

LIVING IN TWO WORLDS: RURAL MAINE IN 1930

The rural people of Maine lived in two worlds in 1930. The first, passing for half a century but far from gone, was a world of nearly self-sufficient farm and village families. Ethnically and religiously homogeneous, modestly schooled, isolated, and independent-minded, most of Maine's earlier rural families had little direct experience with distant markets and federal agencies. In the newer world, which had advanced rapidly during the 1920s, there were fewer but more specialized farms. Farmers who adjusted profited; others clung to the old ways and found themselves farming part-time or not at all. Life changed as modern transportation, communication, and service networks reached out into rural America. The farmer's children would ride buses to consolidated schools; the family would probably have a car for shopping, movies, and dances in nearby cities, as well as a radio, a telephone, electric lights, and modern appliances. Even if they stayed *in* the country, which fewer and fewer did, they would soon cease to be entirely *of* the country — of a world as distinctly rural as that of their grandparents. Even greater changes would come with the Depression and World War II, but in 1930 life balanced precariously between old and new. People lived in the "Great Conjunction," as Walter Nugent calls the meeting of the "rural" and "metropolitan" eras of American history.¹ Contemporary sources, census data, and the memories of survivors allow us to picture the economy, society, and culture of Maine at this critical watershed.



Clover and potatoes in this 1935 Aroostook County scene show Maine farming at its best. In areas less favored agriculturally, outmigration was changing the demographics and indeed the entire complexion of rural Maine society. UMO Extension Service photo, courtesy Fogler Library Special Collections Department.

Most powerful of the forces shaping rural Maine society in 1930 was demography. In 1880 Maine had more farms than ever before or since, and for another thirty years the numbers changed little. Except in Aroostook County, the pioneering days were over, but specialization and commercialization had not advanced far.² With few tenants and fewer bonanza farms, the yeoman, his wife, and their children kept the family farm a reality, not, as in other sections of the country, a memory.

Each census after 1910, however, indicated fewer farms. By 1930 farm families comprised less than half of the rural population and only one-fifth of the state's total. Older than their urban neighbors, rural inhabitants' birth rates were lower (except in Aroostook county), while death rates were highest in the smallest places. More than 40,000 Mainers forsook the countryside in the 1920s, leaving the farms in far greater numbers than they left the rural villages.³ In large part, this

rural decline reflected out-of-state migration. By 1930, 26 percent of all Maine-born persons resided in other states. Although this figure was just slightly above the national average, only 9 percent of Maine's native-born population came from other states, the second-lowest ratio in the country. Many Canadians had come to Maine, but most went to the cities, which (as in other states) grew rapidly during the generation before 1930.⁴ Fiction reflected fact: in Gladys Hasty Carroll's best-selling *As the Earth Turns* (1933), four of Mark Shaw's children and step-children left his Maine farm. The eldest son, trapped on the farm, complained bitterly: "There ain't no money around here any more; everybody knows that."⁵

Taking this to heart, many left and few came. In contrast to the cultural mix common to New England cities, the dwindling population of rural Maine remained nearly as homogeneous as it had been in the nineteenth century. More than three-quarters of the rural-farm population in 1930 was native-born of native parentage — the highest proportion in New England — while the tiny Indian minority outnumbered the handful of blacks. Except in the St. John Valley, the rural people were at least nominal Protestants. Nearly three-quarters of those who belonged to a church were Baptists, Methodists, or Congregationalists.⁶

The impact of this outmigration was felt by those who remained behind. The rural world, even in the most remote corners of the state, had changed significantly during the 1920s. Improved roads were increasingly open in winter to the fast-rising automobile traffic; schooling through the eighth grade had become nearly universal; electricity, telephone, radio, and indoor plumbing had already reached some. Where these heralds of modernization came most slowly, however, the exodus was most rapid, and the pace of outmigration in turn affected the spread of these amenities.⁷ Towns became too small for a high school or a good elementary school, too small for a doctor, too poor to gravel the roads, too far from the electric lines, too isolated for telephone. Henry Dunnack, a state librarian who thought more about this rural decline than anyone else

who wrote in his time, feared in 1926 that it was irreversible. He hoped that in areas where depopulation had not proceeded too far it might be possible to keep enough people to sustain the services, to raise the quality of life so that those who wanted to stay could and would do so.⁸

Certain aspects of the nineteenth-century rural economy persisted. Maine's longstanding tradition of supplementing farm income with other nonfarm jobs remained as strong in 1930 as in 1880. Except for nearly monocultural Aroostook County, Maine's meager soil, rolling topography, and severe climate forced farmers to mix crops and livestock and to rely on lumbering and other nonfarm jobs to make ends meet. They exploited the trees that covered nearly 80 percent of Maine. From the forests of the unorganized and virtually unsettled townships of the North, the domain of the paper companies and the land barons, came a million tons of pulpwood in 1929, more than any other state produced. Much of this was cut by farmers working seasonally in the woods. Wood products in fact were second only to potatoes as a source of farm income. Sawmills and small wood-turning firms bought from farmers, who could also tap maples for syrup, sell Christmas trees, and peddle firewood.⁹ A widow recalled that her husband "worked on the farm [only] part of the time The first part of our life together he worked mostly in the woods."¹⁰

The logs and the men who cut them often came from the fringes of the unorganized townships, where the nineteenth-century tide of settlement had flowed last and ebbed first, into and out of farms that "should never have been cleared." A shorter growing season (100-120 days) than the more favored southern areas, along with hilly terrain and rocky, infertile soil discouraged farming.¹¹ Often those who stayed there bought abandoned farms as investments, cutting them over later for timber or pulpwood.

