

University Students' Attitudes to Farming Life

THIS is the age of public opinion surveys on all manner of subjects, and though results are sometimes greeted with a certain amount of scepticism, particularly if they run counter to firmly established ideas or prejudices, they are still of considerable interest and value. Because of the significance of farming in New Zealand's economy a survey on attitudes to farming life conducted at Victoria University College by Mr. A. A. Congalton, Lecturer in Psychology, among a group of students is of special interest.

THE technique of the survey was to take a selected sample of students (77 men and 30 women, members of a first-year class in psychology), ascertain the extent of their farming or farm life experience, including holidays on farms, and ask them eight questions in the form of a questionnaire which was completed during the regular work of class and took 15 minutes to answer. It was found that the majority of students had had some experience of farm life, though generally it was for holidays only. Between a fifth and a sixth had never been on a farm.

As might have been expected, the results of the questionnaire are as interesting for what they reveal indirectly as directly; principally the woeful ignorance of farming and farm life of what must be a large section of the population.

The first question was "Where would you like to live permanently?" and gave as alternatives a farm, city, small town, and large town. Eighty-four per cent. of the answers indicated a preference for an urban residence (city or large town) and only 4 for a country town; 12 per cent. favoured a farm.

Question 2 posed as a hypothesis an equal fixed and liberal income from each of farming, business, or professional occupations and requested a choice under these circumstances. The postulate is such an extraordinarily unnatural one that it is difficult to see how the answers could have any significance, but the results were similar to those of question 1, with those people who had at some time lived in a farm forming the majority in favour of farming as an occupation.

Types of Farming

The third question was concerned with preference for types of farming and, as might be expected, sheep farming had an easy victory, though what type of sheep farming was not indicated by the question. This confirms the existence of the popular belief that a sheep farmer's life is one of leisure. Among the reasons for the preference no one gave "social prestige", though one has a sneaking conviction that it must have been at least slightly in the thoughts of some of the respondents.

Such possibilities as dairy farming with a sharemilker which eliminate the main reason given as favouring sheep farming (lack of tie and routine drudgery) were not envisaged.

The fourth question encroached on the somewhat delicate ground of matrimony, that for the men being "Would you like to marry a girl who has lived all her life on a farm?" and for the women "Would you like to marry a farmer?" The personal factor was covered by the phrase

"other things being equal". Though analysed together, these two questions seem to relate to totally different concepts. Though 65 per cent. of the women had indicated earlier that they preferred to live in a city, and 95 per cent. preferred a professional occupation, 70 per cent. indicated that they would marry, or be likely to marry, a farmer, "other things being equal".

Probably the answer to this question might have been influenced by the national income statistics.

Question 5 related to whether university bursaries should be weighted in favour of those going in for agricultural work because of the importance of farming to New Zealand. The students were two to one against the idea, but some of the reasons given were important as indicative of confused thinking and lack of knowledge. Though the question was a wide one, most seemed to interpret agricultural work as farming, quite forgetting the numbers of research, extension, and administrative workers required in an agricultural country where farming is likely to encounter the law of diminishing returns unless these things are expanded. One answer was startling enough to be worth quoting: "Farming requires little knowledge, but a lot of hard work". Clearly a visit to a Ruakura or Massey or Lincoln farmers' week would not go amiss.

New Zealand Aristocracy

The next question reads "In so far as we have an aristocracy in New Zealand are the 'top tops' to be found mainly in cities or mainly in farming areas?" It is difficult to see how this question relates to attitudes to farming and in the absence of any definition of an aristocracy it is not clear what the question means. The 58 per cent. of the students who replied "both" gave the only possible intelligent answer.

Question 7 asked for an opinion on the contention that those people with the best brains and talent are likely to settle in the cities rather than on the farms. The question did not indicate what it was the brains were supposed to be best for. The fact that it obviously requires a higher I.Q. to be a successful research scientist or to hold a university chair than it does to run even a large farm suggests that the 85 per cent. who answered "in cities" may be correct; but in practice such a comparison is rather meaningless. Had the question been worded to suggest a comparison of agriculture as a whole with city life, the respondents might have been less definite in their answers. A third alternative was possible—the best brains and talent are likely to go overseas. Possibly what the question was trying to get at was a comparison of I.Q. and capacity levels per unit

of population in town and country. This could be ascertained only by a survey, if any really satisfactory measure of capacity can be found.

The final question, "What kind of a person is more likely to enjoy living on a farm? (that is, what values would you expect to find?)" provided some interesting material. The most popular answer was "likes hard physical work", followed closely by "fond of outdoor life", "likes animals and nature", and "likes solitude". Among the subjective qualities "reserved", "placid", "patient", "stable", "practical", and "self-reliant" ranked high, though "low intelligence" and "unambitious" both found some adherents. Unless included under the heading "other qualities mentioned once only" the attributes of ambition, initiative, and desire for financial independence are not mentioned, though these have been the outstanding qualities in bringing New Zealand land from bush, scrub, and swamp to the world's finest pastures.

Townsmen's Concept of Farmer

It would seem that the New Zealand townsman's idea of his country cousin is still based largely on the earlier "Punch" concept of the village yokel, that he or she has very little conception of the thought, skill, and enterprise required in modern farm management, but that farming would be quite a good job if one did not have to work so hard, and that in any case a farmer is a fairly good marriage prospect even for the professionally trained woman.

It must be remembered, of course, that the average age of the sample was only about 22; thus it is natural that the students should be influenced by conditions during the period of their adolescence.

In spite of what appears to be unfortunate choice of the wording of one or two questions and the inclusion of one or two others, the survey does draw a clear picture of the thought of what is probably a fairly typical sample of young budding professional people of today. If the picture is somewhat different from what some think it should be, that is not Mr. Congalton's fault, but it would be interesting to know whether it really is a true picture and, as it was stated to be a preliminary investigation, one looks forward to the result of the fuller survey which will presumably be based on a wider sample.—J.V.W.

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