

FRIENDS OF THE LAND

Address  
by  
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## FRIENDS OF THE LAND

It is my good fortune to be called on to welcome you all to the second Conservation Forum and Annual meeting of Friends of the Land held in St. Louis. This is an appropriate meeting place; St. Louis is the heart of a great diversified farm. It was founded by traffic in products of the land and streams of the vast western empire for which it was the portal. It grew because its citizens found work to do processing and handling raw materials that came from the ground, and serving the population the land supported. We are meeting here at the junction of two of the world's greatest waterways that drain the spring and winter wheat belts before flowing into the greatest cotton-producing area in the world.

A century and a half ago, St. Louis became the hub of the land and water trails that opened up the Great West. Then a prairie sea of grass and trees stretched boundlessly to the west and north and south. Grass brushed the stirrups of pioneers and surveyors as they rode through a kingdom of unplowed range. Later the empire builders laid their rails on prairie sod from here to the setting sun. Then the land was green and the rivers clean and nature was in balance with the elements.

But the grass and trees, like the buffalo and other wild life they fed and sheltered gave way before the settler, his plow and his ax. The few hills of corn the Pilgrims planted and fertilized with fish spread to 108 million acres. Corn and wheat and cotton have erased the pioneer trails and made a nation passing great, but in the process the wealth of our land has been going down to the sea in mud.

I suppose all of us hold in our minds some pictures, some things we ourselves have seen, that point up and dramatize to us the mishandling and destruction of the land. In 1930 I drove out west of Des Moines to see the home farm we had sold after the death of my father 25 years before. I remembered it as a pleasant farm in rolling country, with black loam plowlands and fine woodlots, and a great variety of fruit trees and berry shrubs about the place. I drove past the farm without recognizing it, and turned back to find it. The black land was gone, the plowed slopes were yellow and gullied, the yard weedgrown, the house a derelict. What we had called "the woods" had been cleared, and the land row-cropped to death. That happened in 25 years of "square farming in a round country", of up-and-down hill plowing.

When the Friends of the Land met in St. Louis in 1942 we organized a tour to visit one county that has within a few miles of each other two contrasting areas - one neighborhood a scene of desolation and total abandonment of hundreds of farms, the other a community of organized restoration and conservation. The blighted area contained one solid block of at least 150,000 acres which had been entirely abandoned. The county agent told me that at the turn of the century the population had averaged one farm family to less than 100 acres, according to court house records. Plowing for corn and wheat during the first world war finished this land for economic use until the long and costly process of restoration has been applied.

I am glad such auto tours are possible again. There is nothing a conservation society, a Friends of the Land chapter can do that is so productive of understanding; there is no community that

hasn't its object lessons.

The Soil Conservation Service tells us that at least 3 billion tons of solid soil materials are washed out of the fields and pastures of the United States each year by water erosion alone. Some enterprising mind has figured out that to move such a bulk of soil on rails would take a train of freight cars 475,000 miles long - long enough to girdle the planet 18 times at the Equator.

With this erosion we lose annually about six times as much mineral plant food - nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potash, magnesium, sulphur, etc. - as farm crops take from the soil in a year. We are depleting our mineral reserves at a rapid rate, and without those minerals in the right supply we cannot have healthy plants or healthy people. That is a vitally important angle to our soil problem. The farms are giving up to the cities in the process of land mining which is what most farming is, a mineral wealth which the farmer does not figure in his costs. He is depleting his reserves year by year, but he can't charge it against his taxes. It occurs to me that this is one good reason why we on the pavements owe it to ourselves as well as to our farmer neighbors to take more than just a passive interest in the protection and restoration of the land.

I believe we can see and define other interests which city people have - the very people in this room have - in the critical challenge to befriend the land.

Unless cover is restored on the hills and unless cultivated land is handled differently on the slopes and in the valleys that drain into the waterways of the great Mississippi basin, recurring floods are

going to wreak increasing damage in spite of the miracles of engineering construction we attempt or perform. That is important; it means something to all of us. Here's another interest - if this country will only do what it knows how to do to restore hill covers and to farm practically for soil conservation, we will be doing more than can be done in any other way to multiply and perpetuate wild life in the streams and fields of our land. There are other sides and angles, but they can wait. If these already suggested don't strike deep into your interest, nothing else will.

