

# RURAL SCHOOLS AND THE SPIRIT OF CO-OPERATION

Interesting Article Taken From July Number of Carlson's Rural Review—Co-operation Necessary in Conduct of America's Rural Schools.

(By G. L. Carlson)

It is characteristic of the American people to want to do unnatural things. If they are filled with the spirit of progress, they will attempt to force progress. If they believe cooperation will prove helpful to them, cooperation will be forced to the limit, only to find later that something has been left undone; or is wanting, to make cooperation a success. If reform of any kind becomes the popular thing, all are in a hurry to institute the reform, never seriously thinking about the fundamental principles involved, or that which makes the reform so desirable. It is this want of serious thought, the want of careful investigation, causing us to jump from one extreme to the other that makes real progress so slow and uncertain in this country.

Just at present we are more or less mad about cooperation. We send commissions to Europe to study cooperation as practiced in various countries there. These commissions find that cooperation is a success in Europe; they return to their homes and talk of its many advantages to a community of producers, and recommend it to their fellows and neighbors. Being more or less in distress, like the drowning man grasping at straws, we jump into cooperation, but we still fail to cooperate. It is easy for most Europeans to work together and cooperate in all their activities; it is a most difficult task to find a community of farmers in this country who will cooperate in anything. Why? We are all agreed that cooperation is a mighty good thing for those engaged in any industry, yet we find it a most difficult thing to do to find any considerable number of farmers in a community who will get together and cooperate. Why this difference in the people of Europe as compared with our own? There must be something more than the difference of race or climate or government to account for this; there must be something more fundamental, more elemental in community development than appears on the surface, to account for such a difference in spirit and desire as regards cooperative principles and activities. It shall be the purpose of this article to investigate, and, if possible, to learn why the American is so slow to unite with his fellows in cooperation.

It may be well to inquire if there is not something in our civilization that is destructive of the spirit of cooperation? It may not be improper to ask whether or not society is so instituted in this country that selfishness has been developed at the expense of helpfulness? It cannot be said that the American, as such, is inherently more selfish than other peoples, especially if we take him as he was in this country fifty or more years ago.

In the early settlement of this country, without reference to the section in which settlement and development were in operation, the spirit of cooperation was in evidence on every hand. If a new settler wished to build a house, the neighbors would unite and build the house

of age who cannot recall many such acts. It is known to all older persons that cooperation was the rule in this country during its early development, just as it is now the exception.

It may be said, then, that our civilization has something in it that is destructive of the spirit of cooperation. What this is should be of interest to all who are interested in any phase of cooperation. It will, more likely than not, be found that there are several forces at work, all more or less destructive of the spirit of cooperation.

One of these forces is the city. In no other country has the city been developed along the same lines as in this. In other countries cities have been the result of natural growth, just as the country districts supporting them have developed. In other countries the cities have developed because there was a place and a need for them in the economics of the country, while here they have preceded the rural development. Let a railroad build thru a new and unsettled section of this country and towns will spring up as if by magic, waiting an opportunity to harvest the harvest, even before the sod is broken. This is now and has been true of the settlement of all western sections of this country. Towns grew up where there was no need of them, and the surrounding country has been taxed in one way or another to support these towns. Every producer has been made to feel this, to realize that to a very large extent the town was waiting for his crop, his all. When a man who is looking for a free home in a new country steps off a train, only to meet several pieces of free land at a high price for their services; where he is made to pay extortionate rates and prices for everything he is compelled to use or buy, he would, indeed, be a stupid sort of a man who had any of the spirit of cooperation left in him by the time his last dollar had been taken from him.

Then, too, towns have not as a rule been built with a view to serving the country around them. More often than otherwise they have been built in the very worst place for such service. Instead of having been located with a view to giving the best service to the country around them, they have been located with a view to enriching someone by the sale of town lots. It is anything and everything but service to a community that is responsible for the existence of the modern American town. Service which will enrich a few at the expense of the many. Cooperation can never be successfully built on such a foundation.

