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THE HELYAR EXPERIMENT: COOPERATIVE LIVING AT THE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE DURING THE DEPRESSION

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Dr. Sarvetnick, an anthropologist, is writing a book on the history of the cooperative living groups.

THROUGHOUT the 1930's, young men from rural New Jersey towns such as Woodstown, Mays Landing, Belvidere and Baptistown came to the College of Agriculture at Rutgers to study. They were to become pioneers in an experiment in cooperative living which continues to this day. Initiated by Professor Frank Helyar, who served the college from 1917 to 1953, these groups provided a unique work-study environment in which students of agriculture learned to live and work together while serving their college. This article is based on interviews with some of the alumni of these cooperative living groups who lived at the College of Agriculture campus during the Depression. It aims to demonstrate the use of the techniques of oral history to recapture the sociocultural history of these groups.¹

Background of the Students

In the interviews, the alumni described themselves as poor, naive farm boys from large immigrant families or farming families who had rarely travelled more than a few miles from their home communities. If not from family farms, they had worked on farms for a good part of their lives. They had a love of agriculture and probably would have taken over

¹ In addition to the interviews, material for this work was found in the Department of Special Collections and Archives at Rutgers University. My thanks to Dr. Bonnie McCay for her scholarly help.



“Professor Frank G. Helyar—a student’s view”

Photo Communications Department,
Cook College, Rutgers University

the family farm or worked in other phases of agriculture after high school if it had not been for the Depression. During the Depression years, New Jersey farmers were in great difficulty because of “depleted land capital, depreciated buildings and equipment (and) increased mortgage debt.”² According to the alumni interviewed, farm families could no longer afford to keep their children on the farm and had little available cash to help them do anything else. Jobs were scarce, especially for the inexperienced young. For these reasons, young men felt uncertain about their futures, and some decided to enroll in the College of Agriculture.

Their family histories tell the story best. Phillip Alampi came from a family of Sicilian immigrants who arrived in the United States in 1910; they became migrant workers who picked peas, beans and spinach on South Jersey farms. Yet, as Alampi said, “My father beat on my bare fanny and said, ‘You’re going to college.’”³ Alexander Gordeuk’s parents were peasants from White Russia with little or no schooling; yet, over the years, Alex came to admire their unique intelligence. He recalls how frightened they were when they could no longer pay the taxes on their farm near Baptistown; they did not know where they would go if they were forced to leave with their 11 children.⁴ Raymond Korbobo remembers how his widowed Polish mother struggled to raise seven children by cleaning the homes of prominent people in Phillipsburg. He also recalls how his older brothers fought off social workers who tried to put the children in the poor house after his mother died.⁵

Robert Windeler stated that his widowed mother “never had a penny income from the farm” in Farmingdale, yet she managed to raise twelve children. He never had a new pair of shoes; instead, he waited for a worn pair to be handed down from an elder brother. Similarly, Windeler told how he waited to attend college until his older sibling had finished; in that way, his sibling could support him during his years in college. Despite their poverty, all but one in his family attended college.⁶

William Moncrief remembers his family’s struggle to preserve its farm north of Bridgeton with the addition of a wholesale meat provision-

² Jacob G. Lipman, “The Purpose and Scope of the Land Use Conference” in *Proceedings of the N.J. Land Use Conference*, Bulletin 552 (New Brunswick: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1932), 11. Dr. Lipman served as Dean of the College of Agriculture from 1921 to 1939.

³ Phillip Alampi, tape-recorded interview, Feb. 4, 1987. (Personal collection of the author.) All subsequent references to tape-recorded interviews refer to date in original footnote.

⁴ Alexander Gordeuk, tape-recorded interview, Feb. 26, 1987.

⁵ Raymond Korbobo, tape-recorded interview, Feb. 13, 1987.