If the hill-country people often combined woods work and farming to survive, coastal Mainers supplemented farm income with a yearly harvest of over 140 million pounds of fish, lobsters, clams, and scallops. They also tended lawns, cooked, and

kept house at the "cottages" where the wealthy vacationed, or worked at the many large hotels of the day. But when the "summer people" left around Labor Day, the natives, as one Mainer put it, "knew you had to work and you had to do whatever you could to earn a cent ... whether it was clamming or cutting wood or whatever"¹²

Fewer and fewer aspired to this rigorous cycle, however; the coastal counties were losing their rural people faster than any other part of Maine. In the few years between 1925 and 1930, 300 farmers gave up on one tract of seventeen townships along the middle coast and the rolling hills just to the north. Behind the dry figures one can all too readily imagine the alder, cherry, birch, and young conifers springing up in the small, irregular stone-walled fields, and the unpainted buildings disappearing in fires or slowly giving way under snow and ice. Picturesque Maine's coast might be; agriculturally productive it was not.¹³

Between the forest fringe and the coast lay a belt of intricately mixed farming. The census classified nearly half the farms in this region as "part-time," "self-sufficient," and "general." Farm families in this middle region typically raised large vegetable gardens and canned and preserved the gardens' products. In addition, they kept cows, pigs, and hens and cut their own wood. Depending on habit, preference, location, and markets, they might also sell hay, wood, milk, butter, sweet corn, poultry, apples, or eggs.

Despite the persistence of mixed husbandry, however, Maine farmers were specializing much more than their grandparents had. Since 1880, completion of the railroad network brought relatively cheap western beef, pork, butter, cheese, and wool to New England, driving marginal local producers out of the market.¹⁴ At the same time, rapid population growth in New England's cities increased demand for lumber, fresh milk, cream, canned sweet corn and blueberries, poultry, eggs, apples, and potatoes. Those who converted to these products, which either weighed too much or spoiled too quickly for

long-distance shipment, found a place in the competitive commercial farm economy. Those who bought the new labor-saving machinery to process farm products could increase profits with volume; the average farm's products were worth nearly four times as much (adjusted for price level changes) in 1920 as in 1880. Specialization continued through the 1920s, with Maine potato, apple, dairy, and poultry farmers enjoying higher purchasing power in the five crop years ending in 1929 than they or their predecessors had experienced between 1910 and 1914 — the “golden years” of American agriculture.¹⁵

A blend of traditional mixed husbandry and newer commercial farming techniques, Maine's farm economy reflected life at the “Great Conjunction.” By 1930 dairy farmers and general farmers who “grouped minor enterprises in fruit, vegetable, poultry or forest products around a core of dairying” comprised together about three-eighths of all the state's farmers. Fewer but better cows produced much more milk. Nonetheless, improved commercial farming methods did not answer all of rural Maine's needs. Of the five milk trains that pulled into Boston daily, only one came from Maine. Maine's farmers, slow to modernize their barns and handicapped by low quality hay, poor pastures, and expensive grain, fell further behind Vermont in the 1920s.¹⁶ Mainers in the egg business, concentrated in Cumberland and York counties, did better against New England competition, but again they supplied only a small fraction of Boston consumers. The state's orchards and fields of sweet corn, important as they were to Oxford and northern Androscoggin counties, counted for even less. Western competition made inroads, but the seasonal “corn shops” afforded rural people, especially women, some cash income in 1930.¹⁷

No “corn shops,” no extensive orchards, few Jerseys or Holsteins, and only a handful of Maine's gaunt, odorous hen-houses greeted travelers to Aroostook County. But the rolling acres of potatoes (132,887 in 1929) testified to the fact that here was a different Maine.¹⁸ Keen eyes would perceive less favorable conditions for potatoes in the County's northern and southern



An Extension agent sizes up a 1931 Aroostook potato crop. In the early 1930s Aroostook County provided nearly one-eighth of the nation's potato harvest. Continuing experimentation with new strains and new farming methods kept the region in the forefront of commercial potato production despite relatively small acreage under cultivation. Extension Service photo, Special Collections Department.

regions, but the central towns, nestled in a loop of the Aroostook River, led the nation in potato yield per acre. Here the "succession of long, broad, high ridges and swells" and the Caribou loam underfoot in the cultivated fields surprised those accustomed to the hillier topography, scrubby woods, and rocky pastures of "downstate" Maine. Such advantages made Aroostook agriculture, unlike that of the rest of the state, count for something nationally; after four decades of growth beginning with a rail link in 1894, the County produced nearly one-eighth of the American potato crop. Here one could find Maine agriculture operating on a paying basis. All admitted that there were bad years as well as bonanzas, but land values were among the highest in the state, and profits allowed Aroostook's farmers (one-sixth of Maine's total) ownership of nearly one-half of the state's tractors — power for the mechanized plowing, planting, spraying, and digging that characterized Aroostook's commercial farming.¹⁹

