

# Difficult Days on Tar Heel Farms

By Diana Bell-Kite\*

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When was the last time your teacher showed you how to cut up a pig carcass? Plant a winter garden? Can vegetables? If you are like most North Carolina students today, your answer is “never!” However, during the early 1930s—the toughest years of the Great Depression—North Carolina’s leaders believed that teaching such skills to schoolchildren and their parents would help speed the state’s recovery.

In Depression-era North Carolina, three out of every four people lived on farms. Many of them made a living by planting and selling cotton and tobacco—the state’s main cash crops. Even before the 1929 stock market crash, this dependence on cash crops was causing problems. When demand for cotton fell after World War I, crop prices dropped. Farmers who had been making as much as 35 cents per pound in 1919 made as little as 6 cents per pound in 1931. Tobacco prices fell, too. With so little income, farmers had trouble paying their bills and often could not afford to buy food. Yet, with all of their land planted in cotton and tobacco, they lacked the space to grow anything else. One Wake County man asked, “So long as the farmers must labor under such a handicap how can conditions be improved?”

North Carolina’s governor, O. Max Gardner, had a plan. On December 4, 1929, more than three years before national New Deal relief programs began, he made an announcement to the state’s citizens. “The people of North Carolina,” Gardner said, “are sending out of the State annually for the purchase of food and feedstuffs a sum in excess of \$250,000,000.” Yet, he continued, “North Carolina can . . . produce every foodstuff consumed by man and beast and now largely purchased from outside markets.” If farmers would reduce the amount of cotton and tobacco they planted, Gardner suggested, and would replace those crops with food like beans, corn, wheat, and tomatoes, North Carolinians would have more healthy food to eat. Prices for cash crops might even rise, due to reduced supply. Farmers could raise more hogs for meat, chickens for eggs, and cows for milk. If they had leftover food, they could sell it and earn badly needed cash. Increasing consumption of these nutrient-rich foods also would improve health conditions in a state where many people ate cornbread, fatty pork, and little else.

Gardner looked to many groups of North Carolinians to run his new program, which he named “Live-at-Home.” He called on ministers, judges, grocers, home demonstration agents (instructors

who taught rural women home and family-life skills), and women’s clubs to encourage Tar Heels to produce and preserve their own food and buy only homemade and home-grown products. In particular, he called upon students. The governor and his supporters believed that children would be enthusiastic about the program and influence adults to raise more food at home. One advocate of the program wrote Gardner: “One reason why all schoolchildren should be interested in the live-at-home movement is that they can help to secure the good will of their parents and neighbors.” A. T. Allen, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, agreed. He said, “If the schools have a real place in the life of the State, as I believe they have, they should be found in the forefront of this fight against ignorance and poverty.”



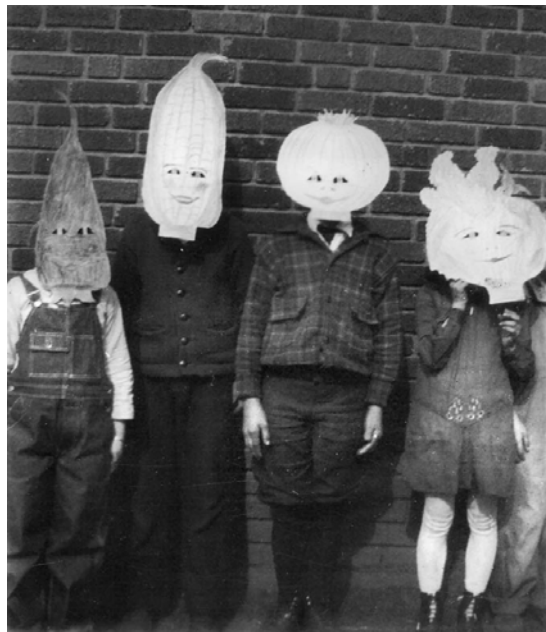
Thetis Parnell, a sixth-grader from Robeson County, made this cover for his school’s “Garden Club” notebook. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of History.*

To jump-start student involvement, Gardner proclaimed February 10–14, 1930, as the first annual “Live-at-Home Week” in all of North Carolina’s public schools. Each morning that week, students across the state assembled in school auditoriums to hear a radio broadcast from Raleigh. The governor spoke on Monday. Each following day, another state leader or agriculture expert shared advice. Afterward, students worked on projects relating to food production and proper nutrition. Fourth-grader Marie Sprinkle, from Madison County, wrote that during Live-at-Home Week her class made “posters of vegetables and other product [sic] of our state. We made a banner on Cloth With an outline of our state in the Center and the important food products in each corner.” Fifth-grader Thomas Barefoot’s class in Johnston County studied nutrition by doing a class weigh-in. He reported, “There are forty-six children in our class and out of these

eight are underweight. Six of those who are underweight do not drink milk. This proved to us that we should have a good milk cow on each farm.”

Writing to the governor as a class assignment, other students reported on the information they had learned and the actions they had taken. Many, as Gardner hoped, passed the Live-at-Home message on to their parents. Second-grader Anne Morgan, from Goldsboro, told Gardner that she and her classmates had planted a school garden. They also “helped mother plan meals this week, buying home grown foods.” The seventh grade at Mackeys Rural School in Washington County wrote, “We live in a section where farming is done chiefly for cash crops. Very few of our parents keep a cow, and no one has the variety and quantity of food required for a balanced diet.” The students pledged to help by “keep[ing] poultry records for our parents.” Similarly, seventh-graders in Wake County decided to keep “our father’s account of things bought and sold for a year to see if this program is profitable. We are trying to carry this idea to our parents.”

To encourage student participation even after the end of the first Live-at-Home Week, the governor’s office—along with other state and community groups—sponsored several poster and essay contests. On June 23, 1930, Gardner personally awarded the two grand-prize trophies to high school essayists Ophelia Holley and Leroy Sossamon. In an essay about the importance of milk cows, Holley argued that if more people in the state would keep cows, North Carolina would “produce healthy boys and girls . . . so that she [would] become a leading state.”



These Tar Heel students dressed up as vegetables to celebrate Live-at-Home Week. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

Throughout North Carolina, families worked to grow more of their own food. Adults attended lessons that agricultural experts taught on how to raise animals and preserve food for winter. Civic clubs and women's associations hosted Live-at-Home dinners where they served only North Carolina-grown products. Due at least in part to these efforts, in 1930 farmers produced \$19 million more in food than in the previous year. In 1931 they raised \$25 million more in food than in 1929.

The Live-at-Home program continued until the end of Gardner's term in early 1933. By then, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his supporters had begun creating new national programs to help farmers. Like those later New Deal programs, Live-at-Home had mixed results. Other than encouragement and education, the state government offered farmers little actual aid. Rather, the program focused on inspiring farmers to improve their own lives. Cash crop prices did not rise. Still, families who chose to grow more food had more to eat, saved more money, and were more likely to eat a balanced diet. Seventh-grader Nelle Curtis, from McDowell County, wrote that she and her friends were "not going to quit 'Live-at-home' this week but are going to practice it. Nearly every boy and girl in our school is going to have a garden." For students like Nelle, the program proved a success. By learning to produce their own food, they helped themselves and their families survive the Great Depression.

*\*At the time of this article's publication Diana Bell-Kite was as an associate curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.*