

### Hugh MacRae's Follies

Three slight and widely separated personal experiences are responsible for this article. The first was ten years ago. I was doing a great steel plant - a beautiful plant with real grass and real vines in its yards - where grass and vines would grow. On a bench beside a green plot sat a huge Chesoh worker - a twelve hour a day man - resting from his turn at the furnace, his head in his hand.

"Too hot, faint?" I asked.

He looked up scornfully, and then sensing a real concern, pointed to the grass.

"I tick for a farm."

"But - why not? There's land for all in this country."

"I not know how."

Two years later an expert woman accountant, with a handsome salary, turned on me fiercely when I spoke of her success.

"Success! This shut-in life! I was born for the land. I could make it give up, but where can I getit with roads, a market, neighbors, decent credit - without them it's too uncertain. There are others to consider. But me - I am sick for the land."

The third was last November - Armistice Day, in Washington. The day brought out hundreds of veterans, among them the disabled out for a little freedom. There was a revival of the camaraderie of war times. You sat down on the path bench by solitary boys, or

if they dined alone, asked them to honor you. Alone I went into a restaurant. A pale lad in khaki - an eye gone - sat at a table. I did as I would have done in 1917 or '18, asked to join him.

The ice broken, he did as he would have done then, told me of himself.

"Me for the land," he said. "My trade takes two eyes. I could run a little farm - hens, cow, garden, bees. They promised us land and credit, too. Why don't they come across with something a man like me can look at. I can't pioneer. I did my part of that in France. Ain't nobody going to help us to land like they promised when we was fightin' for 'em?"

When such glimpses into people's longings stick by you-- as they sometimes do - an answer to their questioning becomes almost a necessity to one's peace of mind - particularly so when you know, as I did, that there are tens of thousands of other people like them trapped in shops and factories and offices. You come to jump at any proof that it is possible for them to have their heart's desire, get land to tame or redeem on such terms that they can enjoy plenty and content as they make their conquest. But is there any such proof? Has anybody demonstrated that it can be done? That is, has anybody set up the principles for colonization as they have been set for making steel and building bridges, worked out methods which make it as nearly fool-proof and swindle-proof as human undertakings can be made?

We have such a demonstration on the Atlantic Coast. I had supposed until I went to see it that it should be classed as an experiment - and I wanted something sure - but the colonies of Hugh MacRae in Pender County, North Carolina, are no longer an experiment. They are one of the completest and most far-reaching demonstrations of how to settle land so that your original settler will get something beside doubt, pain and failure out of it, that the country has as yet seen. I am inclined to class the principles he has worked out with those that Frederick Taylor established for the scientific management of industry. They have the same power to increase the things that men need and want - the same power to transform unskilled drudgery into skilled labor.

The best way perhaps to understand what he has done is to follow the steps he has taken and find why he took them.

He seems to have begun life land-minded and always to have had an appreciation of what people call "dirt farming," something that has an essence in it that the gentleman farmer never knows. As he grew up he could not get it out of his blood. School did not do it. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he graduated could not do it. Indeed, while a student there, the possibility when he went back home - home being Wilmington, N.C., - of doing something to develop the vast acreage of swamp and timber land that spread north, south and west from the town, had strong hold of his mind. The matter with Wilmington, people said, was

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that it had no "back-country." But couldn't you make one? The land was there - couldn't you redeem it, settle it? He went so far as to lay out a plan of colonization along the line of the railroad which ran through the desolate stretches connecting Wilmington with civilization, but the president of the road was one of that school of executives who think, or seem to think, that people have nothing to do with railroads. So Hugh MacRae's scheme for colonization was dropped - a boy's folly.

A few years later and he was free to follow his "folly." He was responsible for varied interests in and around Wilmington, but his mind still dwelt on the rescue of the vast surrounding acreage. He received no encouragement. It was not a land for white men, he was told. Its air was sick with malaria. Hugh MacRae pondered and finally when the city's power plant came under his management he flouted superstition and ran a trolley line straight into the condemned area, inviting settlers to follow!

He was not unconscious that his "folly" might in truth be one. Was this malaria that had kept Wilmington within its city limits for all these decades "in the air" as they said; or was it, as the scientists said, carried by mosquitoes? He wanted his street car motor men, conductors. If it was in the air then they would take it. He saw them growing rosy under the outdoor life. It was the mosquito. If the land he wanted used was drained, the houses where people lived screened, there would be no danger. He went at it. Today Wilmington is fringed with miles of beautiful

suburbs - the children of Hugh MacRae's folly.