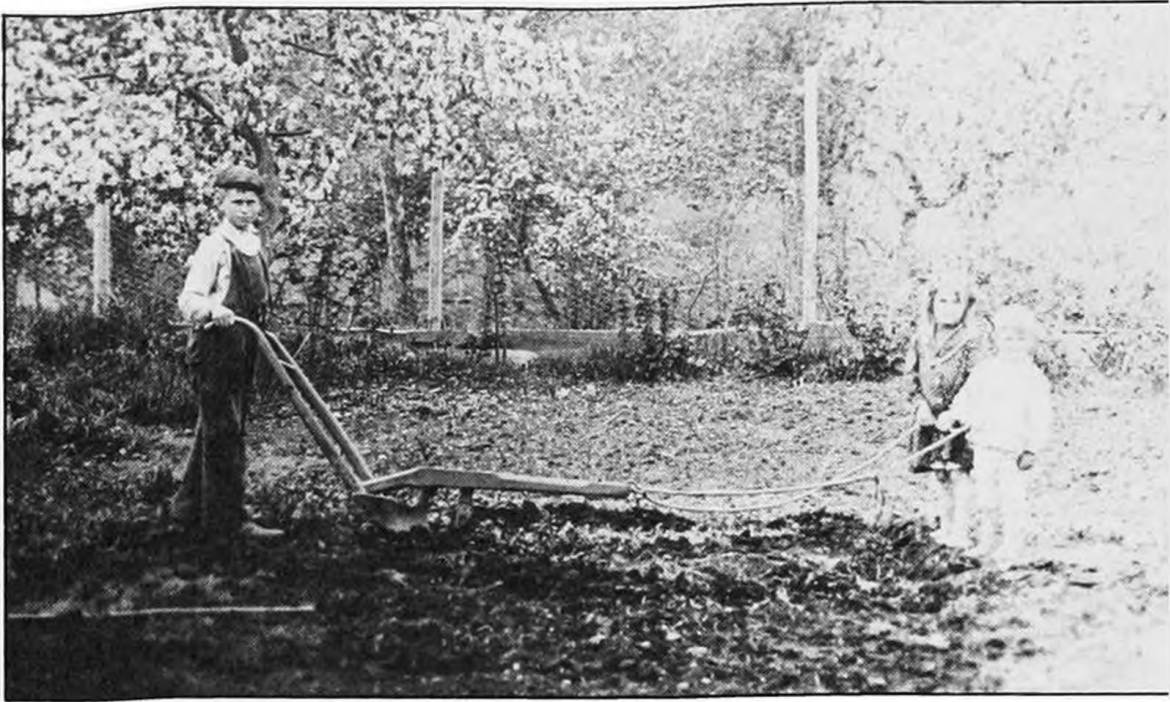
While natural advantages unique in Maine made Aroostook farming more “modern,” its men and women, like their counterparts elsewhere, still found themselves at the mercy of traditionally uncontrollable forces: weather, banks, railroads, and commodity dealers. Like other commercial farmers, they could shape their business relationships little and control them less. It was partly their own fault; notorious individualists, they had flirted only briefly with cooperatives.²⁰ The dealers, or the farmer himself if he held the crop to gamble for a better price, bargained through the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (futures market), contracting for future delivery with prospective buyers. Brokers representing the Exchange did business at various Maine points.²¹ There were still many small dealers, but the trend was toward fewer and larger middlemen and away from the competitive situation that had previously given growers some protection. Dairy farmers, operating on a smaller stage, acted a similar plot. Many of them had once owned shares in the Turner Center System, a \$5-million-a-year cooperative that distributed milk in southern New England, but they sold it in 1930. Both dairy and potato farmers paid relatively high charges to the railroads. Although a higher percentage of shorter hauls cost the lines more than their competitors paid elsewhere, they were compensated by their near-monopoly over commercial transport. Investors in New England railroads received dividends above the national average.²²

Drawn into a world of competitive commercial markets, farmers turned more often to government support. Those who needed capital to start or to expand operations got some help from the Farm Loan associations organized under a 1916 law. Twenty such groups, including seven in Aroostook County, supplemented the credit available from banks and private lenders. Loans from the associations allowed many farmers to plant each year and to buy land, construct and repair buildings, and improve the soil. This outside help, forerunner of much more, had been especially welcome during the bad potato years from 1922 to 1925; nearly 1,500 borrowers had taken advantage of it.²³

Contact with outside governmental agencies, however, was still quite exceptional in 1930; none among a dozen town reports of that year even hints at the existence of the federal government. Few rural people probably sent income tax returns to Washington; the state's major source of revenue was simply a share of the property taxes collected and paid in by all cities and towns. (The familiar sales and state income levies would not come for many years.)²⁴ Government, as in the preceeding century, was mostly a local affair. At the annual town meeting, the interested gathered to elect officers (usually the same ones year after year and nearly always male), to debate expenditures and to set the local tax rate.²⁵ Although growing state participation (especially school and highway aid) modified local responsibilities, the towns still provided most of rural Maine's vital services, as they always had.

Schools, the largest single expense for most towns, illustrated both the presence of change and its uneven quality. There were still 2,000 one-teacher schools in Maine, but they were rapidly giving way to consolidated buildings served by vehicles plying roads newly opened in winter. Nearly all Maine children fifteen and under attended. Both the proportion of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in school and the literacy rate exceeded national figures.²⁶ This was the more noteworthy, since the state left most of the burden to localities, forcing the smaller and poorer rural places to pay high taxes to support financially starved educational programs. Although there were small equalization subsidies, rural children cost more per capita to educate than their urban cousins. Their schools were also more likely to be what a 1934 report called "poorly lighted, poorly heated, poorly equipped, poorly maintained, [and] barren in appearance." The teachers, often making do with little more than textbooks, paper, crayons, and chalk, had fewer years of schooling and received lower salaries than their counterparts in nearly all other states.²⁷

