

**The Farmer's Voice: The Mysterious Case of the
National League for Industrial Education, 1908-1909**

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The enactment of vocational education legislation in the first decades of this century has been conventionally interpreted as a successful culmination of special interest group lobbying efforts. One vehicle for publicizing educational reform in the progressive era was a voluntary association called the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE). NSPIE leaders attempted to gather widespread support on vocational education issues. Often, this network of prominent businessmen, labor unionists, educators, social reformers and agriculturalists resembled a potpourri of competing self-interests. Within NSPIE, the rhetoric abounded about the potential contribution of public or private trade education to industry. Continued enmity between labor unionist and non-union business elements flourished. Although the National Society attempted to address specific concerns of a broad constituency, issues of agricultural education were either downplayed or deferred. As early as April, 1908, increasing interest in agricultural education brought official recognition from NSPIE's Board of Managers (Lloyd, 1979). However, nothing comparable to the debates over public or private trade education ever received greater attention. The dialogues between educator, industrialist and labor unionist rarely included the farmer. In the winter of 1908-1909, a rival association of agricultural interests united in a short-lived legislative drive. The National League for Industrial Education (NLIE) was their collective voice.

Initial agricultural interest in the promotion for industrial education progressed autonomously apart from the trinity of labor, industry and education. Agriculturalists had fully participated in the drafting of the Davis bill when it was introduced into the House of Representatives in January 1907. The bill called for the establishment of congressional district agricultural colleges and experimental stations and normal and secondary schools for instruction in agricultural, home economics and mechanical arts. For two years, the bill foundered in hearings before the House committee on Agriculture. After substantial revisions, the Davis bill was due for a major hearing before Congress in early January 1909 (Blauch, 1935).

Prominent agricultural educators, allied with President Theodore Roosevelt's 1908 Commission on Country Life, viewed with enthusiasm the opportunity to publicize the plight of rural education (Bowers, 1974; Danbom, 1979). The commission's findings, that rural schools failed to prepare pupils for farm life, hastening urban migration, was hardly surprising. Wayne Fuller (1982) suggested that country lifers knew full well what the commission would tell them what they wanted to hear. He wrote: "The commission's report, which laid the blame for the declining rural population squarely upon the country school, seemed to confirm the professional educators' long-standing contention that education in the one-room school was poor education" (p. 221). Rural education reform meant a reconstruction of the curriculum. Relevant coursework in scientific agriculture, domestic science and nature study was advocated for farm children in the hopes of stemming rural flight. These aspects of curricular change were embodied in the proposed federal legislation.

The winter of 1908-1909 was a critical period in promoting support for agricultural education. The National Grange (1908) endorsed the Davis bill at their annual conference. Yet, subsequent efforts to secure passage of federal legislation failed in the final days of the winter congressional session. A year later, agricultural interests forged a temporary alliance with labor unionists to attempt passage of the Davis-Dolliver bill.

The actual influence of NLIE surrounding support for agricultural education legislation is sketchy at best. NLIE records are evidently non-existent. However, some correspondence with the Ohio State Branch of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education reveals that the League might have been merely a paper organization engineered by Herbert Myrick to generate publicity for the Davis bill. Myrick governed the NLIE as its first president, and his New York City office served as the League's headquarters. As editor-in-chief of the Orange Judd Papers, Myrick parlayed a partnership in a minor publishing firm into the directorship of the thriving conglomerate of regional agricultural journals. In addition, he was active in advancing agricultural modernization by promoting scientific agriculture, cooperatives, rural free postal delivery and farm credit. Always the keen propagandist, Myrick used the pages of his American Agriculturalist to further the cause for rural education and country life reform (Myrick, 1936).

It seems that Myrick patterned the League after the rival NSPIE. He offered lifetime memberships in the hopes of building a permanent organization as well as generating revenue for lobbying efforts. Myrick promoted the NLIE as an industrial education reform association. In all likelihood, this was a conscious effort to entice disaffected NSPIE members into the League. In fact, several Ohio NSPIE Members received circulars from Myrick's office. Additionally, Myrick tried to establish state branches which could bring the legislative bill closer to grass roots supporters. In Ohio, an NLIE branch was supposedly organized in January 1909. The Ohio State Grange (1910) sanctioned the League at their December, 1909, convention. Yet, Homer Price (1909), Dean of The Ohio State University's College of Agriculture, who was appointed chapter president, denied any knowledge of the League's existence in the state. Further evidence of the suspicious origin of the League was offered by Charles S. Howe, President of Cleveland's Case School of Applied Science. Howe (1909) suggested that prominent agriculturalists knew little about their own organization. Myrick named James J. Hill, Minnesota railroad magnate and strong advocate of agricultural education, as NLIE honorary president. Yet Howe claimed that Hill disavowed any knowledge of the League.

Although it seems that the existence of the League was primarily a figment of Myrick's imagination, undoubtedly he realized that an NLIE-style organization devoted solely to rural education reform was sorely needed. The National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education was unable to accommodate issues of concern to agricultural educators. First, NSPIE never endorsed the Davis bill because it was too early, they felt, for federal legislation. Their national agenda was devoted to lobbying for the appointment of a commission on industrial education to study the problems (Barlow, 1967). Second, NSPIE leaders were convinced that successful vocational education necessitated dual delivery systems. They lobbied state legislatures for separate and distinct vocational education administrative structures. Finally, NSPIE represented a progressive reform movement of urban elites. Trade schools arose in wealthy municipalities where local boards of education were predisposed to developing an industrial work force.

Agricultural educators, focusing upon school modernization efforts, wanted to upgrade rural education without significantly altering the structure of common schools. Farmers looked to state legislatures to enact bills that would substantially raise the quality of county-level curriculum, teaching and supervision. In Ohio, the 1911 Cahill-Warnes bill mandated that the teaching of agriculture be placed in the common schools. All common school teaching certificates required competence in the elementary principles of agriculture. In addition, the bill carved up the state into four agricultural districts along with the appointment and funding of four district supervisors. Expert lobbyists like Mary E. Lee (1911), chair of the Ohio State Grange Education Committee, rallied farmers in support of issues affecting community control of country schools. When Democratic Senator Henry Yount introduced a measure meant to dictate state uniformity and purchase of school textbooks, the Ohio State Grange helped defeat the bill by labeling it as an attempt to usurp home rule (Derthick, 1911). In general, vocational educators remained passive bystanders in the movement for rural education reform.

It is understandable that farmers were reluctant to enter alliances that minimized their needs. The National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education failed to adequately address agricultural issues. Steeped in the politics of progressive reform, NSPIE leaders were often out of touch with the pulse of America. The social status afforded vocational educators gave them greater freedom to impose reformist solutions. However, their reliance solely upon the advice of professionally trained experts elicited resentment from a much wider populace. The National League for Industrial Education was meant to be an alternative support group for farmers. In some ways, Herbert Myrick's symbolic effort embodied the elements of political populism. His advocacy of a separate vocational education coalition is characteristic of late nineteenth century agrarian radicals who pitted social class interests against one another. Whether Myrick desired NLIE and NSPIE to openly wage war is unclear. However, he fully intended to publicize the plight of the farmer. NLIE was to become a sounding board for development of a national rural education policy. Myrick hoped that agricultural concerns would be articulated loud and clear.

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