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THE VILLAGE WELFARE SERVICE IN LEBANON, SYRIA AND PALESTINE

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THE Village Welfare Service was started at the American University of Beirut in the early nineteen-thirties. While many factors contributed, as always in social movements, to the development of this service, a few influences were outstanding. As the result of the survey of the Near East Relief in 1926, published in the volume *The Near East and American Philanthropy*, the Near East Foundation was formed to bring scientific methods to bear upon the rural districts of the Near East. The Foundation set up in 1930 at the University of Beirut an Institute of Rural Life, one of whose projects was to co-operate with the Department of Education of the Government of Palestine in training village schoolmasters in leadership for all-round village progress, as described below. Another project was to loan professionally trained leaders to the Village Welfare Service as it got into its stride.

For several years before the Village Welfare Service was organized as a society, the Department of Sociology at the University had been taking groups of students to the villages during the vacations to make surveys and to conduct controlled experiments.*

In the summer of 1933 two teams of students worked in the Ramallah and Safad districts of Palestine. In 1934 a camp at Jibrail in Northern Lebanon was established, and the next year a permanent rural centre in the Beka'a was started. A flourishing camp near Aleppo and another in a village near Damascus followed. The Damascus camp was notable for being conducted entirely by Damascenes, both men and women; wives and sisters of the men volunteered, at first returning to the city every night, but before the end of the summer camping in tents in one community. Although almost entirely Moslem, this camp, which was visited by members of the Syrian Cabinet and large numbers of other national leaders, received nothing but praise, and no word of criticism for this pioneer project in co-education.

By the summer of 1940 a group in Palestine were organizing their own camps; the Transjordan students, with the blessing of the Amir, had organized a camp near Amman; and there were two camps planned for Syria and two for the Lebanon. Unfortunately, the fall of France and the tightening of war restrictions throughout the area necessitated the cancelling of most of these camps; only that in the Beka'a has continued with its full vigour throughout the war.

The Village Welfare Service had a twofold purpose. The first was to contribute to all-round rural development—in better health, in increased income through agricultural improvements, in higher status for women,

* A full description can be found in *A Controlled Experiment on Rural Hygiene in Syria*, by Stuart C. Dodd: Social Science Series, American University of Beirut, 1934.

in education and in recreation. The second purpose was to inspire the educated *élite* in the Arab world to take the responsibility and leadership in this rural progress on behalf of the backward and depressed 80 per cent. of the population living in the villages.

The programme of the Village Welfare Service was built largely at first round vacation camps in the villages. Each camp would enlist a group of volunteers from the students and professionally trained leaders in medical, agricultural, educational and domestic professions. The students would work under the direction of a doctor and nurses upon whatever health problems were most urgent and accessible in the villages near the camp. It might be trachoma treatment, or purifying the village water supply, or installing latrines, or controlling malarial-mosquito breeding if this did not require elaborate engineering effort. Other students would work under the agricultural specialist in teaching how to spray against some insect pest, or how to make beehives, or how to prune and tend the orchard. The women students would hold classes for mothers and girls, demonstrate how to bathe and care for the baby and organize contests to increase various domestic crafts. A campaign against illiteracy, with a specially prepared primer for adults, backed by standardized tests to measure increasing proficiency in reading, would be undertaken by other students. The boys of the village would be assembled for boy scout training, and for organizing volley-ball and other sports involving team work. The team work was consciously used as a uniting technique in the village by getting members of different feudal factions, or Moslems and Christians, or previously irreconcilable elements to play together in the same team. In more than one village a volley-ball game against a neighbouring village team brought together on speaking terms for the first time in many years the two factions in one village, who joined in common enthusiasm in applauding the team of their village comprising the children of both factions.

The usual programme included getting the village together to adopt some project for its own improvement on which the students could work with the villagers. Thus one village chose to install a long-needed road, and students and villagers joined in digging it. Another village elected to plant an olive grove on its common land; another, to free itself from malaria; another, to organize a marketing co-operative; another, to establish a night school towards eliminating illiteracy. The aim was to leave the village with a committee of its own leaders continuing to work upon some project chosen by the villagers themselves, without the inveterate independence on government initiative which is so deep-rooted in the East.

At the camps men and women students would study in organized classes the problems of the villages, and the methods which had been found successful in solving similar problems in Denmark or India or elsewhere. In the afternoons they engaged in field-work, going out in teams to neighbouring villages on foot or by bicycle or car. In the evenings when there was not a *sahra* (social meeting) or mass meeting of the village for pictures, talks and general stirring-up of community spirit, the students would invite a visiting lecturer for discussion on one of a series of village problems round the camp-fire.