But his mind was on a still larger thing than helping two people to pleasanter homes, a bit of land of their own. He wanted to see these swamps and forests converted into farms, productive farms, filled with thriving happy people - people who otherwise would have little or no chance. He had proved they could be made healthy. But how about the soil? Its yield for generations had been "pine, pitch, and turpentine." Few saw on its white sands a fit place for farming - farmers needed "black" soil, that only was "rich." As for the swamps - they were just swamps, to be avoided, dreaded. But might not the bad repute of the soil be like the bad repute of the air?

He set to studying it. He saw in the scattered, unconnected patches that negro and white farmers still kept up wonderful growths of vegetables, of strawberries. If you could do it on a little scattered patch, couldn't it be done on big patches? People laughed at the idea. He went to experts in soil, for their verdict. It was dazzling. This condemned tract, they told him, lay in the most fertile belt on the Atlantic Coast - the winter garden of the North-Eastern States. Its soils were of the famous Norfolk and Portsmouth white sandy loam series. It had from 233 to 250 "growing days," that is, days without frost that kills; a rainfall of fifty-five inches, well distributed through the year; pure water to be had everywhere for the digging.

What would grow on this soil? All sorts of garden truck - strawberries, lettuce, asparagus, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, peas, beans; and, as well, corn, cotton, tobacco, peanuts. It was possible, so said the soil experts, for an industrious person to raise seven crops a year on this outcast land. Testing confirmed all they said. He could certify this soil.

Hugh MacRae had established the first principle of successful colonization - proving what the land will yield - a principle which, if it had been followed in this country, would have prevented tens of thousands of heart-breaking tragedies. Lands have been, and are today, sold to the credulous and hopeful which never satisfy one of the claims made for them. And the settler has no redress. Everything else he buys has at least a sort of certification - not so the land. Men have invested their all in Florida Everglades to find when they and their families reached their purchase that it lay under the water. Men have journeyed across the plains to a "home" to find no water above ground nor any below nearer than a thousand feet. For one who, like the hero of "Vandemark's Folly" in Herbert Quick's virile, pungent, honest romance has forced fortune from a swindler's gold brick, a score have lost heart, moved on, left their bones in their tracks. The certification of the land, the holding of the seller responsible if it is not what he pretended it to be, is the first step in restoring confidence to our fearful land-minded.

But land may do all that the seller promises and little good it will do you if you have no all-the-year-around road and no steady market. Transportation and markets must be assured as the land is assured. Hugh MacRae knew that he could fulfill these second and third essentials. He had transportation - cutting straight through the heart of his wilderness - a railroad whose management had seen a great light since the days when its president refused to consider his plans for coöperating with settlers - its management was only too eager to help. This railroad went to great markets - markets organized to take products such as might be produced on these soils, at prices reasonably certain to be fair.

On this basis, he began cutting swamp and savannah into ten-acre tracts, clearing and draining a bit of each. He wanted his settlers at the start to have a parcel ready to till, enough at least for a season's food.

He probably was led to this - a fourth principle - by his own common sense. Let one ask himself how he would feel confronted by an unbroken tract - no tree cut, no drain run. Avoid discouraging your settler on his arrival seems to have been his rule.

And then he started out to find his people.

"You can't find them. They are not in North Carolina," the doubters said.

"That's one thing that ails North Carolina. I mean to bring them to her."

"Those that come will have no money," said the doubters.

"I don't expect them to have much," said Hugh MacRae.

"I shall give them long time credit. This is not speculation or exploitation that I am undertaking. It is business - business for the good of all concerned, and business means credit."

"Another of his follies," said the doubters.

He knew the people he wanted. They must love the land, love it well enough to be willing to sacrifice, to possess it. They must be people who know how to coax its riches from it, patient with its vagaries, studious of its needs - "dirt farmers," willing to use their hands. They must be people of integrity, sincerity. He would sell to no one who did not look on his purchase as a future home - no one who wanted to hold the tract for speculation. That is, having proved the value of the land to be redeemed, he proposed to have people worthy of the land.

He had a long search and at last went abroad for them.

