

Chapter 11

Grassroots Diplomacy

Fighting the Cold War on the Family Farm with the International Farm Youth

Exchange

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Introduction

In the early summer of 1952, a college student from Ohio named Joann Campbell was sailing toward a five-month stay in Finland. She was one of eight hundred students aboard the MS *Nelly*, a converted cargo ship and aircraft carrier that had left New York City bound for Le Havre. The *Nelly* had served as an emigration ship immediately after the war, taking Europeans to new homes throughout the British Empire, but on this June voyage it had become a “floating campus” carrying U.S. students to participate in exchange programs throughout Europe.¹ Joined by two other vessels chartered to satisfy the enormous demand for passage to Europe, the trio carried a total of 3,500 students representing 170 educational institutions that ranged from glee clubs to religious organizations volunteering for hard labor.

But despite her college background, Campbell was not headed to the University of Helsinki as a Fulbright scholar or as part of another educational exchange. She was instead one of thirty-nine students traveling to live on European farms as participants in the International Farm Youth Exchange (IFYE). The program was inspired by former GIs studying agriculture at Cornell University and, since 1948, had been sponsored by the 4-H—a farm youth organization—and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The IFYE placed college-aged students from farms in the United States, like Campbell, on European farms and conversely brought European farm youth to the United States. However, unlike the postwar agricultural programs that sent foods, supplies and experts to rebuild European farming and

From *Global Exchanges: Scholarship and Transnational Circulations in the Contemporary World*, eds. Ludovic Tournès and Giles Scott-Smith (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 188–201.

secure allies for the United States, these students were working with little training and no materials to promote the abstract goal of mutual understanding.

Although the IFYE operated with far fewer people and resources than government-run exchange programs like the Fulbright Program and technical assistance projects under the Marshall Plan, it is an important piece in explaining the transition between international cooperation at the end of World War II and Cold War belligerence just a few years later.² The program further underscores the depth and breadth of Americans' involvement in the Cold War as it attracted farm youth who, often unwittingly, helped wage the early cultural and agricultural battles against communism that would lead to the better-known development programs of the 1950s and 1960s.

Agricultural exchange in the Americas dates back to European colonization, and beginning the late nineteenth century it became the focus of U.S. missionaries and technical experts hoping to improve the welfare of others abroad.³ World War II rapidly accelerated these exchanges as U.S.-grown food went to allies around the world and an international collection of workers came to the United States to raise wartime crops. Moreover, U.S. farmers turned soldiers, like those who created the IFYE, returned from the war with perspectives on overseas agriculture that helped cultivate a more cosmopolitan worldview among their fellow farmers.⁴ These experiences abroad coupled with wartime prosperity at home fostered an urge to support agricultural rehabilitation and food aid after the war. In the face of the U.S. government's bare-shelf policy, which inadequately addressed Europe's food needs in the interest of avoiding a domestic recession, farmers recognized their moral obligations and interests in maintaining newfound profits through food aid.⁵ They sent private shipments of food overseas, participated in programs to redirect military rations to civilians, and volunteered to travel abroad to rebuild European agriculture. But it was not until the Marshall Plan began in 1948 that the U.S. government gave full support to agricultural aid,

after officials had recognized agriculture's ostensibly apolitical nature as a means of reaching international political goals. Just as U.S. agriculture had served as a testing ground for state capacity during the New Deal, overseas farming provided an avenue for international engagement under the cover of humanitarianism. John Maynard Keynes, for example, chided Franklin D. Roosevelt for starting with the "vitamins" when he used the Food and Agricultural Organization to demonstrate the United States' commitment to international cooperation, and the United Nations in particular, but it proved to be a politically savvy move for gaining public support in the United States.⁶ In response, internationally minded farmers expressed their concern at the program's inability to satisfy the nutritional needs of its recipients and at its political motives, which led to unfairly distributed food.⁷ Programs such as the IFYE thus operated at cross-purposes—they embodied the altruistic goals of international cooperation and mutual understanding held by participants such as Joann Campbell, while also serving sponsors' goals of fighting communism.

