THE PLANNING OF SUBMARGINAL LAND PROJECTS

by

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In an unguarded moment shortly after my appointment to the position of Regional Director for the Land Policy Section of Agricultural Adjustment Administration in the corn-belt states, I accepted the invitation for a paper on the Planning of Submarginal Land Projects. At that time I was just fresh on the job and quite certain that I knew just how such projects should be planned. In the meantime, considerable water has gone under the bridge and my exuberant wisdom has been cooled by the testing it has undergone in numerous attempts at actually identifying so-called submarginal land and the planning of such projects.

The economists have talked so persistently and rationally about submarginal land that we who are not economists may have misinterpreted them to mean that submarginal land was something definite, tangible, easily identified and consistently associated with certain soils. This to my notion will not hold true. While definite, dependable knowledge of the soil is now coming to be recognized as essential for the more intelligent use and conservation of our land resources, it is unfair to lay the blame for the wreckage and distress that has accumulated through our short-sighted use and abuse of some lands on the character of the soil alone.

As a young man, my father helped grandfather grub the stump off a southwest Wisconsin valley farm. Under Swiss culture and husbandry that knew the purpose of grass on sloping lands, that community grew and prospered. Cheese, hogs, veal calves, steers and old cows went to market from those deep-notched valleys while eggs and poultry bought the groceries and gingham at the village store in those horse and buggy days. This farm kept the grandparents in decent comfort and gave four brothers their start on other farms or in business. By 1915 its big red barn, silo, well-kept fields and pastures rated a value that permitted the then aging fifth brother to sell the farm and retire to a wide-ponched bungalow in the village.

With the coming of good roads, life in the community took on a quickened tempo. Things began to move and change. The new owner only lived on the old farm for a few years, and then mortgaged it to set up a garage business in the village and rented the farm to a tenant. I do not know who owns granddad's farm today. When I passed it last spring, I had no inclination to stop and inquire. Worn and rusted machinery stands unsheltered where the team was last unhitched. The buildings all need paint. The barn doors hang crookedly by a single hinge. The front porch sags and the steps are rotted askew. The fences lean crazily against the brush that has grown along them. Sheet erosion and gullies are taking a plainly evident annual toll. Old timber stands unsheltered where the team was last unhitched. The buildings all need paint. The barn doors hang crookedly by a single hinge. The front porch sags and the steps are rotted askew. The fences lean crazily against the brush that has grown along them. Sheet erosion and gullies are taking a plainly evident annual toll.

But the logging of Michigan's inexhaustible pine forests. The birthing of farmsteads and cities in the treeless prairie states kept the axes ringing, the sawmills humming and thousands of men employed in the Lake States forests for years. Since logging was chiefly a winter operation, it offered work at that season to men and teams who came to work in the woods settled in the cutover lands in a scattered and haphazard manner of their own choosing. The success of comparatively slack woods work fitted nicely for clearing and breaking more really for crops on the new farm. The medicinal productivity of these moderate to sandy glacial and outwash soils was their bounteous virgin fertility. Wooding camps and sawmills and woodworking providing a nearby market for stable farm labor, all was well and the look was bright.

But the logging of the inexhaustible stands finally ended. The camps and milling woodworking plants moved to more remote and with them went the nearby market for lumber, potatoes, beans, hay and oats. To the cutover land farmers turned to look at distant markets they found themselves pinched by a new set of economic shoes that pinched them full.