the methods of evil doers, graft is gradually being diminished; yet it is true that we are still paying too much for improvements. The tariff undoubtedly increases the prices of those articles on which there is a duty. The tariff is probably necessary, however, because the American people prefer to support the general government by indirect rather than by direct taxation. As time goes on the tariff laws will be improved until eventually they will become fair-
er to all classes of people. The trusts, in so far as they increase prices, are to be condemned, but it is clearly evident that competition may be carried too far. When, on account of competition, it is necessary that a dozen traveling men cover the same territory in the same line, that a dozen delivery wagons should travel the same street for the same purpose, and that five or six milk wagons should visit the same city block each day, the cost of distribution due to unwise competition is clearly increased.

In this short article no attempt has been made to point out a complete solution of any of these problems, but simply to call the attention of thoughtful people to some of the things to be considered in connection with the high cost of living. While it is plainly the duty of our department to assist in bringing about increased production, I believe that we should at least lend our influence toward the bringing of the producer and consumer closer together so far as this would be to the mutual advantage of both. If the cost of production can be cut down, the cost of transportation diminished, and many other losses eliminated, the cost of living must be correspondingly decreased.

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**My Choice.**

It ain't no use to grumble and complain;
It's jest as cheap and easy to rejoice;
When God sorts out the weather and sends rain,
W'y, rain's my choice.

In this existence, dry and wet
Will overtake the best of men—
Some little skiff o' clouds 'll shet
The sun off now and then;

They ain't no sense, as I can see,
In mortals sich as you and me
A-faultin' Nature's wise intents,
An' lockin' horns with Providence.

It ain't no use to grumble and complain;
It's jest as cheap and easy to rejoice;
When God sorts out the weather and sends us rain,
W'y, rain's my choice.

—James Whitcomb Riley.

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**A Husband to a Wife.**

Tell me, my dearest, that thy love for me
Is dead, then turn and look into my eyes;
Thou still shalt find a share of Paradise
Has lingered there—my boundless love for thee.
So thou shalt hear nor pleadings, dear, nor sigh,

But I shall coldly stand and quietly,
Nor touch thy hand, nor smooth thy hair, nor be
Thy lover, for my love will make me wise
And strong to be thy helper, that we bide
Together—though apart. Not hand in hand
Into the morning, as true lovers might,
But still together, ever side by side—
Because we share one grief and understand—
Let us walk bravely forth into the night.

—Mary Sinton Lewis in Exchange.