Grassroots Diplomats

The twenty-year-old Campbell had grown up on a cattle farm in Ohio and had studied rural sociology at Earlham College, a Quaker college in Indiana that would have immersed her in the ferment to avoid war through international cooperation.⁸ The prosperity of her family's farm had paid for her college education, allowed her to travel overseas and even covered the sponsorship of a British family's immigration to the United States. Although the five months Campbell spent on farms in Finland were not necessarily representative of other delegates' experiences, IFYE leaders considered her an archetypical delegate, based on her background, and so her experiences illuminate the early goals of the program as well as the ways in which private organizations and the federal government helped cement Cold War animosities after a period of postwar international cooperation.⁹

Campbell and six other college-aged farmers were selected to represent the state of Ohio through a competitive application and interview process. Her application essay focused on international friendship, but also pointed out several characteristics considered ideal for prospective IFYE delegates, or Iffys as they were commonly called: she had traveled overseas before, for ten years she had been a member of her local 4-H club (which was part of the U.S. agricultural bureaucracy) and she had demonstrated a proficiency at public presentations, which would later win her recognition from officials in Washington, DC.

Delegates from Ohio began participating in the IFYE in 1950, after students secured funding from the Ohio branches of 4-H, the Grange and Farm Bureau. The following year, the national IFYE transitioned from an independently financed, experimental project of the U.S. Extension Service to become a permanent program. With funding from the Ford Foundation as well as “internationally minded” corporations (usually those that would profit from selling agricultural equipment abroad), the IFYE also expanded its geographic scope and began sending delegates to Latin America and Asia.¹⁰ In 1952, Campbell therefore found herself joining the program in a watershed period, as it moved beyond Europe and saw its U.S. delegates increase in number to 123 from just seventeen in 1948.

Before traveling overseas, IFYE delegates gathered in Washington, DC to meet fellow participants and prepare for life in unfamiliar circumstances. There they met officials from the Department of State and the U.S. Information Agency, who were careful to point out that they were not engaging in propaganda. The government officials instructed delegates, often dubbed “grassroots diplomats,” to not promote U.S. methods as superior while working on overseas farms, but instead to participate in farm work and take in cultural differences as a point of mutual understanding. In fact, despite the requirement that all participants had to have a farm background, delegates received no explicit charge to transmit agricultural knowledge apart from distributing literature and promoting the 4-H. They instead heard

lectures on “moral standards,” customs and how to deal with “knotty problems” such as race relations if they were to arise in conversation with host families.¹¹ Reflecting the assumed superiority of the United States, and especially its farm youth, organizers argued that they were simply helping the grassroots diplomats to present the information that they knew “almost instinctively.”¹²

Campbell diligently packed the 4-H pamphlets she was instructed to distribute abroad, but otherwise arrived in New York with a limited ability to influence, let alone speak with her overseas hosts. Although she had received Finnish language records, she boarded the *Nelly* only able to recognize a few Finnish words. Her traveling companions to Finland were in similar positions. One had grown up on a Finnish settlement in the United States, but did not have the language skills he claimed he did, and the other had been mistakenly sent a Swedish language record. As a result of this practical dilemma, the group embarked for Le Havre hoping to encounter Finns with some knowledge of English and relying on the U.S. diplomats who would periodically accompany them during their time abroad. Later realizing the gravity of not speaking Finnish, Campbell complained that Dave Patterson, the alleged Finnish-speaker, had “fouled up” their exchange because organizers assumed that he could serve as an interpreter.¹³ But the Finland-bound delegates were not unusual. Linguistic indifference had existed since the first seventeen Iffys (as they became known) traveled to Europe with no foreign language ability. Even several years into the program, delegates reported that the vinyl language records they received in preparation for the exchange were more novelties than learning tools. They consequently arrived knowing that they would need to rely on smiling, pointing or encountering someone who could speak English.¹⁴ Although a Missouri delegate recounted that his inability to communicate encouraged him to trust his Swiss host family more, European host families often interpreted the lack of language skills as American indifference or an assumption of superiority.¹⁵

After arriving at her first farm stay, a fourteen-acre farm three miles from the Soviet border, Campbell lamented to her parents that she barely said over twenty words a day and could not talk to anyone.¹⁶ Meetings with agricultural officials involved her laughing at incomprehensible jokes and otherwise enduring undecipherable conversations. This continued throughout her stay as she learned a basic vocabulary to complete farm chores, but never enough to actually speak with anyone around her. With little ability to communicate and no agricultural expertise to provide, she and other Iffys were left to help with farm chores, promote the International 4-H program and demonstrate to their hosts that not all Americans smoked and drank.

