Foreword

HERE IS THE RECORD of a venture in philanthropy in collaboration with an impoverished and disrupted people which should be “must” reading for those who would seek to serve backward rural populations in any land. It is shot through with uncommon sense of the practical, the realistic, the essential in the habilitation toward endurable living of a population thrown back by calamity and adversity to a bare subsistence.

The Director of Education for the Near East Foundation, and also for its predecessor The Near East Relief during its closing years, tells the story of a decade of effort in rural reconstruction under conditions of extraordinary difficulty. The absorption of a large, destitute population forced to migrate from Asia Minor into rural areas already occupied and still suffering from the ravages of war had taxed the Greek government to the utmost. These Near East agencies arose in answer to the call for help. Their opportunity lay in discovering how they could effectually supplement the heroic efforts of the Greek government to deal with an unprecedented situation. The limitations of funds, of initial knowledge of good farm practices for the area, of depleted soils and scant tools, of teachers qualified to formulate desirable and acceptable innovations, and of local precedent for the kinds of programs to be undertaken, were weighty obstacles which could be overcome only by high resourcefulness, ingenuity and perseverance. Yet in the brief interval between the catastrophes of two devastating wars methods of reconstruction adapted to the specific circumstances in selected rural areas were developed, demonstrated, and rooted in the soil of Macedonia, in the practices of the people and in the governmental services of the country.
In dealing with backward or distressed farm populations a primary consideration is to start where the people are and with what they have and what they know. Their lives are spent amidst practical realities. It is the essence of wisdom to recognize that long experience has been to them a teacher; that in many matters the farmer has developed understandings and has adopted practices which rest on tenable grounds. The Near East Foundation's field staff, as it gained entrance to the lives and confidence of the farmers and their families, learned respect for their knowledge, for the peasants were found to be wise in many things. When this recognition came, the way opened for those simple, practicable adjustments which marked the next steps toward higher levels of attainment on the land and in the homes and the villages.

The physical necessities of the people claimed first attention. The people were farmers, displaced refugee farmers, set down under unfamiliar conditions of soil and climate and agricultural practices with only meager equipments with which to begin life anew; refugee orphans placed out on farms in order that they might find a way of life; native farmers of many centuries whose land had been repeatedly devastated by wars which left them in poverty. They must be shown how to restore their soils and to get more from their few acres and their small flocks and herds if the level of living were to be raised even slightly.

Among farmers the means of living and the ways of life are interlocking. In Macedonia, as in most rural areas of the world, the farm and the home are parts of a single enterprise. Where the woman shares heavily in the work on the land and the care of the flocks and herds, and also prepares the food, rears the children and cares for the home, her activities and interests are inseparable from those of the farmer. The welfare of the family or the group is conditioned not alone by its physical assets but by all the essentials for its development—its health, its family life, its attitudes and aspirations, its relations with others, its forms of pleasure and recreation.

It is clear, then, why the Macedonian program, confronted with a wide and interlocking group of needs of the farm fam-
ilies and the rural villages, developed on a broad front: undertakings designed to improve farming methods and enterprises and to promote better understandings and practices related to health and sanitation, nutrition, child care and the range of household activities, and the simple recreations for body and spirit. Each specialized area, with its own peculiar requirements and demand for leadership possessing familiarity with its field, had such intimate relations with the others that gains in one segment of this composite effort could be used to benefit the total program. And so it proved in the Foundation's program. Within the decade, measurable gains were made on the farms and in the homes, in the health of families and communities, and in associated community activities; and the quality of living edged upward.

But something more was gained than the direct benefits derived by individuals and communities. Procedures of significance for the rehabilitation of sorely distressed rural populations were tested and established to the degree that they stand out as guiding principles or directives for similar work in other lands. There is the primary principle of self-help, of assisting the people to help themselves in advancing their status. However slow and faltering this procedure may be in its initial stages, it makes for sure progress and gains acceleration with every advance. There is the principle of sharing, of participation of the person or the group served in the planning and the support as well as in the operation of the program. If the dominating aim is to develop indigenous activities, rooted in the purposes and aspirations of the people, they must feel that the undertakings are of their own doing. There is the sound concept, all too frequently overlooked, that one of the best ways of studying a difficult and needy situation is to do something about it—to begin with the obvious and gain understanding and insight as experience and familiarity increase and the deeper problems become revealed. There is the elemental necessity of utilizing the knowledge that is available and finding the means of closing the gap between knowledge and common practice—to make that which is known operative in the daily occu-
pations and experience of the people. There is the realistic recognition that progress for a disadvantaged people usually comes slowly, often almost imperceptibly, and that it is the sum of modest and continuing gains, a little here and a little there. Such guiding principles and clear insights as these underlay the fruitful efforts of the Near East Foundation in rural Macedonia and constituted its strategy.

No less important is it for a foreign agency which seeks to affect fundamental national concerns, such as the welfare of the people in their means of livelihood, their health, education and home and family life, to gain the cooperation of the established government and of the responsible agencies and institutions of the people in the land to which they go. In no respect did the Foundation’s program reflect greater wisdom than in this. It early sought and won the cooperation of the Ministry of Agriculture and the institutions for agricultural education and experiment, the Ministry of Education and the rural schools, the Ministry of Health and the local health services, the leaders in the Orthodox church, among others. It solicited their aid and counsel and they came to trust its purposes and its methods and to support its efforts. In the end the national government took responsibility for the wider development and extension of the soundly conceived approaches to the betterment of the agriculture and the health of the rural families and communities which the Foundation had utilized; and its programs in home and family welfare and in recreation were in the willing and responsive hands of the people in the demonstration centers.

The Near East Foundation sent its representatives to Greece to render service to a sorely stricken people. But thanks to the practical wisdom of its Director of Education and its officers, the relief idea soon gave way to the more fundamental idea of assisting the farmers and their communities to work out their own paths to higher levels of living. The gains were admittedly modest; a ten-year period is far too short to yield major changes under such conditions as obtained in the selected areas of Macedonia. But the achievements were real, the methods
sound and of permanent character, the beginnings of reconstruction effectively laid. The work was germinal in a very real sense; and its pattern has wide application. It lights the way for the elevation of disadvantaged rural populations wherever they may be.

There was a simplicity about the program of the Near East Foundation in rural Macedonia which was also profound. That is why this flowing story of its course by Allen who directed it will be welcomed by those who care about the struggles of disadvantaged peoples to rise.

Albert R. Mann,
Vice President and Director,
General Education Board