

## COMMUNITY IN CLOVER

LANDRUM BOLLING

ON any list of the best farming communities in Tennessee, if not in the entire South, is Belvidere in Franklin County, just above the Alabama border. North of the Black Belt, the land here is by nature no more fertile than thousands of square miles of red clay soil which stretches across the middle South, and the owners of 75 years ago were so convinced it was already worn out that many moved away. Yet today the Belvidere farms are highly productive, and the surrounding area proudly calls itself the Crimson Clover-Seed Center of America.

The beginning of this new prosperity can be fixed almost exactly. It was a day in the winter of 1867. A couple of wandering Swiss Americans, Samuel Kaserman and his ailing son John, after two winters of traveling through the Southern states, stopped to rest on a knoll along the road south of Winchester, Tennessee. Spread out in a great semi-circle to the east and the south were the ragged edges of the Cumberlands. The old man gazed at them reminiscently and turned toward the rolling fields which stretched from the foot of the mountain off in the distance to the west: "Well, John, down in here somewhere I'd like to spend the rest of my days. The land is promising if we give it proper care; and those mountains look something like the ones back home. They'll be good to rest the eye on."

Thirty years had passed since Samuel Kaserman set out from Leuzigen in the Bernese Seeland. A stone mason of inde-

pendent mind, he had led the local peasants in their struggles against the Austrian overlords who monopolized the best lands and dominated the economic life of the community. But threats of arrest and reprisal convinced him he would have to quit his native village.

With his wife and children, Kaserman started for America in 1837. Landing at New York, they traveled up the Erie Canal, across to Cleveland—where they turned down the offer of city land at eight dollars an acre—and headed south to the hilly country near New Philadelphia, Ohio. There on Stone Creek, Samuel Kaserman built a tannery, a grist mill, and a house. A few years later he established a wholesale grocery business in town. In these enterprises the family prospered, but by 1866 another migration became necessary: John, in poor health following service in the Union forces, was ordered by his doctor to move to a warmer climate.

During the winter months of 1866-67, traveling much of the way on foot, John and his father hunted in vain through eastern Tennessee, northern Alabama, and Georgia for the right combination of soil, topography, and price. The following autumn they took up the search again, and early in 1868 they made their choice—the Hilliard Shore place in Franklin County, Tennessee.

For a farm of 280 acres, which the owner was about to lose because he couldn't pay the \$1,800 mortgage, the Kasermans paid \$6,000 in gold. The

neighbors shook their heads: here were a couple of Yankees with foreign accents, who had never chopped an acre of cotton in their lives, paying hard cash for a run-down farm in a section where experienced farmers who knew the land, the climate, and the local crops had given up. At the county seat the ex-owner boasted gleefully: "I don't know as I ever shot a Yankee during the entire war, but I sure cheated a couple of 'em like hell."

Though by local land prices they had been swindled, and by local standards of cash-crop farming they were ignorant and inexperienced, the Kasermans had the European peasant's love of the soil and his canny knowledge of how its fertility must be built up and maintained. They knew that long years of unrotated cultivation in such crops as cotton and corn had burned up vital plant food elements without putting much of anything back in their place. They saw that careless up-and-down-hill plowing had made capricious water courses which were broadening and deepening into aging wrinkles on the face of the countryside. Cash-crop soil-mining the Kasermans could not adopt, brought up as they were in the Swiss tradition of carefully diversified farming. And for cotton raising in particular they had no inclination.

Patiently they began to fill up the gullies with logs and brush. They shoveled into wagons the good top-soil which had washed into the low ground and hauled it back onto the slopes. From the beginning they kept cattle and used the manure for fertilizer. (Some of their neighbors dumped it into the creeks to get rid of it!) The land responded appreciatively to proper care, and in time the Kasermans were able to prove that farming at Belvidere could still be made to pay.

From the start they were so enthusiastic about the possibilities of Tennessee agriculture they began urging their kin to

join them. They wrote to friends in Ohio, to relatives abroad, to German-language papers in the North. There developed a slow, steady migration of Swiss, and a few German, farmers into the Belvidere community. Some came directly from Switzerland; others by way of earlier settlements in Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, Illinois, or Iowa. Most, however, moved either from Ohio or from the colony at Greutli, Tennessee, where a hundred recently-arrived immigrants found that the "fertile farms" they had bought unseen were a mountain wilderness.

Possessed of a common social, religious, and farming tradition, and faced with the common problem of making homes and a living in a cast-off country, the German-Swiss of Belvidere created a united community. They set up a German Reformed Church and, closely connected with it, a school. Out of necessity and self-interest they developed mutual-aid methods for handling their day-to-day economic problems. They pooled their purchasing power in co-operative buying of seed, fertilizer, and other farm needs, with substantial savings over retail prices. Of far more importance, however, were their co-operative efforts to find out how to farm their lands most effectively, their sharing of ideas and experience.