But despite these limitations, delegates could still do what organizers considered a significant responsibility of IFYE delegates: report on their travels to audiences in the United States. Campbell regularly wrote to her family on the trials of living abroad, mentioning, for example, that if her family could see the way dishes were washed and bread was baked, they would understand why she needed to get a typhus shot. She complained to them about the flies in her coffee and the black flakes that permeated all food cooked in her host's cast-iron skillet. With a diet largely consisting of starches and sugars complementing the seemingly endless manual farm labor, Campbell seemed to be in misery during her first month abroad. Even presenting the slideshow of her family's Ohio farm became exhausting because she could not tell her audiences what they were seeing. Campbell noted the villagers' bad teeth, the poor condition of her host family's farm and her unsmiling neighbors. With no one to speak to, she declared that she had long since lost her identity and that she shared more in common with the family dog, who knew about as much of what was going on as she did.

Likely unwilling to air her grievances publicly or upset the benefactors who had paid for her exchange, Campbell's weekly articles written for the *Daily News* in Dayton, Ohio focused instead on the oddities of life in Finland and the shortcomings of that country's

agriculture. She wrote about the “hidden values” of the sauna, noted that women and children did the majority of heavy labor on Finnish farms, and that men back in the United States who felt “henpecked from the work they did at home should move to Finland.”¹⁷ This was a common thread among other Iffys as well, who focused not only on the lack of farm equipment abroad but also scrutinized unfamiliar work practices while ignoring labor inequalities in the United States. Through all the oddities of life overseas, Campbell was able to hold out the possibility of international friendship. But even that found its limit in the “shadow of the Iron Curtain.” She described the Finnish-Soviet border as “the edge of the earth” and a “place where men could no longer stand together.” Although she held out hope that “someday the trees will grow again and the boundary ... will disappear,” it was not until 1961 that the IFYE entered the Eastern Bloc, and then only in Poland.¹⁸

In her five months away from home, Joann Campbell lived on three Finnish farms, attended the Olympic Games in Helsinki and saw a performance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. She distributed the 4-H pamphlets and personalized pencils she brought as gifts and accumulated a suitcase of souvenirs to bring home. She was well-liked by her Finnish hosts, to whom she continued to write for years after her exchange. She even expressed sadness upon leaving, contending that the language barrier was not as important as it seemed and concluding that staying on an “average” farm without plumbing or other conveniences allowed her to “accomplish the mission behind” her trip.¹⁹ Once back in the United States, Campbell, like all returning IFYE delegates, was obligated to stay in her home state for at least three months, taking leave from school if necessary, in order to “present slides, develop newspaper articles, teach new recipes learned overseas, or just chat with friends about the impact of the cross-cultural experience on the individual’s outlook on life.”²⁰ Aided by her large collection of slides, she presented to 150 groups over the next three years, spoke on radio shows in Chicago and Cincinnati, and even appeared on television.

Reports from Campbell's fellow delegates suggested that the program was improving Americans' agricultural knowledge about the rest of the world, explaining that the rocky soil and humidity of Norway prevented the wider adoption of machinery and that the need for employment in Italy explained why farm laborers could just as well do the work of farm machinery.²¹ Bill Upton, a delegate from North Carolina, even noted the advantage his Japanese hosts had in owning their land compared to the growing numbers of farmers in the United States who were forced to rent their land and take out loans for seed and machinery.²² But for each of these more thoughtful observations, there were dismissals of outdated farm machinery, backward techniques, and women forced to perform too much heavy labor. The framework of U.S. politics especially shaped delegates' perspectives on events abroad, such as creeping communism, high taxes and the English health plan that was as bad as English coffee.²³ These reports suggested that in place of mutual understanding, delegates accumulated anecdotal evidence in order to support their preconceived notions about the rest of the world.