The modern American town does not as a rule serve the district in which it is located at all, but rather compels the surrounding country to serve it. The average town has had but one motive for its existence, that of profit, and this profit must come from the producers of the community. These producers have been charged the last cent for which they

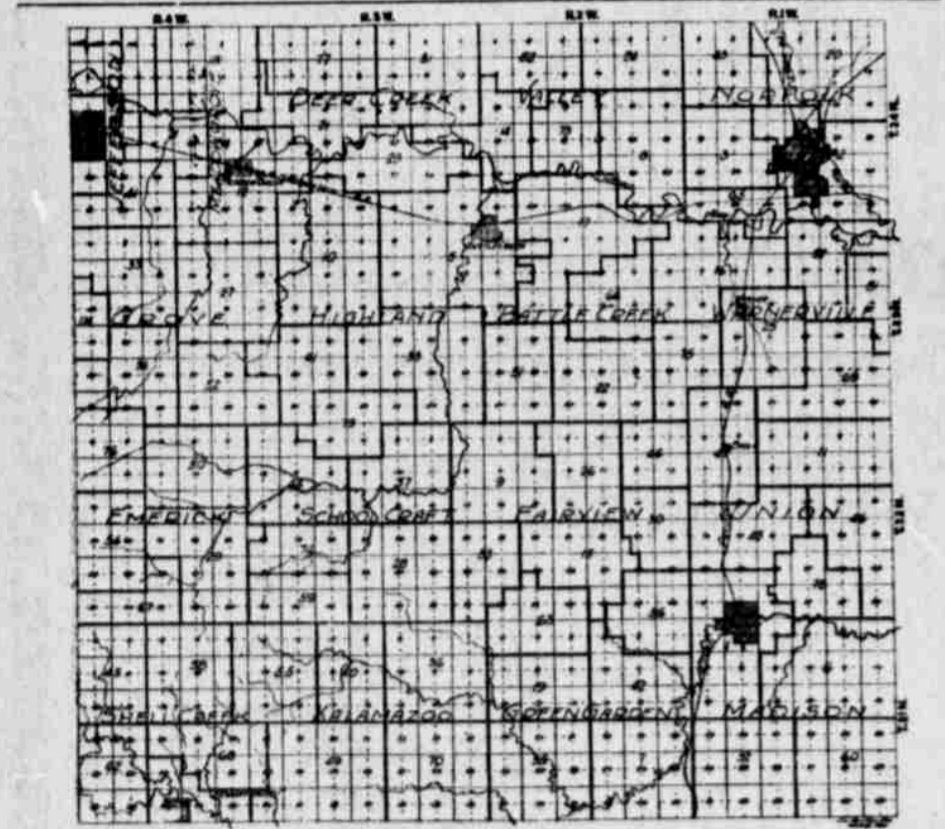


Figure 1. School district map of Madison county, Nebr. Note the uneven and irregular shapes of many districts. Also the fact that in some of the smaller districts some of the pupils must walk nearly three miles. In no district has any consideration been given the saving of time and cash.

for him. It was the same if the need was for a barn, a new field to be cleared, or a crop to be harvested. Very few things of any importance were done by one man during the early development of all sections of this country. If a thing of importance, or one requiring much labor, was to be done, all able-bodied men in the community turned out to do it. The writer has in mind a time before the civil war, when the home of a family in southeastern Iowa was destroyed by fire. Smoke was still rising from the burned remains of that home when the entire neighborhood for miles around turned out to build a new home for this family. In three days the family was nicely located in its new home, little the worse for its loss. There are few persons living in this country that are now fifty or more years

will stand on all their purchases; they have been made to pay an interest rate that no productive industry can live under; and if the town wanted to be a county seat many political schemes were incubated, resulting in high taxes but giving no adequate service in return. As an illustration of what is meant by this last sentence, thousands of dollars have been spent by counties for bridges, and yet some of these counties have not a safe bridge inside their boundaries. From \$3,000 to \$6,000 each has been spent for thousands of steel bridges that have little or no value, while half the money would have built a reinforced concrete structure that would endure for ages.

Towns and cities are now doing more to bring about a better understanding between their own and