Although a growing proportion of rural youths continued beyond the elementary grades, scattered towns and poor traveling conditions slowed consolidation and left the state with



Boys and girls in 1930 could look forward to expanding educational and cultural opportunities in rural Maine. New England cities, however, with their varied career prospects and other amenities, still drew youths out of the countryside in numbers that threatened to undermine rural neighborhood structures. Photo courtesy Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History.

many small high schools.²⁸ Teachers, often only two or three in number, passed on the traditional classical curriculum they had studied, even though only a handful of pupils pursued such academic courses into college. "Only a fortunate few can attend the colleges of agriculture," wrote Massachusetts Commissioner of Agriculture A. W. Gilbert; he thought that the lack of technical education was "one of the most serious handicaps the New England farmer labors under." For rural women, choices were still more limited. The structure of Maine's higher education in 1930 virtually prescribed a teaching career for most of those who had the funds and the desire for more schooling. Bates and Colby admitted more men than women; Bowdoin remained all male, and men predominated at the University of Maine, with its heavy emphasis on engineering. The normal schools, on the other hand, more than reversed

the balance, for females made up seven-eighths of their 1,438 students.²⁹

The University of Maine had been since its founding a force for modernizing Maine's rural economy. Once again, however, the impact was uneven. The original promoters had wanted an inexpensive, practical college to curb the outmigration of the still mostly rural "industrial classes." By 1930, however, only slightly more than 5 percent of the university's graduates listed agriculture as their vocation. Moreover, fewer than four of every ten alumni remained in the state.³⁰

If the university had not totally succeeded in "keeping the boys home," its programs did much to aid and instruct those who remained. In 1885, even before the federal Hatch Act provided support for such projects, a small experiment station was founded. By 1930 its scientists had published hundreds of papers. They treated a wide variety of subjects, but emphasized control of such pests as the spruce budworm and the apple maggot. Although at first all work took place at Orono, the university purchased experimental farms at Monmouth and Presque Isle in 1909 and 1913 respectively. Through these facilities some of the station's work reached the thousands who lacked the time and energy to study its technical bulletins.

More help came from the University's Extension Service agents and specialists, who worked with volunteers organized on a local, county, and state basis into the Farm Bureau. Agents and interested farmers or "cooperators" demonstrated new methods, introduced new varieties, and urged farmers to control costs by keeping better records. John Penney recalled of Clarence Day, Kennebec County agent: "He took a great interest in the Penney farm, brought material here for experiments to be performed under practical conditions, and in many other ways provided valuable information and assistance in the most fruitful years of my life." At the same time, the home demonstration agents sought out project leaders to inspire laggards to serve milk, vegetables, fruits, and whole grain food and to can safely; at the workshops women learned to renovate furniture and to make better-fitting dresses for themselves and warm clothing for their children.



On August 20, 1930, some 200 Belgrade-area citizens gathered at the J. W. Penney farm, "Oakhurst," for the annual Kennebec County Field Day. Events included talks on drafting apron patterns and conducting tea-room lunches, a posture demonstration by the North Monmouth 4-H Club, and a songfest. University Extension Service agents organized 143 such meetings in Kennebec County in 1930, helping to ease the transition to the modern world of electricity and mechanized farms and homes, while at the same time augmenting the neighborhood contacts that preserved traditional rural living patterns. Extension Service photo, Special Collections Department.

In 300 4-H clubs, 5,000 boys and girls worked on animal, crop, cooking, and sewing projects under adult leaders and competed for local prizes as well as for state and national trips. These and many other activities brought higher standards of work and living to the approximately one-eighth of the rural farm population who "cooperated." Others who were not members doubtless saw at least some of 1931's 166,000 circulars, wrote or called about specific problems, read some of the 5,000 newspaper stories, heard radio talks, or attended "Farm and Home Week" at Orono.³¹ Aside from its educational functions, Extension did much to counteract the natural tendency of rural life to isolate people.

Keeping rural people healthy was more challenging than educating them. Maine, with its older population, suffered rates of cancer and heart disease well above the national average. Moreover, the state's men had been rejected for physical problems in the World War at a proportion exceeded by only two other states. Malnutrition and bone and structural defects were most often responsible. The Experiment Station's W. F. Dove blamed the low mineral content of Maine's water, repeated up the food chain to its people, as well as the lack of winter sunshine. Rural Maine's health problems were compounded by lack of medical services. Less than half of Maine's towns and plantations had doctors, and those physicians that served Maine's rural people were frequently restricted by storms and poor roads. In general the country doctor was "likely not to be so well trained or skilled as those ... of the urban community."³²

Sickness, age, and handicaps generated much of the rural poverty in Maine in 1930. Rural Maine attacked this age-old problem with a blend of tradition and newer outside help. By law and custom, the towns were supposed to relieve their own. By 1930, however, the "unsettled poor" received some relief directly from the state. Towns no longer auctioned "paupers" off to the highest bidder for their maintenance, but many still operated a "town farm" or "poor farm." As one typical annual report summarized, such institutions could never be "self supporting." Many of the inmates "had been in residence for years Many are helpless and need constant attention The sanitary conditions are deplorable and have been condemned by the state health authorities." State law mercifully forbade sending families with children to these places; towns normally provided such people with food orders and firewood.³³