“America as it Really is”

Exchanges like Campbell's reaffirmed the superiority of life in the United States for delegates and those they came in contact with, but the best way to do this for foreign farmers was to welcome them to live on U.S. farms. Like their delegate counterparts, exchangees (the term used by 4-H to distinguish foreign participants from American “delegates”) coming to the United States stayed with a variety of host families over the course of three to six months, often spread across different crop regions such as the Midwest, South and Pacific Coast. They were similarly selected through a competitive process that privileged members of agricultural organizations, but unlike U.S. delegates, they were required to have some proficiency in English. Also, whereas the U.S. delegates were instructed not to argue for U.S. agricultural

superiority while abroad, host families in the United States regularly demonstrated it to their foreign visitors.²⁴ This was in part due to the affluence of host families compared to average farmers in the United States. A survey of IFYE hosts in Ohio, for example, found that their farms were on average 228 acres, more than double the 105-acre average in that state.²⁵ Exchange reports continually noted the quantity of farm machinery, how much land one U.S. farmer could cultivate, the modern homes farmers lived in, and the conveniences that seemed to make urban and rural life indistinguishable.²⁶ A participant from Argentina “marveled” at the many quotidian conveniences around his Iowa host’s farm, such as gravel roads, rural mail delivery and electricity, as well as the grain-fed beef that surpassed his family’s grass-fed cattle.²⁷ The unstated campaign to overwhelm the foreign visitors with the abundance of farm life in the United States even raised fears that the participants would not return home. A State Department evaluator suggested that agricultural exchanges were better suited for immigrants because they encouraged the participants to “put down roots in a favorable environment” rather than inspire them to return home with new ideas.²⁸

In addition to highlighting the desirability of farm life in the United States, the experiences of the foreign participants burnished the country’s agrarian mythology. They reported arriving with images of profligate living in New York and Hollywood, but encountered a wholly different culture on the farm. This discovery did not change their general impression of the United States, but it did excise rural Americans as a more wholesome group within the broader population and provided a “right picture” of life on U.S. farms not provided in popular culture.²⁹ Even President Dwight Eisenhower affirmed this perspective in 1954 when he stated to a group of farmers from India and Pakistan that he was happy that they could “see America as it really is,” while dismissing cities as “really only a small phase of American life.”³⁰

In evaluating the early effectiveness of the program, two Iffys from the program's first year declared that its results "are to be measured in terms of international Christianity, good will and understanding. They are, therefore, intangible but everlasting."³¹ But these amorphous goals failed to produce the concrete results that funders and sponsors hoped for. Delegates failed to maintain contact with their host families as intended, moving on with their lives and remembering the exchange as a youthful adventure.³² Host families in the United States similarly seemed to demonstrate little change in thinking about the world, instead rationalizing their long-held views to fit the experiences of hosting foreign farm youth.³³ Even the U.S. Extension Service staff overseeing the program wondered, for example, how much better the farm hosts' knowledge of India was after the visits, suggesting that basing conclusions "about India from the acquaintance with from one to five well-educated, carefully chosen young men must certainly lead to the development of new stereotypes as misleading as the old ones."³⁴ The motivations of hosts were also suspect, as they occasionally cited an interest in doing something for peace and world understanding, but more commonly admitted that they hosted students because their children wanted the experience, while others more brazenly hoped to show how much better Christianity was or to get "paid back" for the work their child had performed in other countries.³⁵ More innocuously, hosts claimed that the experience served as a vacation at home, with the foreign visitor providing "zest" and "lift" to ordinary farm life.³⁶

