

Country Homes for City Schools

HANS WARNINGHOFF

A report on the famous "Schullandheim" movement at Bremen, Germany, this article emphasizes the important role played by parent, teacher and student participation at all stages in the buying and building of the "country homes for city schools." It also describes the origin, organization and financing of the project and the educational ideas upon which it is founded. Central purposes of the movement are to give children opportunities to assume responsibility and to learn to live well with one another.

DURING his visits in the United States of America, the author has always found great interest among American educators in the Bremen schools' country homes. In practically every American town he visited, the conversation became most lively whenever it turned to the topic of these country homes for the city schools. In the past few years quite a few American educators have come to Bremen to visit our schools, and again during these visits the school country homes aroused the greatest interest among the visitors.

What is the school country home ("Schullandheim")? Let us accompany an American visitor on his trip to the country home of the elementary school on Stader Street in Bremen. The country home of this school is located in Etelsen, situated in the Weser valley halfway between Bremen and Verden.

Work of Their Own Hands

We had parked our car at the edge of the highway. We climbed down from the highway and came into a little pine forest which here and there

opened up onto some patches of heath. After a few steps, the highway was out of sight. Only occasionally the honking of a car came through the dense woods. The soil was sandy; we were now in the dunes along the ancient glacial valleys of the Weser river. These dunes sloped slowly towards the marshes.

Soon we found a little path, and suddenly, we saw in front of us a low brown wooden building which lay there all surrounded by the fir trees on three sides in a little saddle of the dune. The windows, painted in white, were wide open. A small flower garden tended by children occupied the fourth non-wooded side of the house. Beyond this little garden the ground sloped down to the river which lay before us in the noon-day sun of this beautiful July day, smooth like a mirror, while on the luscious meadows of the marsh in the far distance, the cattle grazed, and the clouds were reflected in the water.

Just as we started to enter the building, there arrived a group of about

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thirty or forty boys and girls. They had been on a field trip in the morning and had bathed in the river to cool off. Now they came tramping up the dune singing lustily. With a friendly greeting to us they entered the house. We followed them and came first into the dayroom which served for meetings and as a dining room and on bad days as a classroom. To the left of the dayroom a door led into the kitchen. Through a sliding window we could see four or five mothers who were busy with huge kettles. Ahead of us in the middle of the large room a door opened into a corridor, and from the corridor the children entered their bedrooms. We followed some of the children and they showed us with pride how they had made up their beds and cleaned their rooms in the morning. Four or six children of the same sex were in one room. To one side of the bedrooms was a huge veranda which had picture glass, which permitted a free view onto the beautiful landscape.

After the children had changed their clothes in the bedrooms, they went to the wash and shower rooms where they washed their hands for dinner. They then returned in small groups to the dayroom, and immediately started to give the mothers a helping hand. Some put plates and silver on the table, others carried in the huge kettles with food and began to ladle it out. There were no orders or commands, everybody seemed to know his job and to take over his duties without much ado. Now the room began to fill up and finally to overflow, so that a large group of children collected outside and began to sing gay folk songs to those who were working inside.

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Meanwhile, the two young teachers in charge of this group came in and greeted us. Our visitors, one a teacher from Schenectady, New York, and one a social worker from London, England, began to interview these staff members. When we asked the ages of the children, we were told they were nine and ten years old. When we inquired what the teachers considered the most important task, one of the teachers said, "We must learn to get along well with each other. Maybe to you this seems a little problem, but to us that is the most important job."

Now somebody rang the bell outside the door. Everybody came in, the children, the two group leaders and also the mothers who had helped in the kitchen. Quietly everybody went to his place and stood there behind his chair.

"What shall we sing?" asked one of the girls.

"'When All the Fountains Are Flowing,'" several called. So they sang the old folk song, and then they joined hands and said in a chorus, "Good Appetite!" They then sat down and began the meal.

After the dinner a group of the children went to the kitchen to help wash the dishes, while others played under the trees or read on the veranda, and enjoyed the free hour before the afternoon group work began. The class then broke up into a number of groups each of which worked on its special aspect of the central topic which had been selected for study by the whole

class, namely, "The Origin of the Dunes in the Ice Age."