Despite isolation and a slower pace of development, much of rural Maine was enjoying a taste of the modern conveniences to which the state's cities were growing accustomed. Schools, however ill-supported, and doctors, however unev-

only distributed, were far more accessible in 1930 than ever before. Well over half of the state's farms enjoyed telephones, and nearly two-thirds possessed automobiles. Indeed, the Maine farmer was more likely than his counterpart elsewhere in the nation to have an auto, and the number of Maine motor vehicles had exactly tripled during the 1920s. Anxious to extend their horizons even further, auto owners pressed legislators to reverse a century's neglect of roads. However, with limited funds available for road construction and maintenance, state and federal agencies concentrated on roads carrying the largest number of voters. Tourism interests urged improvements to coastal highways, and as a result Route 1, carrying approximately 5,000 vehicles daily between Kittery and Brunswick, was by 1931 a concrete road with short stretches of blacktop. On the other hand, the principal roads in Aroostook county carried 1,000 vehicles or less a day, and remained mostly gravel. Nevertheless, speakers at grange meetings called upon the state to spend more money on the "feeder-lines in the rural districts," and one gathering received a pledge that in 1930 "for the first time," the state would spend more money on country roads than on the "big trunk lines."³⁴

It would be none too soon for the farm families. With only 23 percent of the town roads surfaced, the majority of rural Mainers lived on dirt roads, which were impassable during the spring "mud time." Much of the burden of keeping such roads open to stores, grange halls, churches, and neighbors fell on the town commissioners. In summer they and their scores of workers graveled, ditched, installed new culverts, and generally repaired the ravages of the previous season. In winter even more workers typically earned a few dollars each plowing and shoveling snow. All this made possible the rural free delivery of letters, one of Maine's sixty-six newspapers, rolls of wallpaper, gallons of paint, and truck tires.³⁵ Mail delivery was not without problems, however; one carrier recalled that because there was no other way, he "used to go through the woods with a pair of snowshoes about a mile to two families."³⁶

Rural towns communicated across this expanding system of mail deliveries and roads. Better transportation facilitated the work of several social institutions where people met for relaxation and fellowship. The granges, lodges, and churches, founded decades before, became more accessible. But once again the impact of modern forces was uneven. Competing with these older institutions were newer forms of entertainment, carried by exciting new technology and bringing new attitudes and ideas which both repelled and attracted. Already many Maine families had radios.³⁷ This spearhead of the new mass media that would increasingly dominate and organize leisure time brought music, news, weather information, stock quotations, baseball scores, and "farm flashes" from stations in (among other places) New York, Boston, Portland, and Bangor. The movies, older than radio but now talking, beckoned from every city and larger town. For a Blue Hill family, Saturday night meant that "some times we had company and then we went to the movies and sometimes we'd stay home and play games We went to church suppers Once in a while in the summer we'd go to pavillions ... [or] to Ellsworth for circuses."³⁸

An age-old accompaniment of leisure was drinking, a practice strongly opposed by the Protestant denominations most common in rural Maine. Rural Protestant votes had helped establish prohibition in Maine nearly seventy years before the Eighteenth Amendment made the nation "dry." How effective was the law in Neal Dow's native state? In 1930 the *Kennebec Journal* reported a "record array of liquor cases" in Waterville's municipal court following a sweep of the town's liquor establishments, but the same issue quoted a leading Maine prohibitionist's view that the state was "90 percent dry." If the April 1930 *Literary Digest* poll could be trusted, better enforcement drew public support: more Mainers voted "dry," per capita, than voters in any other section of the country. On the other hand, the state's enforcement officer declined to push prohibition to its ultimate conclusion. He

declared that he would concentrate on preventing the manufacture of drink for sale but would ignore the use of malt for home production and consumption of beer.³⁹ Nor did he mention the barrels of hard cider found in so many Maine cellars.

Other forms of traditional rural leisure-time activities persisted. Thousands attended the thirty-five agricultural fairs held every year. Farmington's, neither the largest nor the smallest, attracted in 1930 (by the local paper's "conservative" estimate) 13,000 to its first day, 25,000 to its second, and 15,000 to its third and last. The midway caught the imagination of many, like *As The Earth Turns'* ne'er-do-well George Shaw and his overworked wife Mil, who enjoyed copious refreshments, saw a boy with crocodile skin, and returned laden with balloons, whips, and a cheap blanket won as a prize. "Mil looked cold, tired, proud, and travel-stained, and even George had taken on an expression of having at least been somewhere and got back, a restlessness and bustle." In addition to seeing the sights and games of the midway, touring the auto show, and betting on the harness races, fair-goers might enjoy the more traditional horse- and ox-pulling contests and the exhibits of cattle, sheep, horses, poultry, crafts, and food.⁴⁰

Granges, a traditional institutional bond between rural Americans, exhibited at the fairs, but there was much more to the Grange than that. Its nearly 54,000 members (four times as many as belonged to the Extension organizations) met twice a month locally, once a month at the county level, and annually as the State Grange.⁴¹ At the hundreds of two-story, barn-like grange halls located from one end of the state to the other, meetings almost always included a reading, recitation, and a musical selection. Plays, although less common, were also performed. The Grange took positions on many political, social, and economic questions, which were raised and debated at all levels of the organization. In addition to its function as the "Farmer's University," the grange, with its suppers and informal visiting, remained "the social outlet, the means whereby the farmer, and especially the farmer's wife, got some little surcease from solitude."⁴²

