NEW MILFORD, CONNECTICUT

A RURAL SOCIETY FACES TRANSITION, AND FINDS LEADERSHIP IN ITS SCHOOLS

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New Milford, Connecticut, was settled in 1707 by a group of Yankee pioneers. Thus, a strong sense of history is part of its culture. Aspects of physical geography combined with a strong inheritance of independence contributed to its development as a self-sustaining town. Diversified small industry and trade supplemented a predominantly agricultural economy. In a traditional New England pattern, the town developed the structure of its government, its social organization, and its central values. Between 1930 and 1940, the beginnings of what we now call an "exurban" migration attracted many professional and retired people to New Milford. These newcomers adopted and preserved the rural culture of New Milford to such an extent that a static society developed.

By the year 1950, despite world wars and other national upheavals, New Milford's rural roots showed amazing tenacity. Its population had scarcely grown in ten years. Its physical appearance, its social machinery, and its way of life remained unchanged. The town was still predominantly agricultural. Its supplementary industrial economy, however, showed signs of age and exhaustion. Its society was in danger of becoming ingrown. Suffering from delusions of permanence, New Milford found itself completely unprepared for problems which were to cause community disruption during the decade 1950-1960.

A sudden flood of problems, many of which were brought in from the outside world, resulted in a breakdown of New Milford's smooth running machinery, and bitter conflicts among its erstwhile contented people.

Within the decade, changes took place in the economic, the social, and the government structure. The sudden appearance of heavy industry caused wide-spread community problems. The rate of population growth spiralled. Industry replaced agriculture as the major source of employment. New Milford changed from a rural-agricultural society to a growing rural-urban-industrial society. Bitter controversy developed over modern innovations, particularly Town Planning. New Milford's Planning Commission, authorized by Town Meeting in 1957, became the battleground for community upheaval. Traditional loyalties changed to contemporary oppositions. Heads of factions replaced community leaders. For a time the search for leadership, and a successful pattern for adaptation to change seemed hopeless.

The public schools, however, illustrated successful adjustment to social change. The schools, in 1950, were in the grip of the status-quo, with inadequate physical plant and without community support. Dramatic signs of weakness--use of outside space and double sessions to relieve overcrowding, a poor morale situation within the High School, inadequate safety precautions--forced the beginning of improvements in the schools. A revitalized P.T.A., new faces in the school administration, a new approach to the responsibilities attached to School Board membership, all contributed to a transformation of the schools from a neutral position to one of leadership and guidance in the life of the community.

New Milford--a sociological anachronism in 1950--became a dynamic community by 1960, largely through the influence of the public schools.