In older lands, he argued, were men who would understand, men who having no chance of proprietorship at home might take it if offered to them in a new country. They would bring farming lore of their own, bred into their bone - invaluable ways - theirs because they had grown up with them. They would cooperate naturally because they were of the same race, came together. These cooperating groups would buy, sell, build together.

The first to come were the Greeks. They came alone, without wife or child - eager for the adventure. Marathon, the

Digital Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

settlement they formed was named. It proved a Marathon for them. "Man cannot live alone." The Greeks could not. They gave up the venture.

Out of this experience, greeted by the "I told you so" of the doubters, Hugh MacRae added another to his principles of colonization. Colonization, he could write down now, is a family problem - social and economic. Making a home on raw land by those of little, or perhaps much capital, requires a family. The reason for the effort is the family. The tasks require a combination of skill and ages - a man with strong hands and head, a woman with a woman's courage and a housewife's arts - children, many of them, for footsteps and chores and taking on the heavier labor as they grow strong, and the father and mother grow weak. The grandfather and grandmother for poultry and gardening, and puttering.

It is running ahead of my story, but the flourishing colonies which have grown up since the start with the Greeks, some twenty years ago - the colonies known as Castle Hayne, St. Helena, Van Eden, demonstrate over and over that the ideal coöperative unit for such undertakings is the family - the larger the better, given health, sound discipline and intelligent direction. Stepping recently before a flourishing ten-acre farm owned by one of the older settlers, and asking how things were going with him, we were told with joy that the grandfather had come from Belgium to live with them, that he had taken over the garden. It was such a help. He was only seventy-six! (The garden looked as if he were thirty.)

Everywhere we went the great news told us by the older colonists was of new help that had arrived - a sister, an aunt, a cousin. More hands meant more crops, more easement for all, more gaiety.

Henceforth it was families only Mr. MacRae sought. He sought them in Italy, in Holland; and they came as fully certified as the land they came to. They made a little Italy - St. Helena; a little Holland - Van Eden. Coöperative, to be sure; but coöperative among themselves, and for themselves, quite apart from the America surrounding them. But this was not what Hugh MacRae was seeking, groups of foreigners, however prosperous. He wanted to make citizens, American citizens, for North Carolina. "Folly!" the on-lookers cried. "It can't be done." And yet it was done, though not by calculation, as everything so far had been done. It was the news of the prosperity of the first families that did it, for they were prospering - prospering in the most surprising fashion. The promptness with which the land had responded to the care and affection they brought to it would never have followed had it not been part of Hugh MacRae's intelligent foresight to apply, as one of the principles in his scheme of coöperation, a friendly scientific direction.

Leave the colonist on new land to himself, force him to find by experiment how to buy at the best advantage, what to sell and where, how to transport; and you are asking of him something only one degree less discouraging than to put him down on

uncertain land, where no spot has been prepared for a beginning and where he must make his own tests. In the case of these Pender County, North Carolina colonies, there went along an expert's counsel, steering the settler that would take it, along a safe and opening road.

Little wonder that the landwise Italians and Dutch with this help prospered. They soon were vying with one another to increase the tillable acreage on their ten-acre plots. The first season convinced them that it was not going to require more than five or six years to own their own land. "In tre more year I own all dis," an Italian boy said to a visitor who came in one of the early years of the undertaking. He had left his plow in the furrow to explain what he had done, was doing, and hoped to do. In his pride and confidence he broke forth with this jubilant exclamation, "In tre year I own all dis."

While the normal time to complete their proprietorship was only from four to six years, there are stories of exceptions told - and verified - which take your breath away. Think of three - four thousand dollars from an acre of lettuce! It happens. One new comer, without capital, buying on long time credit, a piece of cleared land came in ninety days and paid in full for his tract, \$4,000. Lettuce. But let me emphasize - these are the exceptions. They only go to show what the land can do.

The news spread - spread into cities and industrial centres - reached trapped men who had begun to see that in the

factory as it usually is managed, there is but little future for a family. It pays high wages - part of the time, "unemployment within employment," seasonal operation, shutting down a plant for twenty - thirty or more per cent. of the year, absorbs savings. Ill-health pursues many; they sicken for the land. It was such as these, hearing of Hugh MacRae's colonies, who began to appear at the door of the office of the development company in Wilmington, N.C.