Conclusion

With the fleeting influence on delegates and mixed motivations of hosts in the United States, the early years of the IFYE therefore appear to be of limited consequence. While Joann Campbell maintained contact with her host families longer than others and spoke to thousands about her experiences, she chose not to finish college, was married and settled on a

farm across the road from her parents. For many delegates, the exchange was a subsidized vacation that had little bearing on their adult lives. And based on their harsh assessments of host countries, the delegates appeared to confirm recent research indicating that exchange programs actually build nationalism rather than international cooperation.³⁷

But among the thousands of delegates in the ensuing years, a strong tie developed between the program and later work for the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department and transnational food and agricultural companies. Not only did IFYE alumni go on to work with internationally focused government agencies and corporations, but a symbiotic relationship also formed, which continues today, in which U.S. development projects followed earlier work by the IFYE, and the IFYE enjoyed greater support from the U.S. agrodipomatic apparatus.³⁸ Likewise, exchangees commonly went on to work in ministries of agriculture, universities and the food industry. In providing early support, the Ford Foundation was explicit about its hopes to foster farm organizations and in turn rationalize agriculture abroad. And as the program spread beyond Europe, its mission widened as well. Early delegates like Joann Campbell were briefed in Washington to “[bend] over backwards to avoid criticism of one nation’s standard of living” in order to overcome the “suspicion that so often jeopardizes international experiments.”³⁹ This accommodation in turn permitted the IFYE program to build a reputation that fostered its rapid expansion. But as historian Amrys Williams notes, soon after Campbell’s experience in Finland, the IFYE shifted its mission from the postwar reconstruction of Europe to the development of commercial agriculture in the postcolonial world.⁴⁰ Campbell and her fellow Iffys were, in effect, the thin end of the wedge that opened the way for subsequent technical assistance, first with publicly financed development projects and then private investment, including many of the farm machinery manufacturers that helped fund the IFYE.⁴¹

Despite the basic language barriers and the prohibition against promoting U.S. methods, the program maintained an implicit propagandistic impulse. The requirement that all participants had to be college students excluded the vast majority of U.S. farm youth in favor of those who had access to higher education and were predisposed to the industrial modes of agriculture taught at land grant universities. Moreover, the competitive process used to select participants ensured that those most involved with farm organizations and the federal agricultural bureaucracy would be chosen. And while the IFYE touted its private funding and sponsorship, it operated in cooperation with the state and its corporate partners, including the New York “bon voyage luncheon” hosted by the Grocery Manufacturers of America.⁴² The IFYE and similar programs therefore had real environmental and human consequences, especially as they moved beyond Europe to countries that received greater attention for development and modernization projects.

Farm exchanges such as the IFYE also demonstrated that while agriculture seemed to occupy a marginal place in a largely industrial United States, it remained essential to the country’s Cold War efforts. As European refugees awaited passage to the United States after World War II, for example, they were shown models of farms in Iowa to demonstrate the bounty that awaited them. And while Cold War animosities limited contact between the United States and the Soviet Union, in 1955 a group of Soviet farm experts spent a month touring the Midwest to learn about improved farm efficiency and the natural abundance of the corn and wheat belts. They were followed in 1959 by Nikita Khrushchev’s trip to Iowa in order to see the “real America,” where he was met by indifferent Iowans who had already grown accustomed to the parade of foreign visitors to their farms.⁴³ Understanding the reach of the Cold War therefore requires us to look beyond traditional diplomatic sources to uncover these histories. The early history of the IFYE does this by uncovering U.S. farmers

as protagonists in international relations that played out in the natural environment around the world.

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Appendix: Preparing for Farm Life Abroad