⁶ Robert Windeler, tape-recorded interview, Apr. 18, 1987.

ing business, which also serviced the local boats. Despite these efforts, his father was forced to close the businesses in 1933. To keep from declaring bankruptcy and to pay off their debts, Moncrief and his brothers worked to pave county roads and sold vegetables and eggs from a roadside stand. In addition, his father went to work at Seabrook Farms for \$.25 an hour.⁷ David Wood told how his family lost its farm during the Depression: "We were all set to harvest a crop of tomatoes [and] pumpkins when a freak hail storm came through and just wiped us out; that did it."⁸ And then, there was Hildreth Flitcraft who remembered the hard work and long hours on his father's dairy farm with less than affection: "I hated it; I told my Dad there must be an easier way to make a living." Yet, he also recognized that "being on the farm, we always had enough to eat."⁹

Most of these young men who came to the College of Agriculture in the 1930's had attended rural high schools and taken the vocational-agricultural course of study. There was a strong link between rural schools, farming communities and the College of Agriculture. The Extension Division at the College sponsored 4-H clubs, exhibits, farm and home visits, and demonstrations both at the college and county levels.¹⁰ For that reason, many young men became familiar with the college at an early age. David Tudor recalls going to agricultural exhibits, plowing demonstrations and crop exhibits with his father. He said, "It gave me an opportunity to feel at home with the people and the activities that went on there."¹¹ Charles Brown remembers visiting the college as part of his high school team which judged agricultural products. In fact, that was where he met Dr. Henry Keller, Professor of Agricultural Economics, and learned more about scholarships and housing in a living group.¹²

In addition, high school teachers, who often doubled as athletic coaches or guidance counsellors, also helped to familiarize these young men with the opportunities available at the college. According to the alumni interviewed, the teachers encouraged them to seek further education, arranged meetings with teachers at the college and helped them qualify for the scholarships which they desperately needed. David Wood stated that his guidance counsellor "inspired many a lad from Glassboro High School

⁷ William Moncrief, tape-recorded interview, June 12, 1987.

⁸ David Wood, tape-recorded interview, Apr. 22, 1987.

⁹ Hildreth Flitcraft, tape-recorded interview, Apr. 22, 1987.

¹⁰ The department of Agricultural Extension was organized on Dec. 1, 1912 "to carry the results of research to the people of the State." *Rutgers University Catalog, 1934-35*, p. 152, Rutgers University Archives.

¹¹ David Tudor, tape-recorded interview, Mar. 17, 1987.

¹² Charles Brown, tape-recorded interview, Apr. 1, 1987.

because he was such a dynamic person.” After he returned to his local high school to teach, Phillip Alampi helped Hildreth Flitcraft find a room at the college and a \$100 scholarship. Encouragement to attend college also came from mentors in the community for whom these young men worked; some even introduced the idea of higher education to them. William Moncrief worked at Watson’s Can House where Newland Watson discussed the possibility of going to college with him and suggested he apply for a scholarship. David Tudor remembers that a widow, a friend of his parents, “would send me \$5 once in a while and that would make a big difference to me.”

Unfortunately, the vocational-agricultural high school curriculum, which combined academic studies with work in areas such as farm mechanics or animal husbandry, did not prepare these students adequately for higher education. For example, after he started college, John Baylor realized that he was “unprepared for a scientific career.” He had had no physics or chemistry, no language and very poor biology courses in high school. In fact, he stated, “I should never have been accepted in college.”¹³

Nevertheless, the men interviewed decided to attend college. Some went because there was not enough work on the farm or because their best friends were going. Many went because they could not find work or because they heard that tuition was low. One went because “it was something nice to do if you didn’t want to be a farmer.”¹⁴ However, most had no real idea of what college would be like; nor did they know much about the institution which was to change their lives.

The College of Agriculture

The N.J. College of Agriculture had its origins in 1864 after the passage of the Morrill Federal Land-Grant Act of 1862. With this act, the federal government gave grants of public land to each state (or scrip, if land was unavailable) to be used or sold to establish programs in “Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts” at institutions of higher learning. The ideology behind these grants was part of a grass roots movement which came from the agricultural and industrial sectors of the Northeast and emphasized the “dignity and worthiness of the working man.”¹⁵ Institutions established in this way came to be known as “land grant colleges.”

¹³ John Baylor, tape-recorded interview, Oct. 17, 1987.

¹⁴ Flitcraft, op. cit.

¹⁵ David Madsen, “The Land Grant University: Myth and Reality,” in *Land Grant Universities and Their Continuing Challenge*, ed. Lester G. Anderson (Michigan State University Press, 1976), 24.