Before we left the country home, the two teachers took us once more around and through the beautiful country home and explained to us with pride how parents, teachers and children had created this home and kept it up with the work of their own hands, starting with practically nothing. First, there had been only a little barrack, then the wash and shower rooms had been added, then the veranda, then the heating system, then the sport field, and finally the beach. "We have done it ourselves, the fathers of our children, the mothers, the teachers and the children themselves. A lot has been done, and we have plans for many more things we want to do."

Origin of the Country Home Idea

The idea of the country home is a child of the first World War. When this war was lost, the fiasco of the Prussian-German authoritative education became obvious. With the breakdown of the superimposed authority of the state, all feeling of responsibility for one's fellow citizens had disappeared. It became clear: the Germans had been trained and trained well in so many things, but however good the training was that the old school had given to their students, they never had learned to take responsibility and to get along well with each other. Now there had to be a new education which had to teach responsibility, and respect for the freedom and rights of others. Teaching the theory was not enough, children had to learn to live with each other and to develop and apply new principles.

The frame of the city school was too small for such a task. A house outside the city had to be found, where teachers and children could live for a longer time than the few hours they spent in classrooms, and where they could gain experiences in group living and learn that no community can exist unless everybody contributes responsibly to its life. Thus, to learn how to live in a group through living in a group has been, from the very beginning, the main idea behind the country home plan.

In twenty-five years of experience with the country home plan, tremendous experiences and insights have been gained. Probably the most important result of these experiences is this: that there is no task in education that brings teachers, parents and students together in so much happy practical work and cooperation as does a country home project. And this community of parents, teachers and students, as it has been created through the project, is almost more valuable than the country home itself, that was built through the project. A country home is a never-ending task, a perpetual planning for all.

Let us take the fathers first. They donated their work. Week end after week end they went out to grade the ground, to move the earth, to build a new annex, to put in new plumbing and to build new tables and new chairs. And since during the year many hundreds of children pass through for a week or two, there is always the job of repairing.

The children, too, had plenty of work to do. They danced, they sang, they put on plays, all in order to raise



THE fathers at work: country home "Verdener Brunnen."

money for their country home. Yes, they also joined their fathers at work. They passed the bricks, they passed the boards, they straightened out old nails, they scraped mortar from old bricks, they gathered wood from the forest in order to help save money for fuel, and they fetched the milk in their little wagons in order to save money for transportation.

The work of the mothers was just as important. Several mothers always accompany a class into the country home and help with the cooking, with washing and combing very little ones, with the shopping and the bookkeeping, and do all the repairing of the children's clothes, which at the present stage of German clothing is no small problem.

All three groups, teachers, parents and children finally cooperate in the most important project of all: that of raising the necessary money. Most of the parents of the Bremen schools who have organized country homes are members of the working class. These people, often unemployed, and even when working may be at a loss as to how to make ends meet, sacrificed what little they had for the cause of the country school home. A parent teacher organization at one of the elementary schools raised more than \$10,000 in fourteen years and every penny of this

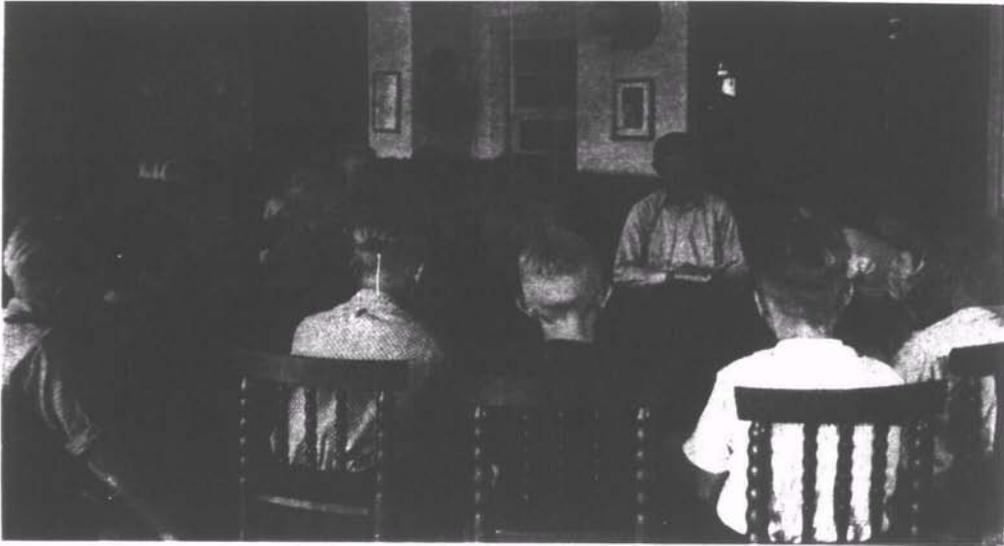
money was invested in the country home.