In the summer of 1952, Marvel LaBrie of South Dakota also traveled to Europe as an IFYE delegate to Belgium.⁴⁴ Like Joann Campbell, she received minimal preparation for her time abroad. Her French language records provided more entertainment than instruction, and the other orientation materials mailed to her with information on local and U.S. history, foreign policy and the U.S. agricultural bureaucracy seemed secondary to practical details such as arranging for inoculations and applying for a passport. Having finished the self-directed study, LaBrie and the other delegates traveled to Washington, DC for an experience more celebratory than instructional, with tours of the monuments and visits to officials from the Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension and the Department of State. In the course of these meetings, delegates would learn about the types of questions they might encounter about the United States, such as why Americans have homes for the aged or why there is no significant ideological difference between major parties. But rather than receiving scripted answers, delegates were instructed to not answer defensively or be pushed to make

embarrassing admissions. At no point did they receive training in agricultural methods or briefings on scientific agriculture that they could bring abroad. However, this minimal amount of preparation was not an oversight; rather, it reflected the confidence of IFYE sponsors that membership of the 4-H and its ideals of clear thinking, loyalty, service and better living would ensure that the delegates would successfully carry out the program's goals. It further showed how sincerely they believed that the rural family values at the heart of 4-H and the IFYE were enough to fight communism and prevent another world war.

Notes

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 2. Sam Lebovic, "From War Junk to Educational Exchange: The World War II Origins of the Fulbright Program and the Foundations of American Cultural Globalism, 1945–1950," *Diplomatic History* 37(2) (2013): 280–312.
 3. Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
 4. See, for example, Joseph Helfert Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereinafter WHS), Madison, WI.
 5. Robert G. Lewis (Wisconsin State Director), 31 May 1949, box 6, folder 9, Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America, Wisconsin Division, WHS.
 6. Quoted in Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 116.

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7. Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent: The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 65.
 8. The details of Campbell's experience with the IFYE are detailed in Joann Campbell, *Joann Campbell's Letters from Finland: An Ohio Girl's Experiences as a Delegate of the International Farm Youth Exchange*, Paul F. Erwin (ed.) (Cincinnati: Creative Writers and Publishers, 1967).
 9. Campbell, *Letters*, 301.
 10. National 4-H Club Foundation and the Cooperative Extension Service, *The International Farm Youth Exchange: A People-to-People Program*, 1958.
 11. Elizabeth S. Colclough, "Peace Corps Prelude," *Travel*, July 1961, 54.
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 16. Campbell, *Letters*, 83.
 17. *Ibid.*, 98, 128.
 18. *Ibid.*, 206.

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19. Ibid., 110, 118.
 20. Anna Marie Boyd, "An Analysis of the Role of the International Farm Youth Exchange Program in Cross-Cultural Communication," MA thesis (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 1971), 24; "Whiteside County Taking Lead in Exchange Program," *Sterling Daily Gazette*, February 22, 1951, 2.
 21. Meta Marie Keller, "International Farm Youth Exchange to Help Understanding," *Sterling Daily Gazette*, February 22, 1951, 2; "14 Young Envoys Back from Europe," *New York Times*, October 5, 1948, 28.
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 25. Boyd, "Analysis of IFYE," 20.
 26. Sabrosky, *Evaluation of the Special Indian Section*, 3; U.S. Department of State, *Preparation for Tomorrow: A German Boy's Year in America*, Department of State Publication 4138 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1951).
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 28. US State Department, *Preparation for Tomorrow*, 40.
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 31. Roy E. Hranicky and Louis Belle White, *The Five H's: Hand, Heart, Head, Health ... and Holland* (Orange Grove, TX, 1950), 8.

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32. Taylor, "Missouri Farm Boy in Switzerland," 75.
 33. Sabrosky, *Evaluation of the Special Indian Section*, 4.
 34. Ibid., 17.
 35. Ibid., 6.
 36. [Mrs. D.] Alexander, "Peace in Kansas," *American Magazine*, April 1955, 18.
 37. Calvert W. Jones, "Exploring the Microfoundations of International Community: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Nationalism," *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (2014): 682–705.
 38. Reminiscences written by IFYE alumni commonly connect their IFYE experience to subsequent work for USAID, Alliance for Project and other development programs. See, for example, Doris Imhof Johnson, *Philippine Experiences of a Kansas Farm Girl* (Bloomington: Trafford, 2012).
 39. Campbell, *Letters*, 24.
 40. Amrys O. Williams, "Cultivating Modern America: 4-H Clubs and Rural Development in the Twentieth Century," PhD dissertation (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2012), 207–8.
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