Individually they worked at the obvious jobs of filling up gullies, spreading manure, and planting grass cover-crops. They discovered, however, that still other efforts were required if the soil was to be brought again to full productive use. To provide the land with potash and certain missing minerals they scattered wood ashes hauled from neighboring sawmills. Knowing their lands needed lime, they drove their wagons across the mountain to a railroad's rock-crusher and brought home ground limestone dust. A few years later they acquired a crusher themselves. From the farm journals they learned of the

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plant-food value of buffalo bones which cluttered up the western plains. They ordered several carloads and ground them up for fertilizer.

Although they lacked county agents and soil-conservation experts, the newcomers kept surprisingly abreast of the latest developments in scientific agriculture. From extensive reading, from travels to various parts of the country, and from differing individual experiences before moving to Belvidere, they were able to pool information not generally available or used in the surrounding county. They were the first farmers in that region to use grain drills, manure spreaders, and mowing machines. In place of the customary bull-tongued plow which did little more than scratch the earth, they adopted steel turning plows. They introduced windmills and cream separators. Beginning with seed which John Kaserman brought back in his suitcase from a trip to Switzerland, they conducted long experiments in growing alfalfa, and eventually it became one of the main local crops.

Perhaps their most notable achievement, following the lead of John Ruch, was in developing wide use of clover and specializing in the raising of seed. Today Franklin County leads the nation in the production of crimson clover-seed, an important cash crop, although originally they had turned to clover solely as a way of building up land and providing hay. The Clover-Seed Festival at Winchester is now the major county celebration each year.

By 1894 the results of the experiments at Belvidere were being enthusiastically described in the report of the State Bureau of Agriculture, which urged farmers generally to plant clover: "Twenty years ago a few Germans and Swiss bought, near Winchester, some old fields that were utterly sterilized and abandoned. After long-continued toil, patience, and

careful attention, a good clover stand was obtained. From that period to the present, Belvidere has been one of the thriftiest, if not the most thrifty, agricultural community in the South. These people found a desert; they have converted it into an Eden. Lands that twenty years ago would not produce four bushels of wheat per acre are now producing twenty-five to forty bushels, and a like increase in all the other standard crops. . . . There is not in all the South a spot more lovely or attractive than Belvidere. Its farm houses are tasteful, neat and comfortable; its fields are models of high culture; its orchards are filled with the choicest fruits; its vineyards hang in season with purple vintages and golden clusters."

In the succeeding half-century, farming fashions of the neighboring area have come more and more to approximate those of the German-Swiss immigrants. And in recent years the Federal program of soil conservation has laid dramatic emphasis on many of the farm practices they had been following for two generations. Yet a careful study of farming in Franklin County, by Walter M. Kollmorgen of the United States Department of Agriculture, has shown that the people of German-Swiss descent still deserve the title of superior farmers. Their traditions have been absorbed by many of their old-stock neighbors, and some of the best Swiss farmers have moved to better lands elsewhere, yet the 35 families of Swiss descent at Belvidere have achieved and maintained a marked economic advantage over the average local farmers. Their farms are larger and more valuable, their annual incomes greater, their fields and homes better kept.

Aside from the fine stands of alfalfa and clover, the sleek herds of cattle, and the barns which by ordinary Southern standards are truly enormous, there are

## COMMON GROUND

other tangible evidences that Belvidere is an unusual community. Take, for example, the knotty weather-grayed poles which carry electricity to the various farm homes. They are obviously many years old and follow the earlier winding roads, in contrast to the new TVA rural electrification lines of the region, which march straight along the main highways. Those old power poles tell the story of the Belvidere farmers who did not wait for the REA or TVA, or even an enlightened power company, but who more than twenty years ago cut the longest timbers from their wood lots, built a line of over seven miles up to the edge of Winchester, and requested they be sold electric power. They got it, and became perhaps the first electrified rural community in the South.

The old black-top road which winds back and forth across the concrete of U.S. 64 tells another story of Belvidere's progressive spirit. By 1916 they had secured from the County Board a promise to build a hard-surface road from Winchester to their community. With the fine foresight of that day, county officials said the pavement would need to be only eight feet wide to take care of existing and prospective traffic. The farmers of Belvidere protested, without avail. And, rather than give up their conviction that the road should be sixteen feet wide, they subscribed voluntarily the money necessary to build the extra eight-foot width.

Not all community enterprises at Belvidere have been successful, however. Lacking a sufficient volume of milk to make it pay, a co-operative creamery, set up in the '90s, had to be abandoned. Subsequently a creamery was established at the county seat, and with better roads and a larger area to draw upon it has succeeded.

The two mutual insurance companies, on the other hand, have been highly successful. The first one, for fire protec-

tion, was started at Belvidere in 1916. It has operated continuously since that time and today insures over a million-dollars worth of farm property throughout the county. Encouraged by this experience, they set up a mutual life-insurance company a few years ago. Today it has over 1,800 members, who pay one dollar apiece each time a member dies. You may point out the failure of other mutual insurance companies or argue that risks are not spread over a wide enough base, but you can't discourage the canny farmers of Belvidere or their neighbors in other parts of the county. Theirs work.