Without the help of the parents it would be impossible to solve the cardinal and perennial problem of each group, namely, how to get all the children of a group to the country home. Often parents pay for the expenses of an additional child in the group. Or they will visit the houses of parents who refuse their child permission to go to the country home. They discuss with them the reason for the refusal and try to impress them with the need for all children to go along. Such discussions often show that the refusing parents are not opposed on principle to the country home idea, but are ashamed because they have only torn or badly patched sheets and undergarments for their child to take to the country home.

New Worlds Open to Children

So far we have dealt only with the social ideas behind the country home plan. But there is no doubt that for many teachers educational ideals were the strongest impetus to their enthusiasm for the country home idea. To the educator the country home opened up a world of educational experience that the city school could not give to them.

Take for example the experience of the farm and the farmer. What city child had any knowledge of how the farmer lived and worked? Who had ever seen a farmer plowing his field or milking his cows? What city child had ever watched a village smith working in his shop on the village street? What city child had ever observed the miller in his mill and knew that the bread he ate in the city had once been



TEACHER reads a story at night.

grain in the fields, sowed, harrowed and mowed with the farmer's sweat and then threshed and later turned into white flour in the village mill?

Completely new worlds opened up to the children of the big city in our country home when they went on field trips into the woods, heath and peat bogs, and when they observed the life and the growth in the fields and the meadows. Here basic principles of modern education were being applied: in place of the book or supplementing it, reality was being put on the educational throne, and at the same time individual observation and individual respect were being developed. As the children went out observing, collecting, investigating heretofore unknown worlds, inspired by their country home experiences, they learned to work and plan for themselves. They discovered connections and inquired after cause and effect.

Composition suddenly was not any more a burdensome task usurped by

teacher and curriculum; it had suddenly become a necessity and a reality.

How should parents at home and friends in the street and other classes of these schools learn about all these wonderful experiences unless one told about them in letters? How could one retain so many new discoveries and observations unless one jotted them down in copybooks, diaries or reports? Since many reports and all the letters were written for others, for parents, for friends, or for the school newspaper or home town newspaper, they simply had to be in good style and free of mistakes. Thus the letter took the place of the composition. Arithmetic, too, suddenly had a new meaning. It suddenly was something functionally used, for instance, to figure out whether the money in the group till would pay for the coffee cake for Sunday, or for celebrating that birthday of Hans that was coming up next week.

Geography, history, botany, sociology, geology and meteorology ceased to

be theories in big books, and became a living, stimulating and thrilling reality. When in the August nights the meteors flung their sparkling fireworks over the dark night sky, astronomy, suddenly, became the most interesting subject to the children. When the new well had to be dug to get water for the shower rooms, the simple secrets of geology suddenly came to life and became a new stimulus for observation and learning.

The experiences on the farm, of course, also had their social implications. They bridged the gap between the city and country. He who wants to live with others must first know who these others are, how they live and work, and how they think and feel. Thus, the small community of the class and of the school was widened to take in the local community in which the country home was located.

Ask any teacher who has spent a few weeks with a class in one of these country homes and he will tell you how much happiness, how much stimulation and how much reward these weeks have brought to both the children and the educator. To him these weeks are the high points in his work, for he is not only a teacher here, but also father and mother to "his" children. And here in these weeks in the country home he has been able to see students and has been able to observe gifts and human qualities which he never observed and could never have observed in the daily routine of school teaching.