Local churches provided another traditional link between isolated farm families. By 1930, however, many were suffering from the dual impacts of outmigration and competition from newer forms of social and leisure activities. The leaders of Maine's strongest Protestant denominations worried enough to undertake an "Every Community Survey" in 1930. When completed, it hardly reassured them: 200 Protestant churches had been abandoned in "recent" years; ninety-three towns had no Protestant church, and only a little more than one-third of Maine's people belonged to any church. Of those that did, 37 percent were Protestant (primarily Baptist, Congregationalist, and Methodist), and 59 percent were Roman Catholic. Only the Roman Catholics had shown any significant growth over the previous decade.⁴³

In more than three hundred towns of a thousand people or fewer, the churches were already too small to carry on a program. Half of them had less than twenty-five members each. Such tiny flocks enjoyed little outside institutional support, especially if Baptists or Congregationalists, and often could not afford a regular minister. They were thus forced to share a "supply" with another congregation. Nearly 30 percent of the ministers served two churches, and another 12 percent claimed between three and six. Over 40 percent of the rural ministers serving in the principal Protestant denominations had no college or seminary training (a proportion substantially above New Hampshire and Vermont figures). A sharp decline in Sunday school enrollments, moreover, indicated a future even less promising.⁴⁴

The survey team pointed to "very poor financial support" as an explanation for the decline of rural Protestant churches. Other causes included the hilly topography and the resulting isolated neighborhoods scattered through inland Maine. Maine's convoluted, island-studded coast presented similar problems. Cultural and dogmatic barriers, moreover, created and sustained too many weak churches. Having identified these handicaps, the survey team warned against denominational competition and urged ministers and church-goers to

become more involved with local problems: "The church will be interested in the struggle of the Maine farmer to regain his local markets ... to adjust his agriculture to the most economical and profitable type."⁴⁵

Maine's farms and villages stood at the "Great Conjunction" in 1930, both enriched and impoverished by the forces of modernism that penetrated even the most remote rural neighborhoods. New markets, new transportation and communication systems, and modern technology brought profound social changes. In view of these changes, were living standards in rural Maine better or worse than those in other parts of America in 1930?

In 1929 Maine's farm population received a per capita personal income of \$474, considerably above the forty-eight-state mean of \$388. That was, however, a very good potato year here but not elsewhere, which distorts the rankings in Maine's favor. Nevertheless, Maine stood high in a national study of the "rural plane of living"; Less than one-quarter of the counties in the nation placed in the classes reached by nearly all of Maine's units. More relevant to the life choices of rural Mainers than national tables, however, was the fact that rural Maine people could do better in the cities of their own state and better yet in southern New England than they could on the farm. For every dollar of per capita income received by Maine's farm population in 1929, the state's nonfarm population received \$1.45, and the entire population of the three southern New England states enjoyed \$2.01.⁴⁶

Rural Maine was beginning to enjoy the crucial modern convenience electricity, however. About three in ten Maine farmers had "power" in 1930, up from one in ten in 1920. They could, if they could afford them, run milking machines and cream separators in the barn while their wives used electric irons, vacuum cleaners, toasters, heaters, radios, and sewing machines. If a wife had an electric washer, she could wash as many clothes in ninety minutes as she could scrub on her board

in five hours. Many were still milking by hand, heating “sadd-irons” on the stove, and using kerosene lamps. High installation costs and foot-dragging by the utilities delayed the new conveniences.⁴⁷ But for those lucky enough to enjoy it, electricity elevated the standards of farm life dramatically.

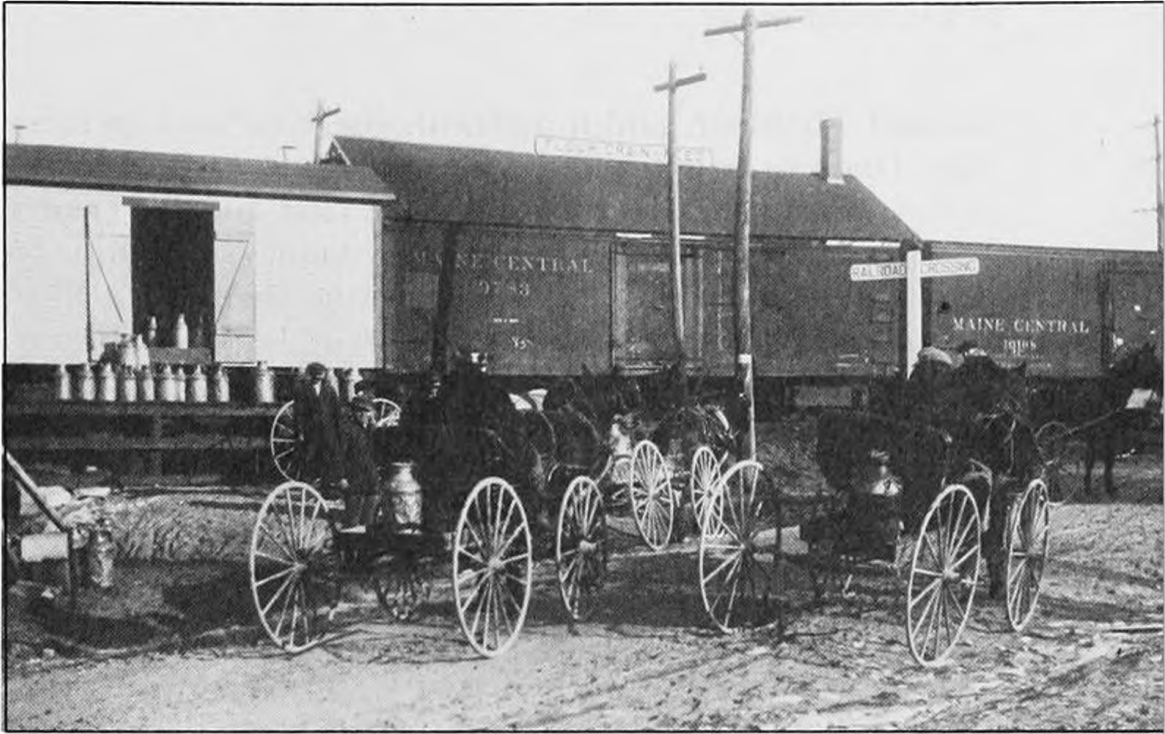
We need to ask, however, not only how rural Mainers lived, but what beliefs they lived by. Changes in rural attitudes are more difficult to ascertain. Even though biographies and autobiographies give access to the memories of a few survivors, we can only imagine they are speaking for their less articulate contemporaries. Were their recollections distorted by nostalgia? Although the standards and beliefs these accounts convey can be generalized only with a great deal of caution, they do reflect the traditional beliefs of communities just beginning to feel the impact of better schooling, increased mobility and communications, and a changing economic and social world.