Close association and intermarriage with old-stock American families have long since destroyed most vestiges of a "foreign colony." When Henry Warmbrod meets Emil Kaserman, his school desk-mate of 65 years ago, they may talk a little in the Low German spoken by Swiss peasants of the early 19th century, but that is chiefly a ceremonial warming-over of old memories by men who rarely see each other. Among the few surviving sons of the original immigrants, Warmbrod, at 75, is still working his farm, while Kaserman, at 78, is a retired college professor living in Knoxville.

The Kaserman lands, which were expanded to include over a thousand acres of mountain timber, have been sold. The older Kaserman brothers who remained on the land died childless, and their sisters long ago moved to neighboring towns. Emil, who had a leaning toward scholarship, taught science in various colleges and universities in the South and West. While he was in college, he left the Reformed Church and became a Southern Baptist. For a wife he picked an East Tennessee girl of English descent. His city-bred sons took to city occupations, and one of them, another John Kaserman, is an engineering draughtsman with the TVA.

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Henry Warmbrod, by contrast, lives in the house his father built and farms the fields his father tended. He married Lena Amacher of another Swiss-immigrant family in the community. Most of their eight children graduated from the University of Tennessee, some of them going on to careers in the city, others returning to the farm life of Belvidere. Parents and children alike have been continuously active in the church and community affairs started by the original immigrants.

The Kaserman and Warmbrod families symbolize two parallel trends in the life of Belvidere. In many rural communities, however, cityward migration is draining off so many of the most vigorous and intelligent that there is a serious deterioration of rural life: increasing tenancy, absentee landlordism, disintegration of church and other community groups, and a general lack of able local leadership. No such deterioration is evident at Belvidere.

In an area where tenancy is on the increase, the farmers of German-Swiss descent, in almost every case, own the farms they operate. None has been on relief, and their farms tend to stay within the family.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church is still the central institution at Belvidere, with a membership of over two hundred, as high as it has ever been. Defying the adage that churches are women's organizations, the Sunday School has three classes for men over twenty-one, and there is an active club called the Church-

men's Brotherhood. During the past spring, several men volunteered their labor to lay a new hardwood floor in the auditorium and to install a basement furnace. The program for young people is particularly successful. The Sunday School classes frequently hold the highest attendance records among the churches of the county. The Girls' Missionary Guild and the Christian Endeavor are flourishing auxiliary organizations, and under church sponsorship there are periodic socials and entertainments. On the edge of the church grounds are a much-used tennis court and a croquet yard.

The church still binds together the community—young and old. Henry Warmbrod, whose memory goes back to the beginning, puts it this way: "When our parents came here they faced an uphill fight, taking this worn-out land and trying to build it up to where it would be productive. They were strangers and foreigners. By themselves there's probably not a family that could have made it alone. But in their church they had a spirit, when you get right down to it, that enabled them to succeed. Our young people of the third and fourth generations are carrying on that spirit still."

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## POLONIA TO AMERICA

ED FALKOWSKI

My father's father was a Polish peasant. He had the peasant's dim sense of wonder and aloneness, building himself an inner world in which he lived with claim to few friendships other than that of the charred brief-stemmed pipe which clung in his mouth as if grown there and from which there curled an incessant smoke.

Letter-literacy had not pried open his mind to the magic of the written word. He saw life as tangible fact of earth and weather, of early rye in the field and a crop of fall potatoes, of money or no money in the purse. Its horizon now dwindled to the scope of a bin of winter wheat, now stretched beyond the world's rim where the sun dropped each day like a great coin.

Life and death of seasons, the ebb and flow of human generations, the ever-renewing struggle to convoy yet one more crop through locust and drought to autumn fullness—this rounded out his world, held him rooted to his two morgs of dubious soil and the patriarchal ploughshares of the local Pan, a landlord whose holdings of field, forest, and stream made up a total universe that asked no questions nor answered any, but accepted as its due each new peasant generation born to work its soil.

Here the peasant lived unaware of history, his universe defined in fireside legend. Poland was a past greatness refusing to die beneath the monumental debris of events. Even after its partition, national consciousness revived in the warm music of its language, which lived on despite

Tsarist edicts. Polish patriotism thrived on oppression. Through a mist of retold legend the lowliest Pole cast a nostalgic glance at the renowned splendor of a Poland that was no more. He longed for its restoration. He envisioned it as a theocratic utopia where the humblest would find food and shelter in a warmth of seigniorial benevolence. Such was the Poland my grandfather conjured before us years later as he sought, from time to time, to kindle in us a sense of Polish patriotism.

Upon this consciousness, the dream of America broke in rumor and letter, a vast promise making luminous a twilight of resignation and unfighting despair. There had gone forth from this village of Osiek in the Russian-Polish province of Polock numerous young men who now sent back word from Chicago, Buffalo, Scranton, Milwaukee, telling of new-found hope and well-being, of rediscovered dignity and self-worth.

The educated Pole commonly went abroad to Paris or London, where Polish culture was being established as the first of the great émigré cultures. But this world lay beyond peasant reach. His dream was rather of larders replenished, of crops secured from blight, of language beyond the pale of suppressing authorities, of children growing to a future instead of a past. He longed unconsciously to expel from his blood the torpor of an old fatalism.

My grandmother's brother, Uncle