The act aimed to establish an education that would differ from the predominant classical education which produced the doctors, lawyers and theologians who came most often from wealthy families. It looked to a curriculum that combined liberal arts with the more practical needs of a rapidly industrializing society. Although students were expected to take a broad range of classical courses, their research and the remaining courses were to be devoted to utilitarian concerns. The curriculum was to be based on "scientific principles underlying the practice of agriculture rather than on manual labor on a farm."¹⁶ It was anticipated that this new type of institution would open up educational opportunities to the sons of workers and farmers from the middle and lower classes and would give them political power and an opportunity to influence the course of American life.¹⁷

Initially, the land grant experiment was not a success in New Jersey. The College Farm was purchased by Rutgers College for \$15,000 in 1864 for use as an experimental farm but proved to be a financial liability. Few students attended in the 1800's: those who did were interested mainly in taking courses in engineering and the natural sciences. In addition, most of the local farmers, many of whom had little formal education, distrusted "book farming" and believed that their sons could be better educated on the farm.¹⁸ It seemed as if the college would have to wait until employment opportunities in agricultural business, research and teaching opened up before enrollment would increase.

Both the State and Federal Agricultural Experiment Stations were established at Rutgers between 1880 and 1887; these later merged. In 1906 the first major structure, the Short Course building, opened on the College Farm campus. By 1907, in addition to a small number of full-time students, the college had 40 students for 12-week courses in fields such as horticulture, dairying, and animal husbandry; these Short Courses then became an annual event.¹⁹

The Cooperative Extension Service was established in 1912 and provided a direct avenue to the farmer with lectures and demonstrations

¹⁶ Jean Wilson Sidar, *George Hammell Cook: A Life in Agriculture and Geology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 104.

¹⁷ Sidar, *op. cit.*, p. 84; William Demarest, *A History of Rutgers College: 1776-1924* (New Brunswick: Rutgers College, 1924), 406.

¹⁸ Hubert G. Schmidt, *Agriculture in New Jersey: A Three Hundred Year History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 114.

¹⁹ Short Courses were of twelve weeks duration and were "planned to give assistance to those who desire to become better farmers," but "are unable to take a more extended course of study." There are also courses which last from one to three weeks in "special agricultural topics." Rutgers University Catalog, 1934-35, pp. 146-48, Rutgers University Archives.

given on the county level. By this time, graduates of the college were starting to work as county extension agents, and the reputation of the college began to spread throughout the state.²⁰

The Smith Hughes Act of 1917 made the training of high school teachers of agriculture mandatory in the United States. In 1914, the year that Jacob Lipman became Dean of Agriculture, the short courses were combined to make a "long course." By 1918 the idea of a college had grass roots support and a "Committee of Farmers" petitioned the Board of Trustees to organize the College of Agriculture as a distinct unit. This was accomplished in 1921.

During the 1920's the college amassed a sizable staff and equipment for teaching. Enrollment, however, remained low; it grew from 109 undergraduates in 1921 to only 118 in 1930. There were two main reasons for the slow growth in attendance: the cost of education was hard for farm families to bear since cash was in short supply, and boys from rural schools were often too poorly prepared to compete successfully for scholarships.

In the next decade, the outlook for the college changed. Because of the hardships associated with the Depression, more students began to take an interest in vocational and practical curricula. An article in the Roselle Park "Spectator" on June 19, 1931, carried the headline "Rutgers Aggie Grads Find Positions Quickly" and went on to say that unemployment and the depression in agriculture hadn't prevented "ag" students from finding jobs in their fields.

Accordingly, while enrollment at Rutgers College of Arts and Sciences declined, that at the College of Agriculture increased by 250%. This "was attributable to the lower tuition fees and the less rigorous admission requirement in that [agricultural] college"²¹ which attracted students who did not qualify for the Arts and Sciences program as well as those with farm experience.

Throughout the 1930's, rising enrollment in the College of Agriculture and a decline in government funding put a strain on housing and teaching facilities.²² The sudden growth of the college also brought problems in apportioning rooms and finding scholarship funds for needy students. The student loan fund had \$1,025 in 1930; it had been reduced to \$285 by 1933 and repayments were made "as the students are able."

²⁰ Schmidt, op. cit., p. 196.

²¹ Richard P. McCormick, *Rutgers: A Bicentennial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 243.

²² Faculty minutes, College of Agriculture, Sept. 23, 1933, Rutgers University Archives.