Probably no traditional “religious” doctrine was so widely, strongly, and persistently held as the belief in the merit of hard work. To be sure, this dogma made a virtue of necessity. Living was far from easy in rural Maine, and long hours, hard labor, and uncertain rewards were the lot of most. As Roger Mitchell wrote of his father, a farmer and woodsman:

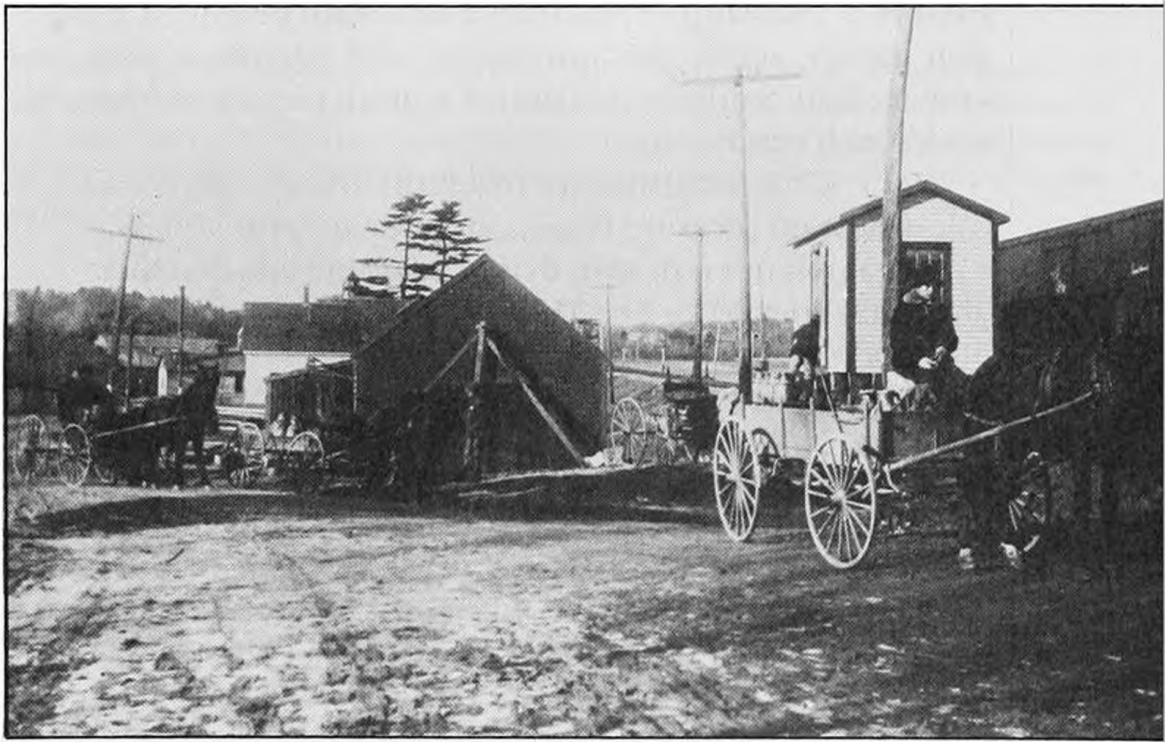
Don found himself year after year forced to follow the woods in order to live. He took jobs close to home if he could. Then he was able by early rising and a long day to get his chores done, look after the sale of his crop *and* work another job.

Don Mitchell, like many others, could proudly say of his sons, “Them boys all work. I haven’t got a boy in the family that’s got a lazy bone in him.” One coastal wife recalled that her husband would go to Southwest Harbor for a load of flounder, bring them home to clean, pack them far into the night, and then “get up early the next morning, peddle them in the Model T, trade for potatoes, turnips, or whatever.”⁴⁸

Woods work and peddling were part of the man’s sphere and — in theory at least — women did not work in the barn or



Railroad cars, telephone lines, and horse-drawn milk wagons in these turn-of-the-century scenes demonstrate the presence of change and its uneven quality in rural Maine. Courtesy Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association.



the field. The home, garden, and henhouse, however, kept them busy. One harried wife added to her other duties cooking for up to nine hired men. Her husband much later mused, "I don't know how she done it ... she was rugged too!" In addition to cooking, there was washing, mending, and sewing, as well as canning and preserving in season. Minnie Penney "put up" twenty-six quarts of vegetables and eighty-five quarts of honey one day without any sign in her diary that such production was unusual. Her flock of about one hundred hens brought in household money; one day, to earn a few dollars more, she and her mother dug eight bushels of dandelion greens and sold them in Augusta. Her husband owed her "my greatest debt for whatever success I have had as a ... farmer."⁴⁹ Hard work was a virtue that lay at the core of rural values, and this virtue retained all the vigor of its nineteenth century origins.