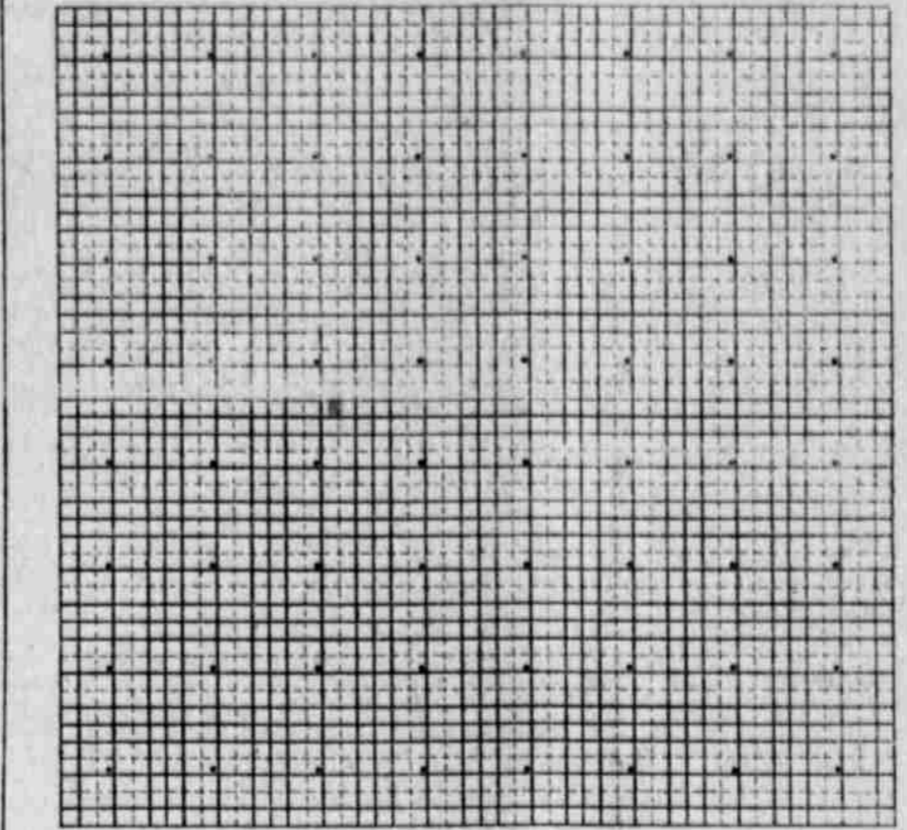


Figure 2. Map of same county showing school districts organized on a plan that increases the average size of districts, and reduces the average walking distance. This plan gives to each nine sections, with the boundaries running thru the center of the sections.

country folks. The wants of the rural communities are now better supplied than ever before, but the fact remains that the most vital needs of a people have not been supplied by the towns, such as a wholesome social condition, education and the like. The amusements, if any, have been such as would yield a profit to those who controlled them. It never occurred to those responsible for community growth, that wholesome amusements were as necessary to a community as a water supply or fire protection. Instead of being a community matter, and placed upon a free community basis, amusements have been sold as other commodities are sold.

The church, too, must bear its share of the failure to develop a spirit of cooperation. When church people quarrel over such trifling matters as the amount of water to be used in baptism, there is small chance of getting them together in the larger fields of cooperation. Just to the extent that the spirit of cooperation has been neglected in our scheme of civilization, just to that extent the people have lost interest in the church and all church work. Every minister in America who speaks frankly on the subject says the one big church problem of the present is to maintain a membership interest in church work. Unless the Protestant churches can bury their small differences and get together in all the work for bettering humanity, they will all be buried together. The people are fast losing confidence in a religion, the philosophy of which is so little understood that no two persons can agree concerning it.

The development of the prairie states has had something to do in destroying the spirit of cooperation. In settling and developing the timber sections, progress was very slow. It required years to clear a small farm of its timber growth, and much of the work was of a nature that required more than one man to do it successfully. The development of the prairie regions was easy by comparison. Men began to do things on a larger scale, and the advent of the modern machinery which followed made it possible for one man to do as much as could be done by several in a country covered by timber. This developed a spirit of independence that has been neither good for the individual nor the community. While many farmers boast of their independence, their independence is apparent and not real. There is not a class of persons so dependent upon others, in this or any other country, as the farmers of this country. Up to within the past two years, there was nothing the farmer could do without the help of others. Every article of necessity to him was made by someone else, and sold to him by still another. He has had no voice in the price at which he has sold his own product. He has had no voice in the price charged him for all he has had to buy. He has been financed by others when he needed more capital, and he has paid the interest rate charged him, willingly or unwillingly it mattered not. In our system of economics he has been what the child is in our family system—always subject to a higher will with no right to voice an opinion of his own. This is anything but independence, yet the farmer has been made to believe that he was the most independent of characters.

