

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FARM COMMUNITY IN THE PAST

Land used for farming was originally common property in England, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and probably in all parts of Europe. Village ownership of the land under the Mark system was an Anglo-Saxon, Teuton, Scandinavian, and Slavic institution. The land was common property in China, India, Mexico, Arabia, and Peru. Nearly one-third of the land of England was held in common up to the end of the eighteenth century. The fields, grassland, woods, and waters were used in common by all the members of the community under a system of rotation and allotment, periodically arranged by the village authorities. There was no freehold ownership in the modern sense of the term. No one owned land. Use alone gave the right to possession. There was, however, private property in the homestead, and in a small bit of land round about it. The peasant could use his homestead as he liked, and he

usually cultivated vegetables, an orchard, and supplied his personal wants. All of the land outside of the village belonged to the community. No one had any exclusive rights in it. This common land was rotated among the villagers periodically as were the portions set aside for pasture and woodland.

The village was built to accommodate itself to the system of land-tenure. The houses were clustered together. There were no detached farm-buildings. The community was the centre of the farmers' life.

The members of the village formed a kind of co-operative society. They made their own laws quite naturally to meet the conditions of their life. The by-laws described how the fields were to be cultivated, the cattle cared for, etc. The villagers selected their alderman who was the chief of the village for a year or longer. He called meetings of the villagers on the village green, much as is still done in some of the cantons in Switzerland. The meeting discussed such questions as the time when ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and felling trees should begin; when the cattle should be turned loose on the stubble; what

wage should be paid to the workers; when to turn the cows out into common pasture. Complaints were heard at these meetings. Fines were imposed. One of the functions of the alderman was to see that "no one shall scold, swear, or call his neighbor names. He who does so shall pay for scolding or swearing two shillings, and for calling names three marks."

The roads, streets, ponds, were all under village management. The village had, as its common property, its "village-bull" and "village-boar," which were kept by one man for a remuneration, or by different peasants in rotation.

"In many villages the blacksmith was a kind of municipal officer; so also was the schoolmaster. In a by-law it was provided that all the villagers should be mutually responsible for his board, whether they had children at the school or not. Any one refusing to do so was liable to a fine of three marks to be levied, if necessary, by distress and handed over to the village authorities. The old by-law sometimes dealt with other matters, such as the duty of everybody to attend services in church; the duties of servants; the question of fire-places and damage by fire; mutual aid; death;

disease among cattle; beggars and tramps, and the like. In case of theft the villages themselves often fixed the punishment.

"The village, therefore, was a miniature state within the state, with its alderman, who in the larger villages was assisted by a kind of standing committee; and its own officers such as bailiff, herdsman, and others.

"In the district of Aarhus they said: 'The village-bull and the village blacksmith are our officers.' The alderman wielded a considerable power and most by-laws declared him and his helpers to be 'holy and inviolable,' when performing their duties. The alderman carried 'the village staff,' and 'the village horn.' The first was a square rod, on which each farm in the village had its division marked with the initials of the owner or tenant, and if the peasant ever happened to be fined, a notch was cut in his division on the rod. The horn was used for convening meetings or for summoning the peasants in the night in case of fire or on any similar emergency. The alderman kept the written by-laws in his possession; it was some times stipulated that he was to keep himself well versed in the law, which should be read out at the meetings at least twice a year, or at least such articles of it as had reference to the matters before the meeting, so that all should know the law. If any one offended he was fined, and if he did not pay his fine punctually it was levied by distress. The amount of the fines was spent on feasting or merry-

making, and on necessary expenses of the village.

"It will be seen from all this that a well-developed spirit of co-operation and home-rule existed in the village communities, dating back to very old times and handed down from generation to generation. Most of the village affairs were regulated by definite rules, the peasants aiding and controlling one another. Many tasks were performed in common, and few were the undertakings which could be carried on except after a joint decision. A humane spirit prevailed in the villages, and co-operation led to many praiseworthy undertakings within the community and to mutual aid and assistance in hard times, when crops failed, or when sickness or fire ravaged the district. Attendance at church and school was encouraged, the security against floods, robbers, thieves, or wild animals was greater than if each had to fend for himself, and a social life was evolved which undoubtedly had a great educational effect."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Co-operation in Danish Agriculture*, by Harald Faber, p. 6.