

Voluntary Service at the Mennonite Youth Farm

At Rosthern, Saskatchewan, fifty miles north of Saskatoon is located a dairy farm with various institutions, known as the Mennonite Youth Farm. Originally an experimental farm, it was purchased during the war from the Canadian government by the Saskatchewan Youth Organization of General Conference Mennonites for the nominal fee of twenty thousand dollars. The government specified that the farm be used for benevolent purposes only. At that time the farm consisted of 609 acres of land, four dwellings, two large barns, poultry houses, a modern piggery, and several smaller buildings.

Since that time more land has been purchased and additional buildings have been moved in or built as new needs arose. The present farm operation consists of more than 1300 acres of land including 320 acres rented land, 400 acres of hay, and 560 acres under cultivation. The buildings include a dairy barn capable of holding sixty cows and some baby calves, with a loft large enough to store 6,000 bales of hay plus all the bedding needed during the long cold winter. There are also a modern pasteurization plant and various other shops and outbuildings. The institutions currently in operation include a home for twenty crippled, retarded children, a home for thirteen retarded men, one for twelve retarded women, and another for fifty-three invalids. The total operation of the farm and its institutions requires a staff of about fifty.

Plans for the future include a new institutional plant to replace the present men's, ladies', and invalid homes with room for seventy invalids, ten retarded women, and forty retarded men. The old buildings are to be used for staff housing. The farming operation is also expected to expand to provide more work for the retarded men.

Besides the regularly employed staff on the farm is a unit of five voluntary service workers from the States who hail from Minnesota to Kansas to California. They help in various phases of the farm operation and also participate in community and church activities.

One of their main tasks is to help in the general farming program. This includes preparing the ground for crops, sowing and harvesting wheat and barley, baling hay, and planting and harvesting oats and corn for ensilage. The short summer and the rapid growth of crops create an abundance of work in gathering in the crops and preparing for the winter.

Other important tasks of the VSers are in connection with the dairy. One regularly helps milk both morning and evening and also grinds feed for the livestock. Another assists in operating the pasteurization plant where chocolate milk, homogenized milk, skim milk, and cream are processed. Still another takes the bottled milk to the nearby town of Rosthern where he daily delivers the milk from house to house. This job provides an excellent opportunity to meet people and bear witness to them of the saving grace of God.

Another area of work which involves VSers at the farm is in directing the work and recreation of the retarded men. The mentality of most of these men is no more than that of a six year old and therefore they cannot do all a normal person could. But with encouragement and guidance they can be kept busy and enjoy the satisfaction of achievement, even if limited. Several teams of these men, each under the supervision of a VSer who works with them and keeps them organized, perform their daily chores. In the summer they help in planting potatoes, hoeing weeds, caring for flowers, building fences and stacking bales. During the winter they clean the chicken house, hog barn, and dairy barn, bed and groom the cows, haul coal, and remove snow from strategic areas. They also help in generally keeping the farm neat and tidy. These teams alternate duties weekly to avoid monotony and to increase the versatility of the men.

Another significant area in working with these men is the direction of their recreation. They participate in table games and also in active sports such as skating and broomball on the ice and miniature bowling in the Mallway of their home. A positive physical therapy program such as this, which allows each to accomplish according to his ability, offers many possibilities and will probably be greatly expanded when the new institution becomes operational.

The final area involving V.S on the farm is orderly work at the Invalid Home. This work is mostly caring for men, who are on the first floor, of the building. Besides such routine tasks as carrying trays, feeding, making beds, washing and rubbing backs, giving baths, and shaving, many interesting and amusing incidents occur. The opportunity to converse with the tuests and hear of experiences in their lives also adds value to this work. The appreciation shown by the guests and the experience gained by helping those less fortunate amply reward the effort of serving God by serving man.

But work is not the only aspect of V.S. life at the farm. Recreation also plays an important part. The recreation room with its table games and ping pong facilities always awaits use. The ice rink also is always available during the winter months. Frequently the farm recreation committee, which includes several VSers, plans recreational activities for all farm staff. Many varied activities take place at these times including such things as skating, broomball, tobagganing, softball, volleyball, parties, and monthly use of a local high school gymnasium.

Besides farm related activities, the V.S. unit also finds ~~it~~ its own past times. Last winter they enjoyed an ice fishing trip to the northern part of the province. Occasionally special events lure them to Saskatoon. A rather unique project in which they participate is to referee the league basketball games of the local high schools. In addition to providing a change from the routine of work, this is also a way of further serving the Rosthern community. Activities in summertime are also numerous with volleyball and softball being quite popular in the long summer evenings. These various diversions and sports provide opportunity for enjoyment and release of tension and help the workers maintain a healthy attitude during work.

An additional source of strength and sustenance for the VSers is fellowship with God through participation in the spiritual activities of the farm and of the Rosthern Church. Every Monday evening, after singing for the Invalid Home guests, the farm staff gather in the recreation room for a Bible discussion and prayer meeting. In addition, there are daily prayer meetings at several convenient places on the farm. The VSers also take numerous responsibilities at the local Mennonite Church. Several teach Sunday School classes. One is a member of the Christian Endeavor committee. Several sing in the young people's and men's choirs, which both practice weekly. Recently several presented topics at the church. Several also participate in the activities of the young people, including one who belongs to their recreation committee. Assistance in the leadership and direction of a boy's club in Rosthern presents further opportunity of service for the unit. Besides benefitting themselves these various outreaches provide opportunity for the unit to establish a positive Christian witness on the farm and in the community.

From this description one can see that V.S. life at the Mennonite Youth Farm is varied, busy, and interesting. Much valuable experience and insight can be gained by leaving one's home community and adjusting to a different one in another country. There are openings for V.S. workers at the Mennonite Youth Farm now and as the expansion program proceeds additional openings will become available to those who wish to donate time and talent to God by serving humanity.