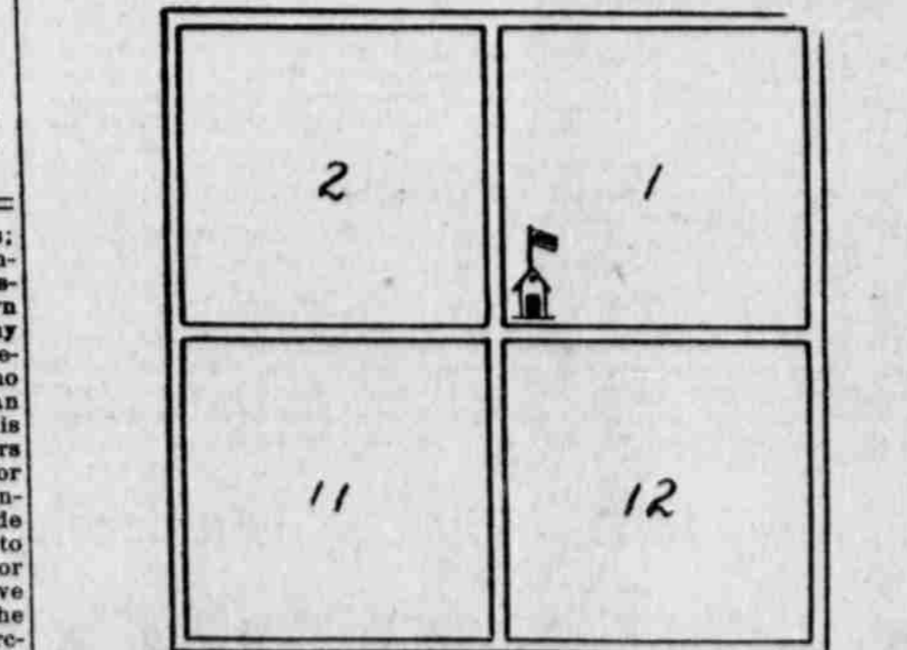


Figure 3. Map of sub-district under Iowa plan. This gives four sections to each school, with a maximum walking distance of two miles. This is the most expensive system ever devised, and one that gives the poorest service. Boundary lines in center of roads.

Quite often we hear a person say that cooperation is very popular in rural Europe, and they cannot understand why it is so different here. Such persons fail to see the underlying principles involved, causing Europeans to favor cooperation while we oppose it. In Europe most farmers do not live on their land, but in rural villages. In these rural centers every want and need of the community life can be supplied. The school, church (one mind you, and not several), bank, store amusements, and every other community need will be found in this village. It is not necessary for a person in this community to leave it for anything necessary to the community life. In this country our social and governmental systems have been so instituted that one is often compelled to go long distances to supply himself with many wants, and those vital to the community life are the ones most likely to be wanting.

The rural school in this country has had more to do in destroying the spirit of cooperation than all else. Our rural schools have never been in touch with rural life. They teach city ideals rather than the ideals of the country, and more often than otherwise the teacher is from the city rather than the country. Our text books are all simply ideal for training rural youth to be dissatisfied with rural life. Not a single text book used in the rural schools of this country is in harmony with rural life. What right have we then to even expect our youth to develop in harmony with their surroundings, or that a spirit of cooperation could be developed under such circumstances? Man is largely what he is by reason of environment and training. If we place him in an environment where the air he breathes nourishes his inherent selfishness, and then train him for self and to doubt the honesty and sincerity of others, there will be small chance of developing a spirit of cooperation.

Of all the stupid things the American has done, he has never done anything quite so stupid as in the organization of our rural school districts. In no way could our rural school districts be organized to defeat the purpose for which they were organized so well as they now do in the way we have organized them. The chief purpose of organizing a school district is to serve the largest number at the lowest cost in money and effort, and yet we have reversed this principle and organized our rural school districts to serve the smallest possible number, at the highest possible cost in both money and effort. All thru Nebraska, as well as in every other state, we will see children living within 100 feet of each other, and only a road between them, and the two sets of children attending different schools. If children that are neighbors and chums are not permitted to attend the same school, how in the name of common sense is the spirit of cooperation to be developed in them?

Why so little intelligence has been exercised in the organization of our rural school districts we have no way of knowing. That there has been no intelligence used in this work will be plainly evident if a study of figure 1 of this article be made. This figure represents the school districts of Madison county, Nebraska, and differs in no essential from the manner of organizing rural school districts

thruout the state. It will be noticed that in some of the smallest districts some of the children are compelled to walk three miles. There is every reason to believe that the men responsible for such school districts had no conception of child value, and rather believed that land is more valuable than the future citizens of our state.

