Farmers Buy Forty Per Cent. of Motor Cars

Country Existence Ameliorated by Speeding Up from Three to Twenty Miles an Hour—Tremendous Influence in Rural Social Life.

FORTY per cent. of the automobiles sold thus far this year have been bought by farmers, according to an estimate obtained from the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce. This is considered the most significant shift in motor car distribution since the gasoline-driven vehicle passed from the toy to the practical stage, with the promise of an effect on farm life more far-reaching in certain respects than that wrought by any previous invention.

Iowa, a farm State, leads in the number of cars per capita. According to the latest vehicle registration figures by States, now available for the first six months in 1917, there is one motor vehicle in Iowa to every thirteen persons, a gain over the same period in 1916 of 40 per cent. The percentage increase for the same period in the great manufacturing State of New York was 24.

The new figures show that place of honor is held by one motor car per capita in is also held by a farm State, Nebraska. There is one motor vehicle for every ten persons, an increase since last year of 26 per cent. The gain in the great manufacturing State of Pennsylvania for the same period was 10 per cent. Third place in per capita distribution of motor vehicles is held by California, where there is one motor car for every twelve persons. In this State, too, agricultural interests are large.

Another agricultural State, Kansas, occupies fourth place in percentage gain, with one car to every thirteen persons, with 22 per cent. advance over the corresponding six months in 1916. Lest Kansas in fourth place again is a farm State, South Dakota, showing an increase of 24 per cent. In this period Illinois, one of the leading manufacturing States, registered an increase in number of automobiles purchased of 13 per cent. The next three places in this list are held by farm States—Minnesota and North Dakota tied for fifth position, with one motor vehicle for every fourteen persons, and Montana next with one out of every fifteen. And so it goes down the list of States.

What is the national significance of this? A look backward, as seen by motor vehicle experts. Everybody knows about the outstanding rural problem—"The Isolation of the Farmer. For thirty years it has been a leading topic in all discussions for the amelioration of farm life. Many times the problem seemed on the eve of solution. There was the railroad. It was to intersect the country until no isolation would be felt. Then came the telephone. It was to knit the countryside together by wire and long distance conversation and thus banish isolation.

Next came rural mail delivery. It was to make the change by the delivery of daily papers at the farmer’s door, by establishing continuous touch with the city and the outside world. Each did effect a decided change, but the problem of loneliness of farm life remained. Telephoning at first afforded labor-saving devices for the farm, such as the Reaper, the riding plow, and the gasoline engine, weakening to some extent the theory that it was the burdensome work and the length of the hours that made farm work distasteful. Then came the introduction of the idea that the heart of the trouble was social, and that it would be solved only by the extension of social organization in the farm communities. Neighborhood societies, monotonously.

The dull people became duller; many of the brighter ones made their escape.

What was needed for the farmer's family was twenty miles an hour. This the automobile supplied to this the real meaning of the remarkable increase in the number of automobiles now being bought by farmers. The city had various kinds of rapid transit before the automobile, but the automobile was what is needed for the farmer. Rapid transit made the big cities of today possible. "Automobile rapid transit, experts on this subject say, is going to make a new kind of life possible on the farm. The practical utility of the automobile on the farm has already been much emphasized. It is the seating and travel back and forth in the day's work. It is a device of capital importance and it must be appraised at a high value, but the practical side of the farm life has received the almost exclusive attention of those who would improve its conditions.

It may be said that therein lies its unattractiveness to many. It was too practical; too much work and too little play. All the inventors had been concentrating on providing the farmer with better tools to work with instead of giving at least a fair part of the thought to a device to afford him the relaxation of some kind. That relaxation was needed because the farm until a few years ago. It was no pleasure to wear out a team on some long trip, over hot and dusty roads. But now the farmer automobile owner looks forward to his vacation with all the expectation of the city man. Thousands of Kansas and Nebraska farmers will make trips this year to Colorado and other scenic States of the Far West, after their rush season is ended.

In some of the most prosperous districts four out of five farmers own automobiles. To them a hundred miles is a short trip. This means the multiplication of the attendance at all social gatherings—more zest, more life, and, through the agency of the automobile, that which is happening in the country is undergoing a change. The old horse and buggy courting radius was about six miles from home. The farmer’s son, with the automobile, has a range of 100 miles in which to seek for a wife. The sociologists will call it better mating, for the farmer’s boy or girl now has a larger opportunity to choose the one most suitable. The automobile is making a farm the place to live.