Towards cultivating rural leadership among the college students, the preparation for these camps was put in the hands of the students: during the academic year money had to be raised for the camps; programmes planned, volunteers enlisted and trained, equipment collected and local contacts made. Part of the work was to secure Government co-operation, and to arrange visits from Cabinet Ministers, newspaper reporters and others who, by catching the vision, could spread the movement more widely and deeply through the Arab public.

A good example of what the Village Welfare Service was sometimes able to achieve is shown in the following anecdote. Afif Tanus, who had received special training for this service at the American University of Beirut, was seconded for some years to the Government Department of Education in Palestine, and it was largely owing to the initiative and energy of this able young Lebanese that the Village Welfare Service in Palestine advanced so rapidly.

The District Officer of Beisan, in Northern Palestine, had a problem. He had brought several thousand olive trees from the Department of Agriculture to the village to be planted on part of the public land. The villagers wanted olive groves on their treeless hills, and also badly needed the income that would accrue therefrom; but they refused to plant the seedlings. The District Officer had tried persuasion, he had even tried the police; but all to no avail. Then someone suggested borrowing Afif Tanus from the Department of Education, as he was acquiring a reputation for stirring villagers into unaccustomed activities for their own betterment.

Tanus accordingly came and talked with village leaders and Government officers, and very soon realized that the difficulty was neither ignorance nor lethargy, but an ancient village feud whereby each of the two factions was afraid to plant the seedlings until they were sure the other faction would not get control of the project. So Tanus called a meeting of all the village property owners and leaders at the local guest-house. Over tobacco and coffee the project was presented to the villagers in glowing terms, but in reply they made excuses that olive trees would never grow in their district, or Allah would have planted them long ago; that they knew little about cultivating olives, and in any case the olives might be wormy.

By midnight Tanus realized that something dramatic must be done to break the deadlock. He decided to risk an appeal to Arab traditions in a somewhat novel form. He rose in the council, wrapping his *abba* about him to signify the meeting was at an end. As impressively as possible he summarized the discussion with the statement that he and the other Government officers had come to the village as guests trusting the traditions of Arab hospitality, and bringing with them from the Government the gift of these olive seedlings and future wealth. Now the village had rejected the gift of their guests and had thus violated the ancient honour of the Arabs. He would therefore pronounce a curse upon the village! Hereafter its people and their children, and their children's children, should be known throughout the length and breadth of the land as the face-blackeners who had blackened the faces of their guests by refusing their gifts. Wherever anyone from the village went abroad, all would point the finger

of scorn at him, as if branded with the brand of Cain, as belonging to the village that was unworthy in the sight of all Arabs. As soon as he (Tanus) and his colleagues should have shaken the dust of the village from off their feet on leaving it, forthwith this curse would descend upon the village! Immediately the meeting was in an uproar with dismay and consternation on all sides. They implored him not to leave them and bring the curse on them. He replied that early in the morning he would leave the village, and left the room.

Before the meeting Tanus had arranged with the village schoolmaster to mobilize before dawn all the boys carrying their picks and shovels, together with the town-crier. The crier went through the village announcing that no one was to do his normal work in the village that day. No man was to go to the fields, no woman was to bake bread, no child was to go to school. Let everyone assemble in the market square. Everyone assembled, led by a parade of the schoolboys with their teacher, Afif Tanus and the Government representatives. In the square the people expected further speech-making; instead, Tanus took up a pick, went off to the site chosen for the grove and started to dig. That an *effendi* from the Government, their guest, should do their manual work was unthinkable—a shame to the village. Accordingly the headman must needs take the pick from Tanus' hands, whereupon Tanus took another, and kept feeding picks out into the hands of the leading elders who thus, in spite of Arab custom, found themselves at work. Then he organized the affair, urging them to complete the planting before sundown, and assigning all on one side of a boundary line to one faction, and all on the other side to the other faction, and challenging each faction to be the first to get their quota planted. With the music of Arab tribes going forth to war being played by a couple of young men, all the village was presently busily at work planting olive seedlings, and Tanus departed to the next village on his daily business.

A check-up later showed that a high percentage of the seedlings had taken, and the village was greatly pleased with the project. But more significant still, the new spirit in the village was shown by such remarks as, "Now that the olives are planted, what shall we do next?" The above incident was one of many in the work done by Afif Tanus, a Lebanese village boy who graduated from the University with the ideal that rural progress must be the foundation of all Arab independence and development. He is perhaps one of the best examples of that part of the Arab youth who believe in the same ideal and express it in action through the Village Welfare Service.