There was also a controversial move to make the grade needed for graduation from The Agricultural College higher than that needed to graduate from the Rutgers College of Arts and Sciences.²³

Helyar and the Cooperative Living Groups

It was during these difficult years that Professor Frank G. Helyar originated the cooperative living groups which were to become home to several generations of students. In their early years the groups provided shelter; later, as they evolved, they became a comfortable setting within which students could share the responsibilities of daily life and gain an education while providing service to the college.

Helyar was born in Boston on February 8, 1883, but his family moved to New Hampshire and then Vermont, where Helyar spent his early years working on farms. His father, who was educated in the classics in England, died when Helyar was ten. He attended Brattleboro High School for two years but left after an argument with the principal which left him "sour on education." However, he came under the influence of the secretary of the local YMCA who urged him to continue his education; he studied alone and passed the entrance examinations for the University of Vermont.²⁴ (It appears that Helyar had very little money when he attended college.)²⁵

In college, he majored in dairy bacteriology and dairy chemistry but later took courses outside his field in history, logic, ethics and philosophy. He was also active in extracurricular activities; he played football, joined the Agricultural Club and was a charter member of Alpha Zeta, the honorary agricultural fraternity. His exposure to a broad curriculum and his interest in a wide range of activities indicate his belief in a well-rounded education. Later in life he stated that schools of agriculture have "too much agriculture and too little other culture."²⁶

After graduating in 1905, he worked for a year at an agricultural experiment station in Massachusetts and then became principal of the Mt. Hermon Boy's School, which was also in Massachusetts. He married Irma Hatcher in 1908. In 1910 he became the first director of the New York State School of Agriculture at Morrisville. That school, with "3 old buildings, 250 acres of farm land and no students" in 1910, grew to one

²³ Annual Report, College of Agriculture, 1938-39, Rutgers University Archives.

²⁴ Leon Rosenblatt, "Professor Helyar: A Lifetime of Service to Agricultural Education," *Rutgers Rural Review*, Vol. 6, no. 4 (1953), 4.

²⁵ Korbobo, op. cit.

²⁶ Rosenblatt, op. cit., p. 4.

with a physical plant worth over \$500,000, 300 students and 30 faculty by 1917,²⁷ when Helyar left to work at the College of Agriculture.

At the College of Agriculture he served as director of Short Courses, Professor of Animal Husbandry and Director of Resident Instruction.²⁸ Helyar was aware of the problems facing his students. Since he had grown up in an agricultural area, he knew well the lack of sophistication and inexperience of rural men, as well as the shortcomings of a rural education. As a consequence, he recognized that an environment of scholars pursuing a rigorous scientific curriculum, such as that found at Rutgers, could prove difficult for his students.

In fact, Helyar seemed to have the unique ability to combine his personal experience in agriculture, his philosophy of education and the cultural patterns of rural family life to create a successful living environment for his students. I believe it became his goal to adopt the characteristics of shared experience, close ties, loyalty to the family and the discipline demanded by work in agriculture as patterns for his living groups. By tapping into the values of rural society, he helped his students manage their identity and gain security in a new and difficult setting.²⁹

The faculty minutes of May 29, 1935 indicate Helyar's faith in his students. They state: "He [Helyar] found that many [students] were not sure of their objectives, that some did not fully meet entrance requirements, and yet were good men. He stated that . . . boys had been admitted from a lower quartile; while some had failed, the majority had made good and from this number had come some of our best students."

Although he achieved success in his profession, Helyar's personal life was marked with tragedy. His daughter, Elizabeth, born in 1910, died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. His son, James, Rutgers '34, died in a veterinary accident in 1945. Furthermore, the faculty minutes and reports of his students indicate that Helyar himself was often ill.

Helyar received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Rutgers in 1948 and retired in 1953. He died on April 15, 1963 and is buried at Morrisville, N.Y. On October 14, 1961, on the grounds of the College of Agriculture, Helyar Woods was named in his honor. In the early 1960s, a group of alumni joined together to create a living tribute to

²⁷ Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁸ The Director of Resident Instruction supervises students in full-time programs as well as those taking Short Courses.

²⁹ Robert Haines, telephone interview, Feb. 21, 1988. Haines, a member of Phelps House from 1947-51, confirmed that Helyar wanted to make the living groups "a home away from home" but knew this was in contradiction to the university philosophy which wanted the students to believe that they were breaking away from their ties to home and parents.