The Program Has Grown

The idea of the country home took root quickly after the first World War. In the city of Bremen alone there were

founded seventeen country homes between World War I and World War II. Of these seventeen homes, fourteen belonged to elementary schools, two to private high schools, and one to a public high school. In the first seven years after World War I, one hundred and forty country homes were founded all over Germany, and by 1933, when practically all new ideas and local initiative in education were killed by the Nazi regime, the number of country homes had risen to three hundred.

These years between the wars were years of financial distress for both the community and the individual citizen. In this financial stress the country homes could only be built through the efforts of the parents organization. The new idea was a challenge to school budgets that had been cut to the bone and to the family budget, which often had only the dole as a source of income. Yet, the parents in the slum districts of the big cities were the first to accept the challenge.

Teachers and parents got together and organized clubs to raise money and to scout for a suitable building not too far from the city and if possible near water and woods. When they had chosen a suitable place and collected the money for the first down payment, they would organize volunteer groups of fathers, mothers, teachers and children who gave all their spare time and vacations to make the new place fit to live in and large enough to accommodate one or two classes at the same time. At first there was only money to *rent* a building. One school, for instance, rented an empty barrack, a second school rented

a large pigsty which had become empty during the war when pigs were killed, a third school rented an old farmhouse which was half in ruin.

Soon it became clear that it would be better to own a place than to rent it, but the big question was how to finance such a purchase. The following report on the founding of a country home for the experimental school on Helgolander Street in Bremen, gives a clear impression of the difficulties in the pioneer work. The report is entitled: "The Country Home in Ristedt."

"In 1922 inflation is devouring the thousands of marks, which had been collected by the parents for the organization of a school home, but the determination to create such a home is indestructible. Students, teachers, mothers, fathers, everybody has put his shoulder to the wheel, and the work is starting once more from scratch. In the spring of 1923 one class of the school is on a hike to Fischerhiude. During a rest the boys discover behind a little wood an empty pigsty and thus, the school got its first country home. The owner wants no rent in cash, after all, money has no value; but he put it in writing that we would repair eighty broken window panes.

"The fathers got to work and in a few months the first furniture could be moved in: two large tables, four long benches, one-half dozen rickety chairs, and a cooking stove. There were no beds, but there was some straw, so the mothers sewed up sacks from old burlap. Now the country home was ready to be lived in. First, only one-half a class could be sheltered, but soon fifty soldiers cots were

bought cheaply, and now the whole class could be sheltered.

"Everything was terribly primitive. Washing, for instance, had to be done under a pump with everybody waiting in line with soap in one hand and towel in the other, and, yet, in spite of the primitiveness everybody seemed happy. Nobody seemed to mind at all.

"Two years later there was a big boom in pork and that was the end of the contract. Out went the boys, in came the pigs again. But the idea of the country home had spread so strongly among teachers, parents, and students that everybody was resolved that the school should have a new home. After a long time on the real estate market a little farm with two acres of land was found in Ristedt for \$2,500. Another thousand dollars was drummed up with the shows, gifts, and contributions to the organization and with that money building materials were bought and the fathers and mothers donated their time and their work weekend after weekend — some fathers spent thirty consecutive weekends improving the old farmhouse. Finally there was room enough for children of two classes at the same time. Many parents and teachers not only donated their time and work, but gave money regularly, and a number of them even put up their homes as collateral."¹

Even after the homes were owned by the school, they were still very primitive. But soon water pipes were put in, the primitive big stove in the center room was eliminated and a heating system installed. New bedrooms were

