A COUNTRY SUMMER PLAY SCHOOL

Caroline Pratt

1917

A summer school of the type which I am about to describe should be on a farm within two hours of the city, the size of which should be determined by whether or not it is to be made to yield an income. If it is large enough to support a farmer, it should also contain house and barns and equipment for running such a place.

I should not lay much stress upon the advantage of having a farm large enough to carry on agriculture, from the educational point of view, as industrial and commercial life is plentifully supplied in the environment of the city child. Rather the land should be rough and uncultivated in order to give opportunity to the spirit of adventure. The industrial side of farm life would come out sufficiently by having the children cultivate their own gardens, by keeping a cow or two for the school milk supply and a donkey or a safe horse for the children to use.

The essential requirement, however, would be a generous stream of water. The stream should have a swimming pool as one of its features. Above the swimming pool would be the center of a large part of the school activities. There should be a huge bank of sand along the bank. There should be a clay pit. A small building for keeping the tools and a work bench or two should be built. There should be a place for making cement. From
the main stream it should be possible to deflect smaller streams so that groups of children could work on special projects without interference. It should be possible for a child to have his own tiny stream to carry out his individual project.

What might work out of an environment enriched to such an extent and farther, as the beginning made its own suggestions, is a matter partly of conjecture. We know from experience that the children would learn to pipe water to different places. They would discover the use of gravity for this purpose and possibly the syphon. Older children than ours at present would construct dams, water wheels, windmills, etc., for raising water.

But the feature about which we can only conjecture is how far the children would go in reproducing sections of, first, the environment with which they are familiar and later other sections. Here would be the opportunity to discover how cities and industries have sprung into existence and reproduce enough of them to get a general effect. They could construct railroads on solid cement foundations and build stations of cement blocks of their own making. Or they could use stones and cement for bridges and buildings. They would have the shop with plenty of wood to use to supplement these. Ever since the Play School was started, I have wanted to give the children opportunity to experiment with cement. I believe it offers rich opportunities for children of the age of our oldest ones. Big schemes could be carried out in a more permanent form than our other materials permit and much quicker results obtained than with wooden construction. This work would have to be done in the country where there is more space than a city school offers.

Here would begin the study of history and geography. There could be no better basis for understanding the physical side of life and its effect on the social life of the people. How towns spring into being; why
industries are placed as they are; the effect of the sea or a lake or river upon the people who border them; the basis for such information would come in this environment.

But the children should not be rushed along this road too fast. Such work would cover several years.

Groups of children would be interested in dramatizing. Industrial and domestic life, which forms a part of our city children's mental content, would be made to further this. They would build houses and furnish them and play out domestic life. In this connection I am sure children would become interested in pottery and in sewing. As their pottery became worth it an oven for baking clay should be added to the equipment.

Nature study in and for itself as well as in its interpretive character would be one of the main purposes of the summer plan. There would be opportunity for children who wanted to garden. There would be places to paddle and play in the sand, to dance on the grass, to play ball.

The physical arrangements would be unique. Unless a better plan is offered, I should be in favor of a dining pavilion with small tables and chairs. The pavilion could be used for dancing and play on rainy days. It should have awnings but should be an open porch.

The sleeping arrangements should be rough open porches, containing space for two children each, but not necessarily under separate roofs. These places every child should be entirely responsible for. They should be for bathing, sleeping, dressing and keeping clothes. Outside each should be a water connection where each could get a cold shower on the grass. There should also be basins for keeping hands and face clean. All these arrangements for taking care of the physical side should be complete for two children.
In the summer plan, fewer teachers would be needed than in the city school, but incident to providing for the child's physical side more service would be required, especially while the children are very young. I believe the physical side as well could be taken care of when the school is old enough to have older children of its own upbringing. Teachers engaged for ten months of the year in the city school would then spend two months in the country school. If the school's city and country, were made to cover the whole twelve months of the year, each teacher could have a two month's vacation, through the fact that the summer school would require less supervision.

With such an environment with its opportunity to invent and adapt, the same opportunity that has been and is accorded by nature to man for his development, together with the added advantage to the educational process of having men's achievements to imitate and thus bridge the process, there would seem to have been taken a fundamental step in supplementing the country life so that it shall become a real children's environment. How to right-about-face and go back to the city would be the only real problem. But we must keep our minds upon the fact that city life is rich in mental content, that social life is worked out here as it cannot be in the country. Also that these propositions are warm weather ones.

I believe the details are sufficiently in mind to project such a summer plan at once and that a piece of land which would fill the requirements should be purchased. My idea would be to purchase fifteen or twenty acres near New York, without buildings. We could then make our provisions simple and even crude.

"A Summer Play School" (Country) Caroline ]
[Pratt -- 1917. Plan Submitted to the Bureau]
[of Educational Experiments 1916-1917. Type-]
[script, City & Country School files. ]