Professor Helyar. Through their efforts, Helyar House, a permanent cooperative living dormitory for 40 students of agriculture with needs for financial assistance, was dedicated on October 22, 1968.

College Life For the "Aggies" in the 1930's

While Helyar House was to be home to future living groups, we now return to the past and the first group of students who came to the "ag" campus in the early 1930's. What was college life at Rutgers like when they arrived? The emphasis on athletics, extracurricular activities and fraternity life on the Rutgers campus which characterized the 1920's, continued into the 1930's, but with a difference. Postwar expansion at the college had come to a halt as state funding declined, enrollment at Rutgers and NJC (New Jersey College for Women, later to become Douglass College) dropped, although it rose at the agricultural school, and the adolescent behavior of the 20's, tempered by the problems of the Depression, had become more serious.³⁰

Although campus culture was to have a strong effect on their years at college, these students arrived with little awareness of the academic or social life which awaited them. Their rural lives had kept them close to home, their high schools had left them ill prepared for academia and their accommodations presented them with a new set of problems.

Although there were dormitories on the College Avenue campus, these students could not afford to live there and the agricultural campus was to have no dormitories until 1974. Instead, during the early 1930's, Professor Helyar placed 26 impoverished students in the attics and basements of the Poultry and Short Course Building, the short course and plant pathology greenhouses and Dean Lipman's home. By the end of the decade there would be 50-70 students living in such accommodations. These housing arrangements were dreadful; they were brutally hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. The furnishings, the bathroom facilities and cooking equipment were primitive. With the exception of the Poultry Building, there were rarely more than two or three men living in the same building. Away from their customary support networks, the students felt isolated, lonely and homesick. Tudor described playing his saxophone in the attic of the Poultry Building to ward off the loneliness of his first night at school.

The words of some of these first living group members best describe

³⁰ Michael Moffatt, *The Rutgers Picture Book* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 104.

the situation. Alampi said, "It was all serious business; it was Depression and it was rough." He added, "We never really had a thread of sociability." "They all lived together but they were surviving individually," stated Vander Noot,³¹ and Tudor added: "We had no other people that knew of our activities other than our parents and faculty there."

Students were required to work to pay for their rooms. They tended the coal furnaces, swept up the buildings, cleaned the laboratories, milked cows or picked fruit. Alampi remembers working as a night watchman from 8:00 PM until 6:00 AM. On his rounds during the winter, he would often fall asleep by a warm furnace. Afraid he would oversleep, he carried an alarm clock to wake him in time to punch the next time clock. Korbobo, who tended the greenhouse furnace in winter, was the envy of all because he was able to keep warm. Windeler recalls milking a whole herd of dairy cattle between 8:30 PM and midnight.

Because of their chronic shortage of cash, many students were forced to take on additional jobs both on and off campus. Some worked in restaurants for meals or leftovers they could take back to their rooms. Baby sitting provided additional food in the form of icebox privileges. Others did yard work or labored on farms during school vacations. If they wanted to see a football game or a movie, they took jobs as ushers. Some even sent money home to parents who were in difficult financial straits.

An additional means of acquiring cash was provided by a college policy which permitted students to bring poultry from home to be used for income. Tudor remembers bringing 35-40 chickens in crates tied to his father's car but stated, "I had not the ghost of an idea of how to feed those birds." He learned and sold eggs and chickens door to door.

Because there were no centralized cooking facilities, students cooked and ate by themselves; thus, they missed the camaraderie associated with the communal preparation and sharing of food. Eggs and chickens were diet staples because of their availability on campus. Those who worked in the poultry laboratory would get the "better" birds left after diagnosis. They would then "peel" (skin) them and cook them over a hot plate. Others remember eating "half a loaf of bread and a can of Campbells soup"³² for dinner or a \$.15 hamburger for an entire day's food.

Although most social activities were centered on the College Avenue campus, the men on the "ag" campus kept busy. There were no intramural sports; instead, there were "pick-up" baseball and touch football

³¹ George Vander Noot, tape-recorded interview, Jan. 7, 1987.

³² Alampi, *op. cit.*



“Ag” students proudly display the chickens that helped pay their way through college.