Isolation made independence, like hard work, a necessary virtue. The Maine farmer normally worked alone, with family members, or with a hired man or two. He usually resided at least a few hundred feet from the nearest neighbors and often lived in a township of less than a thousand people. A generation earlier, when the automobile and telephone were unknown, Kate Sanborn had drawn a bleak picture of home life under such conditions:

What monstrous treadmill lives ... no vacations, no pleasure trips ... no time to write unless a near relative is dead or dying. Someone says that their only chance for social life is going to some insane asylum!⁵⁰

Isolation made some narrow and prejudiced. Antiforeign feelings, especially directed against Mainers of Canadian birth or heritage, with their French language and Roman Catholic religion, were far from rare. A Cornville resident recalled a teacher telling her class that the neighbors wanted "to get rid of [her] because [she was] French." Tens of thousands of Maine people had belonged at least briefly to the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s.⁵¹



A "hill country" farmer limes his field. Tradition and isolation were forces that preserved distinctive rural values. Independence, belief in hard work, and distrust of outsiders were attitudes that weathered the changes brought by modern transportation, communication, and farm technology. Extension Service photo, Special Collections Department.

But isolation had positive effects on rural values as well. Ernest Dodge remembered that each family was "self-sustaining — beholden to no one ... No services were required or expected Crops were adequate and sometimes abundant, shelter was ample, spirits were high, and life seemed rich." The rural environment fostered individual responsibility and independence, but those who suffered reverses often blamed themselves completely. For instance, the hero of the autobiographical novel of Aroostook, *Potatoes Without Gravy*, rejected several well-meant attempts to help his hungry family as "charity."⁵² This attitude often shaded into contempt for those who

received anything they had not fully earned, unless extreme age or illness justified it.⁵³ But the rural community *was* a community, not the atomized world of classical economists. When Don Mitchell was “burned out,” for example, “the neighbors came from miles around and the children were taken until things could be got back in order People donated money, contributed labor [and cut] logs.” Gladys Bowden remembered the same spirit: “If anyone was sick, and they had wood to cut ... Oh, there’d be ten or twelve men come, they’d work all day, they get the wood all sawed and split and in under cover for the man They’d be tickled to death to do it.” In the best of the rural people, responsibility for others accompanied responsibility for oneself: “People who had what they could spare did a great deal for those who didn’t have, much more than they do now.”⁵⁴

The complex mixture of economic activities that went into most rural family incomes imparted another facet to rural beliefs and attitudes. Adaptability and general competence were admirable virtues, but they too, were necessities if one were to live in the always uncertain and frequently harsh climate. Alternative incomes from woods work, fishing, trapping, carpentry, and a myriad other odd jobs increased opportunities for surviving through bad harvests. If the countryman kept any cattle, horses, or chickens, there would be chores, winter or summer; for the rest of the winter day he would be bringing in wood, perhaps thawing frozen pipes, or stockpiling ice against the eventual summer. Paths would need shovelling if there was snow, and if the storm was bad enough the roads would be blocked, mails delayed, and trains late. It all nurtured patience, Ernest Dodge reminisced: “Weather dampens useless excitability for petty things and develops perspective and understanding.”⁵⁵

Ideal characteristics were but offsprings of necessity: rural Mainers proved to be, as their grandparents had been, hard-working, self-reliant, neighborly, and adaptable. Add to this one more quality (with its contradictory obverse): the men who farmed, fished, or cut wood, and the women who worked alongside and in addition reared the children and kept the

house, had to be gamblers. This was especially true in potato country, with its one cash crop depending on national marketing. One farmer looked back after a decade of struggle:

He had planned and schemed, worked and worried, been harassed by the elements, dry spells, heat and frosts, plant diseases and tubers breaking down He had been hindered because of his lack of finance for production, and by low prices for his produce after he managed to get a crop He had often allowed his passion for working the land to overcome logic.

In less favored areas, less ambitious men and women took fewer chances and accepted less spectacular failures. The buildings ran down as the bushes grew up, and the machinery rusted in the yard. If enough individuals lost heart, the entire community failed. As E. B. White wrote in the late 1930s from Brooklin, Maine, "A generation ago ... there was something doing here Today the town hasn't even got a doctor Everything in life is somewhere else and you get there in a car."⁵⁶

Seldom was the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal more clearly expressed than by Jefferson's friend James Madison:

The class of citizens who provide at once their own food and raiment may be viewed as the most truly independent. It follows, that the greater the proportion of this class to the whole society, the more free, the more happy must be the society itself.⁵⁷

By 1930 in rural Maine, the quickening pace and modernization had encroached upon agrarian society and had undermined Madison's dream. On those who would survive as farmers, fast transportation and western competition forced specialized production for distant markets. Demands for better schools and roads required the rural property holders to pay heavier taxes, which drove some off the land.⁵⁸ While the schools educated some children to want a different life elsewhere, the roads brought more cars to make the towns and their newer styles of life more accessible. On the other hand, much of

the older world persisted. As its people stood on the threshold of world depression, the New Deal, total war, and unceasing technological revolution, they clung to or rejected ways and ideas that were going but not yet gone.

NOTES

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