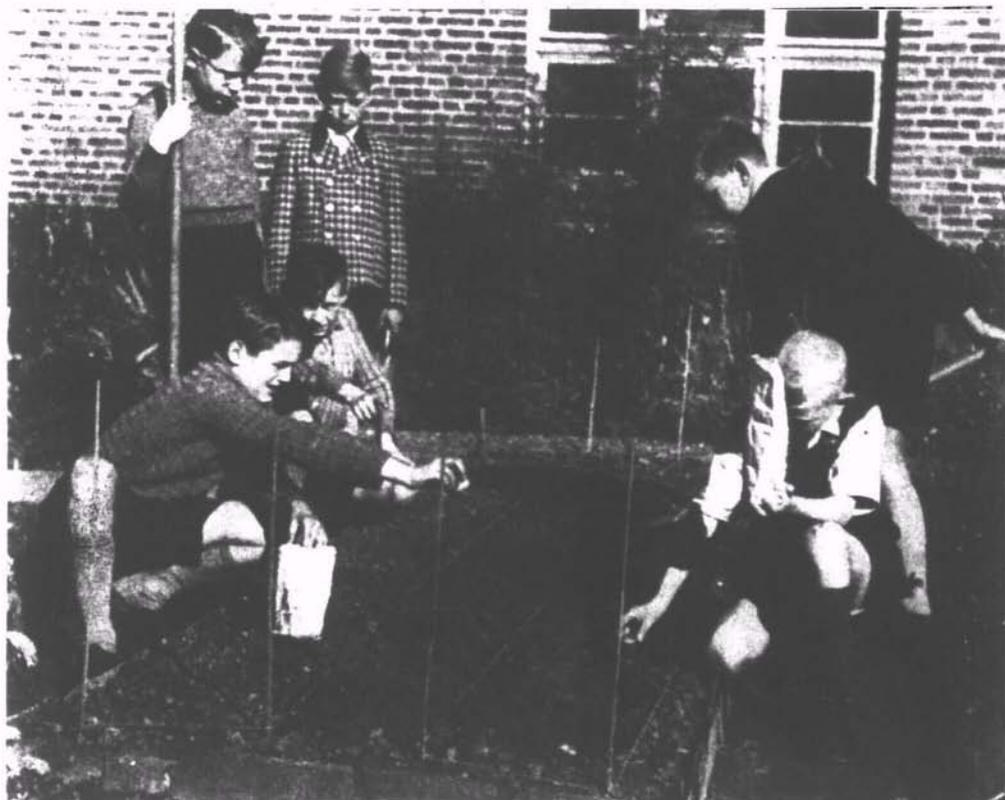
¹ *Schullandheimarbeit*. Edited by W. Berger.

added. Water and shower rooms were put in and often there was added a "wash-kitchen," since many children were too poor to bring a change of clothes. Here the mothers who had come along as helpers had to wash the linen and the laundry of the children while they were asleep. Improving a country home once it has been acquired and taking care of the repairs is a task without end.

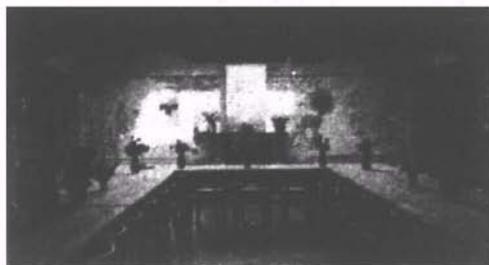
After the end of the second World War the parents at once started a fight to retrieve the old country homes that had been confiscated by the Nazi and turned into military hospitals or homes for the aged. Now the country home idea spread. The terrible destruction

in the cities had made these weeks in the country more important for the city children than ever. Of the seventeen country homes around Bremen in operation at the start of the war, five have been returned to the schools, three more will be reopened this year, four more country homes have been created since 1948 and four more will be built next year. It has been an uphill task to retrieve some of the old country homes, since many of them are now filled with refugees from the east and there is simply no place in the destroyed cities to shelter them.

Three of the newly organized homes have been salvaged from the air-raid shelters and the storage vaults of a big



SOWING in the kitchen garden.



ONCE a Nazi air-raid shelter—now a country home.

munitions depot outside of Bremen. This change-over from the war functions to peaceful purposes seems like a beautiful symbol. Through tedious work, parents, supported by bulldozers of the United States Army, have cleared three of the vaults, which had been covered by mounds of sand, many yards deep in places. They have blasted holes into the thick walls in order to bring light into these dungeons. They have put in windows and painted the walls with gay colors, and thus turned the arsenal of destruction and the symbol of Nazi totalitarianism into beautiful homes, which offer space for six classes of the city schools, and a chance for children to spend weeks in fresh air, to learn to live with each other, and build a better democracy for the future.