Courtesy of Raymond W. Lloyd,
Photographer: George H. Pound, New Brunswick.

games. A few students played varsity sports, and many attended university football games. There were clubs associated with each major along with Alpha Zeta and the Agricultural Club. The first Agricultural Field Day on May 7, 1938 inaugurated an annual event featuring exhibits of agricultural products, judging contests and alumni meetings.

For the most part, however, the students made their own fun. They remember water fights, contests to diaper a doll and baking contests with the girls at the New Jersey College for Women, which the men won because they all had learned to cook. Once or twice a year there were dances in a classroom building to which NJC women were invited; these were well-chaperoned and alcohol-free. When asked about the attitude of the women at NJC, Tudor said, “For the most part, I don’t think they considered us too high on the rung.”³³

³³ Tudor, *op. cit.*



Students while away the afternoon on the porch of the old Phelps House.

Thomas D. Mulhern, Milltown, N.J.

Beginning in 1935, the course of the living groups underwent a change for the better with the opening of Phelps House. Purchased from Reverend Charles E. Phelps by the Experiment Station, this old farmhouse provided Professor Helyar with the first home-like setting in which he could place a dozen or more students who could live and work cooperatively. It was located on the site of the present Sears store, “about a mile from the center of the Ag campus, three miles from Old Queen’s and a ripe tomato toss to Route 1.”³⁴ The Phelps house had “a friendly stoop across the front,”³⁵ a coal fire, a pot-bellied stove, an icebox and poorly functioning lavatory facilities. Later, students acquired a refrigerator, installed a shower and covered the dirt floor in the basement with concrete.³⁶

At first the Rutgers administration was wary of permitting students to

³⁴ H. Russell Stanton, “Alpha Phalpa and the Depression,” in *Aloud to Alma Mater*, ed. George J. Lukac (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 162.

³⁵ Stanton, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

³⁶ Barbara A. Nadel, “A New Image for Cooperative Living,” *Rutgers Alumni Monthly*, Vol. 48, no. 3 (December 1968), 5.

live alone so far from the main campus. In a letter to Dean Lipman on May 28, 1934, President Clothier expressed his fears about safety, "social control" and the need "to exercise some supervision over the nature of the meals which the boys provide for their own consumption." Because of their fears, Helyar had to prove to the administration that the project would succeed. In the faculty minutes of December 18, 1935, he wrote, "The boys are expected to conduct themselves as gentlemen. If the enterprise doesn't succeed, the house will be closed."³⁷ He told the students that their behavior would either make or break him but, at the same time, he reassured them of his confidence in them. In response, Vander Noot stated, "We cleaned like demons and lived like angels because we didn't want to let "Prof" down."³⁸ Many others echoed this sentiment.

"Prof" kept watch over the house. He would come over with Professor Howard F. Huber, the director of buildings and grounds for the college, sometimes unannounced, to check the closets or look under the beds; often he would leave little notes. Once a month he would sit down with the students to discuss problems pertaining to the operations of the house. In addition, the students would invite him or other favorite professors and their wives for dinner, a tradition which continues to this day.

In order to help the students develop a sense of identity, "Prof" suggested that the students give the house a Greek name. "Alpha Phalpa," a cross between a fodder and a fraternity, "tells a lot about how early members looked on their own dollar-scarce world in relation to other worlds, such as Fraternity Row."³⁹ Many of the alumni interviewed stated that Helyar disliked certain aspects of fraternity life. The highly stylized features of fraternity life represented a deliberate attempt to create a culture which was different from that of the previous generation;⁴⁰ Helyar believed in contrast that the living groups should replicate the values of rural farm families. In addition, while fraternity members were selected for their ability to conform to the norms of the group, Helyar chose students who would share the "responsibilities and the fellowship of a small group of other rugged individualists." Although Helyar wanted his students to enjoy the camaraderie characteristic of fraternity life, he also wanted them to have "far greater freedom."⁴¹

³⁷ Faculty minutes College of Agriculture, Dec. 18, 1935, Rutgers University Archives.

³⁸ Vander Noot, op. cit.

³⁹ Stanton, op. cit., p. 163.

⁴⁰ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 134-36.

⁴¹ Ingrid Nelson Waller, *Where There Is Vision* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 209.

Quickly, the students began to develop pride in their new identity. Korbobo stated, "It didn't take us long to get the idea that we were better than the fraternity boys downtown. We weren't out dating fast girls; we weren't drinking booze and all that stuff. So they were crumbs; we were the elite." Tudor said, "It was a fraternity in itself; I was proud to be a member of that group."