I am ready to assume that we are all more or less aware of these things - of the need for soil and water conservation, and the relation to human health, to flood control; to wild life. The question is, how much are we interested? Is our interest passive, the too-bad-but-what-can-I-do variety? Or are we willing to search our hearts and minds to see if there isn't something we can do about it? Is there a place for the Friends of the Land, and, if so, do you belong in it? Is a common interest in the preservation of the soil and all that it implies strong enough cement for a local and a national organization that has no other interest or purpose?

With your permission, I would like to tell you something about the Friends of the Land. The Friends of the Land as a formal body is five years old. It is young, it is small, its few thousand members are widely scattered. But it is growing, interest in it is increasing, and it is learning to walk and make its way in the world. The reason, as one of its founders puts it, is this: "When people come together to work for the land, the mother of us all, to try to protect it and save it for the use of human beings, for ourselves and the present as well as for posterity and

the future \*\*\*, there they find some common denominator that brings them closer together than any other work on the face of the Earth."

Friends of the Land is a non-profit, non-political society. It is strictly an amateur; no officer or director or staff executive is paid a salary by the organization. It was founded and has developed as a result of the devoted and unselfish work of a large number of men and women - I wish I could name them all - Louis Bromfield, Russell Lord, Dr. Forman, Jane Francke, Ollie Fink, Dr. Helzer, Hugh Bennett, Albrecht of Missouri, Ed Condon - even to name these does injustice to many others I haven't mentioned.

Some people complain to me that the Friends of the Land society isn't "practical". The answer, of course, is that Friends of the Land will be just as "practical" as we make it. If a connection with the organization stimulates a community to study local conditions and spread the light throughout its territory, then Friends of the Land will be justified by a practical result. If it reaches many of the non-farming population, which is about four-fifths of our total, with the vital message of conservation, it is "practical". If it nourishes and spreads the reach of its magazine "The Land" to its full potential usefulness, then from my standpoint it has justified itself even though it fails to accomplish another single thing.

After all, the question of what is practical and what is not depends pretty much on the point of view. When a young man in Ohio tried to get his neighbor to plow and cultivate on the contour, that practical individual made the classic answer: "Young man, you can't tell me anything about farming; I've worn out three farms already." The corn belt farmer who farms his rolling slopes with square fields may think he is entirely practical, but less than a generation of that kind

of farming has destroyed the major values of many a farm.

What is the attitude of Friends of the Land toward other conservation organizations and societies, and what are our relationships? If anyone feels that in order to join Friends of the Land, he must give up some other conservation membership, I would prefer that he do not join us. While I intend to raise the question at our regular meeting tomorrow, I am confident that Friends of the Land will endorse and support the movement of which Jay Darling has been dreaming, to establish an independent clearing house, a common nerve center, for all conservation interests. We believe that care of the land is the bed rock on which all conservation rests, and that the job is big enough - perhaps too big - for all of us working together.

There are a few thoughts I want to leave for the local Chapter which I hope will grow out of this meeting. To reach its maximum usefulness a community organization must be big enough and alert enough to generate its own current so that it will not need to depend on power from the outside. Look about you - everywhere you can see the right way and the wrong way to handle the land. There is enough to be seen here, to be done here, and there is enough leadership here so that you will not need to turn elsewhere for programs and object lessons. You will not even need to bring on the outside "Traveling circus" to make your meetings entertaining and inspiring - Bromfield and Bennett and Ferman and Lord and Franck. and Fink cannot stretch everywhere.

From here you can help spread the understanding that flood control is a two-phased job. One belongs to the engineer, to handle floods when they come. The other falls to men on the land, to friends of the land, who alone can keep waters in the courses where they belong.

I realize that nearly every man and woman gathered here has a direct or indirect interest in the ownership of a piece of land. The truth and importance of these things are well-known to you. Friends of the Land brings you no new philosophy. Perhaps it can help add to the light and force that are already here. It is what we do for ourselves that counts most; the values most worthwhile will not be brought to us from the outside.

Let me in conclusion thank the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, the Farmers Club, the Belleville granges, the Garden and Women's Clubs, the many who have worked to arrange this meeting. Let me in an official role bring you the greetings and the best wishes of the local chapters all over the Country. For those of us who hold temporary posts as officers in the national organization, let me tell you that we need the help, the force, and the leadership which you in this region can give. There is plenty of work to be done if we know how to do it.

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