Practical Problems Involved

The most important practical question involved in the founding and upkeep of a country home has already been touched. We mean, of course, the question of how to finance such a home. The Bremen country homes have until last year been financed by the parents of each school organized in a special organization. In the most favorable cases these parent organizations have raised the money for the country homes all by themselves. Very

often, however, the parents were too poor to raise all the money and in that case had to borrow from private banks and to put up their private property as collateral. This naturally put a severe financial responsibility and burden on a smaller part of the parents and could not exactly be called democratic. Therefore, the parents of more and more schools have clamored for a state fund which would make loans to individual schools. Since 1949 Bremen has created such a fund amounting to \$25,000, and schools which want to build more country homes or which want to restore the old homes can now receive loans. The loans are amortized with varying speed depending on the size of the school, and as the money is paid back, it can immediately be turned over as a loan to another school. Thus, there is only need for *one* such fund.

Experience has shown that if a school has about sixteen to twenty classes, it is usually in the best condition to amortize the invested loan and in addition to finance the upkeep and the expansion of the country home. Of course, the parent organization is not able to aid in the individual class project: that means, for instance, that the school organization can not put up the necessary money to send *all* children of a class to a country home.

This brings up a second problem: How shall the trip of the individual child to the country home be financed? Since school buses are being used for the trip to the country home, the expenses involved are mostly expenses for food. The cost for food depends very much on how a home is being administered. This is different in different homes. In one home, for in-



MUSIC on the heath.

stance, all food expenses are calculated and budgeted by the mothers who accompany the class, and the budget is usually made in cooperation with the teachers and the class, unless the youngsters are too small to help. This is the cheapest form. Another home has employed personnel for the whole school year to take care of the budget and the cooking. A third type of country home has just one permanent administrator who is assisted by the mothers of the group. In each case the costs differ. It also makes a difference whether groups come to the country home in the spring or in the fall, since prices for food change with the seasons.

In some German cities contributions for the upkeep of the home and for its administration are calculated into board charges for the individual child. Bremen does not subscribe to this system. In Bremen the money for board

is separated from the general costs of upkeep, which are financed through membership fees of the parent association and through donations. This method has an advantage in that families with many children contribute only once to the general cost of upkeep, and can thus more easily finance the individual stay of their children in the country home.

The collection of the money is not done with any overhead. The money for board for each individual child is saved over the whole year, either by parents who collect the money each week in the homes without remuneration or by teachers or students who organize a savings bank in the school, a project which is, of course, of high educational significance.

A question as to which class should go into the country home is answered by all schools who have such a home with "All the classes." This means



DISCUSSION group in the dayroom of a Bremen country home.

that the six-year-old will go, as well as the fourteen-year-old. Most country homes are in operation all year. Only in a few cases where the home has not year been "winterized," or where the home is not large enough, exceptions have been necessary. Such schools usually send the younger (seven- to twelve-year-old) children into the country home, rather than the upper classes of thirteen- or fourteen-year-old students, who have already been in the country home several times. These go instead on two week field trips.

How long should a class stay in the country home? Two weeks are really the minimum, especially if one is concerned with the social aim of happy group living. Experience has shown that a shorter time than two weeks is not enough to weld a class into a real community.

How large should the country home be? The Bremen educators think that a country home should be large enough to shelter two classes at the same time. Experiences have been especially good when the classes were different age

groups, for instance, if a group of fourteen-year-old girls was put together with a group of first graders.

Mementos of Happy Days

It was the morning after an air raid. A teacher of the school in the Helgolander Street, one of the schools that had pioneered in the country home idea, walked through the ruins. A young woman approached the teacher and said:

"You have lost everything, Mr. P.?"

"Yes," said the teacher, "and you?"

"Only this is left," she said and pointed to the overnight case in her hand. "I guess you have forgotten, but I was in your class and we went with you to the country home in Ristedt in 1929. We were the eighth grade then, remember?"

"Oh, yes," he said, "that was such a long time ago, and so much has happened. You may not know, I have not been a teacher for the last ten years. The Nazis discharged me in 1933."

"Oh, yes, I know," the woman answered and they were silent again. Suddenly she exclaimed with pride, "Do you know what I have saved?" She opened her little overnight bag and took out a folder.

"This is what I wrote when we were in the country home," she said. "My reports on my field trips, my notes and my letters home."

These mementos together with a few letters and family photographs were the few things which she had kept, kept as her most precious possession, without which she could not live. Night after night she had taken with her in the air raid shelter the mementos of happy days at the country home.

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