In contrast to the earlier groups, the Phelps House had enough members to set up a division of labor. Led by Vander Noot, a senior chosen by Helyar, the students developed rules and regulations and organized into work teams which rotated their assignments. Members gradually learned to work together and to accept responsibility for the running of the house. Problems were solved at group meetings. Equally important, the home-like setting at the Phelps House replicated the familiar patterns of rural family life. Although the members were extremely competitive among themselves in terms of athletic prowess or academic achievement, they described their fellows at the house as "family." They said they would fight among themselves but would join together to fight off trouble from outside the group. Many describe the feelings of kinship, camaraderie and loyalty which developed there.

The cooperative preparation, consumption and clean-up of food also gave the group an opportunity to work together. Although meals lacked variety, food was plentiful and came from many different sources. Milk, cracked eggs, fruits and vegetables available at the college were either free or sold to the students at low cost. Day-old bread was purchased from the local bakery and dented canned goods from the supermarket at bargain prices. Farmer Kilbourne,⁴² a neighbor, donated produce from his truck farm and students often brought food back from the family farm after a weekend at home.

A blast from Reverend Phelp's bugle, which was parked inside the front door, would signal the arrival of additional food or other booty. If a student-waiter had stashed away some cider or doughnuts while working at an Elks' Club party, he would sound the bugle upon returning home, no matter what the hour, and the boys would pile out of bed to share the loot. Furthermore, if a loaded truck overturned while trying to negotiate the Route 1 traffic circle, the bugle would sound once more and the students would run down to "help" the driver. The house obtained supplies of chicken, watermelon and beer in that way and even acquired a box of brassieres which house members modeled with great glee.

⁴² Spelling uncertain.



Dinner time at "Alpha Phalpa."

Thomas D. Mulhern, Milltown, N.J.

The establishment of the Phelps House paved the way for the Towers living group. "The Towers" was an ironic name for the group which inhabited the top floor of an old bluing factory which had been purchased by the college and converted into offices, laboratories and living quarters. The building was infamous for its large leaking windows that "sometimes let in drifts of snow," its inadequate heating system and "the roaches that crept up from the entomology experiments downstairs."⁴³ While the physical layout of the building was not as conducive to a familial life style as the Phelps House, the Towers housed a dozen or more students who modeled their organization on that of the Phelps House.

The original living groups, in places such as the Poultry Building, the greenhouses and the piggery, continued throughout the thirties, although the fact that there were only a few occupants in each location kept them at a disadvantage. They never achieved the level of sociability of Phelps or

⁴³ Nadel, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

the Towers. Despite their dissimilarities, however, all of the living groups had certain problems in common.

The combination of a rigorous academic program, a heavy work load and a shortage of funds made the students' early years on campus difficult. While their courses in agriculture were all on the "ag" campus, their academic courses were given on the College Avenue campus. This required a three-mile walk or "hitch" twice a day, often after the students had worked for many hours on the college farm.

The classes on the College Avenue campus put the "ag" students in direct competition with students from urban and suburban environments who were better prepared for the demands of academia. In those circumstances, their identity as "aggies" became apparent to them or was made clear by students and teachers alike; many recall feeling uncomfortable in class. Wood remembered that "they sort of called you 'farmers' ," but he said that it didn't bother him. Baylor said, with pride, "We were aggies through and through." Ambivalent feelings of pride and embarrassment were common.

The need to support themselves, and sometimes their families, put added pressure on the College of Agriculture students and many took on additional jobs. Often, this work load proved exhausting and resulted in academic warnings or failures. Afraid to let their families down and aware that they might lose their only opportunity for an education, these frightened, troubled students made their way across campus to the Office of Resident Instruction to see "Prof" Helyar.

The alumni interviewed had many impressions of the man who helped them shape their destiny. "Prof" was described variously as a "tall, gawky man," "a big robust man," "a typical New Englander," "a strict Puritan" or "a farmer." Some said he was "a father figure"; others, "a strict disciplinarian." Most agreed that they were afraid of him; yet, all had respect for him.