Figure 2 will show the same county organized according to a system. This gives nine sections to a district, and in no case will a child have to walk quite two miles. Such an organization of a county into school districts makes the districts smaller than necessary, since it is possible to give each district 16 sections without increasing the average walking distance. In figure 2 the district boundaries are made up of center-section lines, instead of section lines as at present. This does away with the necessity of sending children to different schools who live but 100 feet apart, and with only a roadway between them. This system of organizing districts makes for economy, since, including the towns, it makes 64 districts do the work of 82 as at present organized.

The difference between our present want of any system, and the system shown at figure 2 will be better understood if the reader will study and carefully compare figures 3 and 4. At figure 3 may be seen the ordinary four-section district, such as is the rule in Iowa under the township-unit plan which is in force there. In all such districts the section line, or highway, is the district or sub-district boundary, and the children living on the two sides of the highway must attend different

as compared with the plan in present use. Under our present plan this district requires 128 acres to give it the necessary roads, while under the plan as shown in figure 5 but 88.8 acres are required to give it a complete and nearly perfect road system. This saving would give to the district a free farm of 39.2 acres for educational purposes. Not only have our school districts been organized without purpose, but our roads have all been built for the express purpose of taking us away from our community centers, rather than to them. Every scheme of government in this country is against the best rural community life, and in favor of the larger cities. All roads are built for the sole purpose of coaxing farmers to visit the towns and spend their money there. There has never before been printed a plan or scheme of developing rural centers along scientific lines. In fact, very little that has been given the subject. The one great big scheme of America is to devise plans for encouraging producers to part with their money. No that has been given concerning the citizen of the future, and in this fact we find the answer to the oft repeated question, why do we make progress so slowly?

Let us make a careful study of figure 5 before we lay it aside. Let us suppose such a rural district existed in Nebraska or any other American state, consisting of six dozen of 16 sections and having a similar road scheme. Then let us suppose this district owned 40 acres of land upon which the school was founded; that it owned a few choice individuals of the various breeds of livestock needed in the district; that an

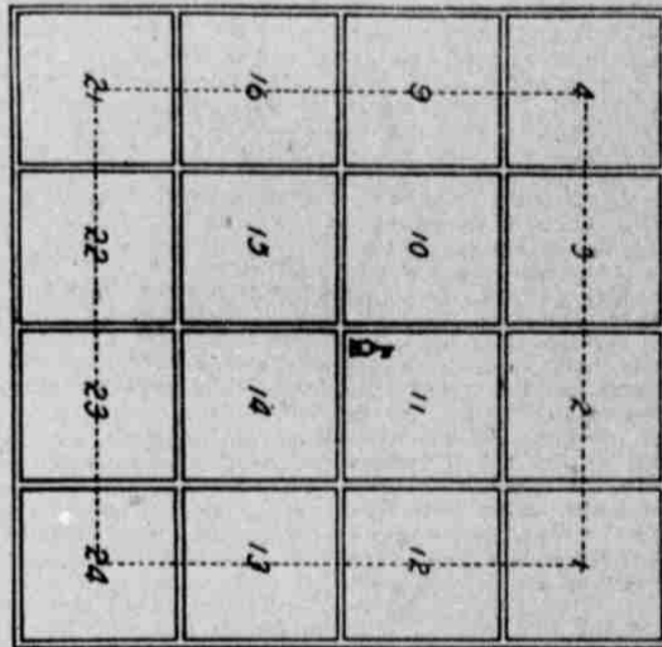


Figure 4. Map of a nine-section school district with boundaries running thru the center of sections on all sides. This gives an area two and one-fourth greater than in figure 3, with the same maximum walking distance. This plan reduces school cost by a little more than half, besides giving better service. It is a long step toward the rural social center, but may be improved upon as shown in figure 5.

schools. In all such districts children must walk up to two miles to reach the school house. At figure 4 may be seen a nine-section district the boundaries running thru the center of the section. This gives two and one-fourth more area, or land for taxation to support the school, and yet no child has to walk any farther than in the four-section district with the boundaries in the highways. By such a system of organizing school districts two important things are accomplished, a lower per capita cost, and the first step toward a social center and cooperation.