One Sunday last May, making the rounds of the settlements, I stopped before a trim cottage, gaily painted, set in roses and shrubbery, a good barn to the rear, a big yard of Rhode Island Reds to the side, a Ford at the door, five acres at least of lettuce, strawberries, potatoes, to right and left, the whole backed by tall, long leaved pines. A smiling Pole of perhaps thirty ran out, eager to tell Mr MacRae that he was clearing two more acres this year - a happy man if ever I saw one. A miracle had happened to him - a foreigner, caught at a machine, bolting on a rumor of what had been done in these parts, attacking an untouched tract, because cheaper, ("Other fellows begin farming farming with a plow," he said, "I begin with ax.") - taking a job as a motor man until he had cleared his first piece, and now, after six years, a proprietor - land and all clear, a bank account, a family, happiness.

A little further on lay five acres of as perfect crops as ever one saw. This man, they told me, walked into the office one day, without a dollar. He wanted land, would work. "We gave him the land and found him a job at a dollar a day. He hung over that land from the start like a lover over his lady, and it gives him its best." Possibly he is worth thirty thousand dollars now, after about seven years. "That's all right," he says, when we joke him about getting rich. "I would rather do this than anything else in the world, if there was not a dollar in it," and I believe that is true."

A little later, at Castle Hayne, was a Hungarian who had escaped from a Paterson factory, where he had developed tuberculosis. He came to Wilmington with \$75. and a family, - took his ten acres. It is all in crops now - in crops with artificial irrigation and cheese-cloth screens for extra early plantings, machinery of the best, a tidy home, blooming children, and health for himself. Above his interest in his crops - he had strawberries that would pack forty-five to a basket! - was his interest in "the best thing we've done in the colony so far" - and that was a co-operative house for grading cucumbers - a practice which they have found substantially increases the value of all crops.

These men are samples of those that the spreading news brought - the best of settlers. But, more than that, it was their

coming that Americanized the colonies. Up to this time each group had clung to its own tongue, its own customs - even its own costumes. Now they began to vie with one another in American ways. They would speak only English to one another. To do as the Americans did was a boast. Today all the settlements are American, with foreign touches, like the foreign accents and the green striped porch pillars of the Italians.

While all this was going on Hugh MacRae was slowly training the colonists to another great principle - diversified crops. He had early realized that only by diversification could they be continuously prosperous. A single crop however profitable one year may mean ruin another. A man makes \$3000. from an acre of lettuce and the next season puts his entire acreage into lettuce, so do his neighbors. Everybody loses. They "break" the market. There are such things as crop failures and if you have but one crop all is lost.

"Diversify, diversify," he began to preach. "The South has been ruined by cotton and tobacco. She must learn to raise what she eats - keep cows, poultry, bees."

In 1915 a great blow to the colony of St. Helena backed up his theory. The Italians who settled it had ~~seen~~ at the start, what the nearby state experiment station has since brilliantly proved, that they had a fine soil and climate for grapes. They made vines

the base of their business. The fruit paid handsomely until the Volstead Act came, cutting the foundations from under them, as they believed. Under the disappointment some left the colony - too early, for experience is now proving that the market for grapes will probably be as great, or greater than it ever was.

A new base was needed at St. Helena, and Hugh MacRae had one ready to suggest - the dairy. "Another of his follies," men had said, when he talked of dairies on this land - "no pasture, nothing but rank native grasses - cannot get a balanced stock ration." But he had been experimenting. If the colonists were to be permanently healthy they must have stock. To have stock they must have pasture. He had been going about with his eye on the ground for some years. One day he had found a tiny patch of white clover. White clover was not supposed to grow in the coastal region of North Carolina; but here it was! If it could thrive on a small patch, why not on a big one? He tried it, and succeeded. How about other clovers? the Japanese clover, the burr clover? He found they all grew, if you planted the seed. Then there was the carpet grass. He began to plant it "on the worst soil in the world" - sour, half the year under water, sandy; and it took. Took and stayed, transformed the field. He began to extend it into pastures, planting it with one and another kind of clover. Today, when you make the round of the colonies with Hugh MacRae you are

continually being stopped in the most unlikely places, walked across fields - he wants to show you "the finest pasture in the South." He wants to show a perfect stand of seed, the seed of burr clover, white clover, Japanese clover.