Beside his association with the living groups, Helyar taught General Agriculture, which all first-year students were required to take. He was described as "a quiet teacher," and "a dry lecturer" who spoke slowly but with a "dry wit." As Dean of Resident Instruction, Helyar acted as a liaison between the students and the faculty. He was permitted to override the Registrar in behalf of the students as long as he could demonstrate a need. Faculty minutes show that he often spoke of their personal problems or requested permission for them to drop or substitute courses. On the other hand, the students found him to be demanding yet flexible. They agreed "that he was all heart and unbeatable as a judge of human na-

ture.”⁴⁴ Because he understood his students so well, Helyar was able to help them find unique solutions to their problems. Alampi recalls how upset he was when he failed three courses in his freshman year and “Prof” suggested that he give up the sports and extracurricular activities that he loved so much. However, after he told “Prof” how much he wanted a varsity letter, Helyar suggested that he drop all sports except cross-country running. In that way, Alampi would be able to practice while he ran back and forth from his job on the farm. At the same time, “Prof” also required him to retake the three courses he had failed while he took the required courses in his sophomore year. Alampi graduated in four years as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and, among other achievements, served as N.J. Secretary of Agriculture.

Windeler said that Helyar never used force or scolded; instead, he searched for the reason behind the students’ problems. When he went to see Helyar about an imminent failure in chemistry, he remembers Helyar saying, “It’s not that you don’t have the brains; it’s because you’re spending too much time working.” Helyar then helped him get a job which took less time. Windeler went on to become a member of the Agricultural Extension staff for 40 years.

After failing Algebra three times, Korbobo asked Helyar to let him take Art Appreciation in its place; he justified his choice because he hoped to become a landscape designer. When the two men met many years later, Helyar told him that he thought he (Helyar) had made the biggest mistake of his life in allowing him to get out of taking Algebra again because he believed that Korbobo needed to pass the course to retain his self-esteem. After graduation, Korbobo became an Extension Specialist in Landscape Design and a golf course landscape architect.

Helyar was not the only teacher helping students in those years. Many remember the roll of bills William Skelly, Professor of Animal Husbandry, kept in his pocket from the secret “slush” fund he had acquired from various honoraria or other projects. Like Helyar, he seemed to be able to spot students who were “down in the mouth.” He would stop them, discuss their problems and dole out a few bills for new clothes or other needs. Korbobo said “there were a lot of guys who stayed in school because of the efforts of Skelly and Helyar.”

Dr. Willard Thompson, Professor of Poultry Husbandry, and Edwin Bearer, Associate Professor of Agricultural Education, were also helpful. Thompson always had his door open to his students and Bearer would take

⁴⁴ Stanton, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

students home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, on occasion. Tudor recalls that Dr. Frederick Beaudette, Professor of Poultry Pathology, invited him to accompany him to Mays Landing where he was to give a speech and then gave him his car so he could visit his ailing father; he called Beaudette a "second father."

As the living group members adjusted to college life, they came to recognize the unique advantages inherent in their situation. First, they were the only students residing on the agricultural campus. Therefore, they were known by, and came to know, the faculty and staff quite well; the relationships forged during those years were many and enduring. Next, the work-study program linked students with faculty working in their major field of study. Working together informally in the barns and fields gave students and teachers the opportunity to know each other personally. The faculty, many of whom were prominent scholars, helped them gain entry into graduate school or find work in their chosen fields. Finally, the land grant philosophy, which integrated the classical with the practical areas of education, produced men who could function well in a variety of academic and social settings. The young, naive, farm boys who entered college in the 1930's emerged as confident men, many of whom were to make lasting contributions to society.

Conclusion

In 1953, the year of his retirement, Helyar stated: "In a large majority of cases, young men, to whom opportunities have been given, either through financial help or the opportunity to come to college, have justified the faith reposed in them and any financial investment made." He also said, "The tremendous potentialities for lives of great usefulness I have seen have made me, indeed, most humble."⁴⁵

The cultural changes of the decades after the 1930's, the enormous expansion of the college and university, the changing demographics of the student body, and government participation in student aid programs changed some aspects of living group life. Yet the sharing of work-study experiences, the development of close personal relationships and loyalty to the group which characterized the first groups in the 1930's continues at Helyar House at Cook College and justifies the faith that Professor Helyar had in his students.

⁴⁵ Frank G. Helyar, "Looking Back Thirty Five Years," *Rutgers Rural Review*, Vol. 6, no. 4 (1953), 5.