this center there was not only an agricultural high school, but a church, bank, store; a place for wholesome amusements and where every economic and social want of the community could be supplied. Does any one doubt that a healthy spirit of cooperation would develop under such conditions? Again, does anyone believe for a minute that in such a community, and under such conditions, there would ever be any difficulty experienced in keeping the young people in the country as farmers? Is not the future of agriculture worth a little of our time for a

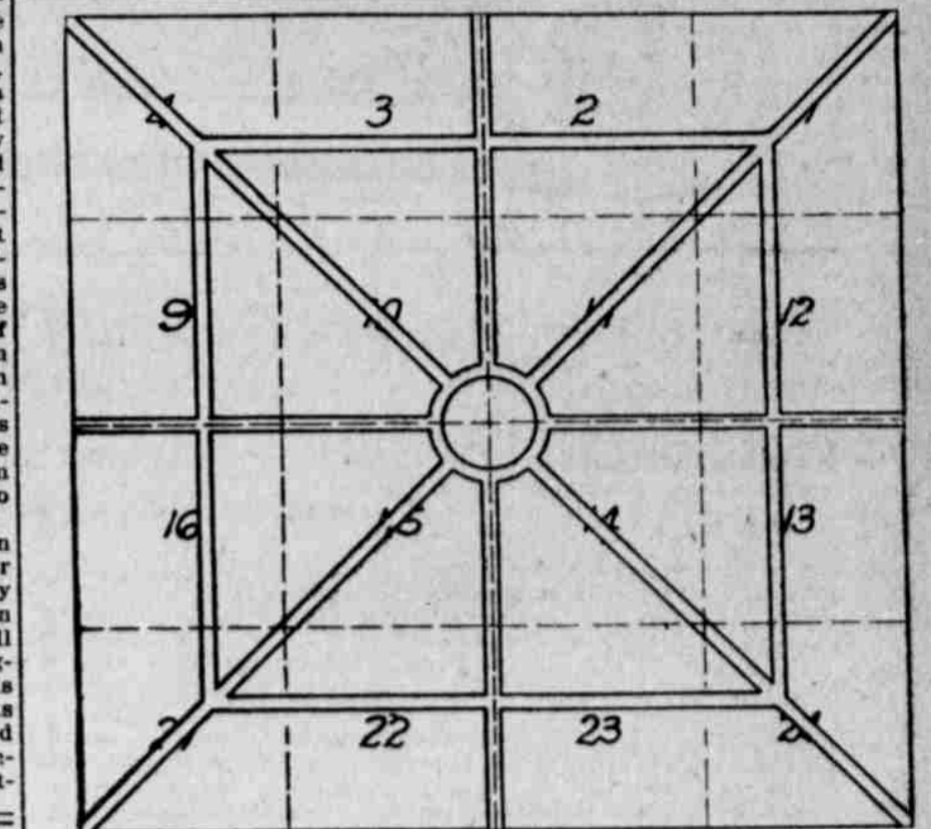


Figure 5. Map of ideal rural school district. Similar districts are the rule in all countries except this. This map drawn to conform to our rectangular survey system, which is unknown in Europe. Such a district includes 16 sections with a maximum walking distance of not much more than two miles. In such a district the school cost is reduced to the minimum, with service unexcelled. Road cost also reduced, besides aiding in the social center idea by making the center of the district easily and quickly accessible, and doing away with all roads not needed in reaching the school. Under the present system 128 acres are occupied in roads, while under the above system it requires but 88.8 acres to give the district a perfect road system, a sufficient saving to give the district 39.2 acres for educational use.

At figure 5 an ideal rural school district is shown. The writer has seen scores of similar districts in Europe and also in Costa Rica. This has been changed in the drawing only to the extent that it might conform to our system of surveys. In Europe there are few straight roads, most of them following curves rather than angles. With our rectangular system of surveys, roads are more often straight than otherwise. Figure 5 was drawn to represent a sixteen-section district, with the school in the center, and all roads built for the one purpose of reaching this center in the shortest possible distance. This plan saves 39.2 acres

study of this subject? Is not the future rural citizen worth more than the land required to develop him? If these two questions are to be given a negative answer, we may as well cease all effort toward perfecting a better and higher civilization. By the use of proper intelligence, the average county of sixteen townships can be reorganized into thirty-six school districts, each so organized that it would develop its own center, and in which the average walking distance for pupils would be less than under the present plan. Such a plan would be in the direction of

(Continued on Page Four.)