And yet he is not satisfied. He is all the time watching for some new grass. The first thing he did with me when I arrived in Wilmington last May was to walk me out through his beautiful garden to an isolated corner - his private experiment station - to show me lustily growing, a patch of rescue grass.

"Can't you see," he exclaimed exultantly, "what it means to this region? No man can compute it. It's a new grass. Nobody knew that it would grow here. It came of itself to tell us." I did not "see" then, but two days later I was almost as much excited over that straggling little patch as Hugh MacRae had been for he had shown me what grasses and clovers meant to men and women hard up against a difficult situation, what they meant to these Italians, victims of the Volstead Act. Because of his pasture "folly" they are now turning farm after farm into as good pasture as the world ever saw, and the beauty of it is that it is ten months a year pasture. That is, such is the climate that it is only necessary to feed for two months, and such is the temperature that this does not have to be done under cover.

In this episode you have perhaps the most important principle of permanent colonization after the first - healthy

certified land. There must be a continuous source of sound counsel - a source the colonist has learned to trust - somebody who never fools or tricks him - somebody "who knows what he is talking about," who has proved the thing he says is so and can "show" you - somebody who foresees and warns you, talks "common sense" - somebody who in disaster has an immediate resource - which saves the day.

All of this Hugh MacRae has been to these settlers from the start.

This they have grown in numbers, in prosperity and in solidity. Today there are six settlements, of from 30 to 60 families, within 30 miles of Wilmington. The size of their individual holdings - usually 10 acres - makes the members of each group neighbors. You may not be able to "call across" but you can usually signal: the school, the church, the community house are within walking distance. Their interests are so alike that they naturally cooperate in many ventures and necessities, this in spite of strong individualism and a passion for independent proprietorship.

In the growing season they come together almost daily at the shipping points - the side tracks where the refrigerator cars await them. As you drive out from Wilmington late in the day you meet them coming and going. Trucks - Fords - wagons - carts - mule teams - horses; blacks, whites, Italians, Slavs, Dutch, Poles - even an occasional Chinaman. Cosmopolitan as you ever saw and yet so intensely, determinedly American. Their carry-alls are piled high with crates and baskets, much of it graded produce. Here they

linger, their output packed and receipted for - linger to discuss prices, the reason of this man's superior sweet potatoes, romaine, strawberries, new experiments, new plans. Proudly they discuss the growing opportunities and advantages their labor and thrift are bringing them. For people like these the railroad can afford special conveniences, and does; Wilmington can afford to take electricity to them, and has it on the way; the State can afford to give them good highways, and is doing so (a section of North Carolina's magnificent 50,000,000 dollar project for giving all her people "hard" roads.)

The shipping point buzzes every night with news of these things, and it stimulates them to undertakings - like the cucumber grading house. Tired men go home refreshed. They belong to a growing thing.

One of the heartening features of the development is the powerful example the colonies have been to "old settlers." Scattered among the pines and swamps, lean long lived families of blacks and whites, scratching a meagre existence from a soil which they did not understand, they were ignorant, isolated, poorly nourished and so set down as hopelessly shiftless. But here have come people, "dirt farmers" like themselves, people from across the sea, from great cities, leaving high wages, the movies, the street cars; and, where they have been starving, are growing rich. It is hard to prove an alibi in face of these colonists!

And now by their own doors comes a "hard" road, "as good

as any street in Wilmington." Miraculous things are happening to many of them, transformations. But of course this is the joy and profit of a demonstration. It puts tools into uncertain hands, knowledge into unfurnished heads, faith into unbelieving hearts. This is what Hugh MacRae has done down in Pender County, North Carolina. Do not imagine it has been easy as it may sound as I tell it. It is 30 years since the idea was born - born of a great love for his native state, which for the moment had dropped out of the national race, and a great desire to do his part in the world towards making more people happy, secure, useful. All this combined with a stubborn Scotch faith in a succession of "follies," (a "folly" being what one had never seen done and which therefore it was useless to bother with.)

But "It's dogged that does it" and Hugh MacRae's dogged - and intelligent - persistency has put colonization in these states on a scientific basis. If those who would open land - the Federal Government, the State, the individual, will follow his principles and practices there will come a time when land-sick steel worker, successful but revolting woman, disabled veteran, need not fear to follow their bent.

It's a far-reaching thing this man so faithful to his dreams and his follies has given us.