

From Buffalo to Wichita

AGNES E. MEYER

FROM BUFFALO to Wichita, it is the children who are suffering most from mass migration, easy money, unaccustomed hours of work, and the fact that mama has become a welder on the graveyard shift.

Those of tender years are frequently neglected, but even the worst mother will make some kind of provision for an infant, however inadequate. Those above 14 are also threatened seriously because they are making too much money, and the children's courts in every city are alarmed by an increase of drinking, sex delinquency, and crimes as serious as burglary and murder.

But it is the adolescent children of 14 and under who are being overworked and economically exploited from one end of our country to the other. They are at the oversensitive period of life

when physical exhaustion, family strain, and dissensions are apt to do ineradicable harm to the physical and psychic development of the individual.

If precedence can be given to any of our social cankers, when so many of them are grave and each of them affects the other, I should select child labor as problem number one because it is a serious threat to the nation's future.

The only solution is a vigorous campaign on a country-wide basis to awaken the conscience of the public which is still too indifferent to the problem, of the parents who allow and even encourage their young children to work, and of the small employer who is taking advantage of the chaos through which we are passing to exploit the very young.

An attractive, well-organized after-school recreation program would have to accompany any campaign to reduce child labor, as more harm than good would be accomplished if these children of working parents were merely thrown upon their own resources.

So far the hope of Federal aid has impeded rather than stimulated local progress in child care. I found many communities waiting complacently for Lanham Act funds that never arrived. And yet there is no doubt that the permanent Federal agencies concerned with the care of the child, such as the Social Security Board, the Office of Education, and the Children's Bureau, could do much to hasten local action if funds were available.

Agnes E. Meyer, wife of the publisher of the Washington Post, spent more than three months last spring traveling about the nation observing America at war. "My pilgrimage of discovery," she writes, "was not a happy one; yet it was as inspiring as it was depressing. For in experiencing, day in and day out, the turmoil and the travail, the high aspirations and the callous indifference, the triumphs and the failures of my country, I discovered as never before, how much I love it, and how profoundly it needs the last sacrifice of self that we can bring to its defense." The article printed here contains selections from Mrs. Meyer's stories now published in booklet form as "America's Home Front," obtainable from the Washington Post for 25 cents.

Some of the poorer states, which are already handicapped by the closing of public schools because the teachers have left for defense jobs, will undoubtedly need temporary assistance from Federal agencies in order to cope with any new measures for the over-all care of the child. Everywhere there is a clamor that social workers and teachers be declared essential to the war effort, as industry and the draft already have depleted their numbers to an alarming extent.

Mobile, Ala., is an extreme example of what happens in a large but poorly organized community when it is overrun by war-workers. Even before the war, the school facilities in this important southern city were inadequate.¹

Slave Wages for Teachers

The salaries throughout the school system are slave wages. The teachers are few in number. Some of the new ones, picked up in desperation, lack any qualifications. The pupils are legion. The schools are not only overcrowded; it is known that at least 2,000 children in the city do not go to school at all for lack of space. How many more there may be who have nothing to do except walk the streets and go to the movies is uncertain. One moving picture manager said to the truant-welfare officer:

"Miss Bessie, why don't you bring your teachers down here? My place is always full of children."

The absenteeism of pupils competes with that of their parents at the shipyards.

"The older boys," said one teacher,

"feel that they will soon go to military service and that school no longer matters. Children who have moved in from the country," she explained further, "are attracted by the bright lights of the city and fail to attend school."

The big salaries to be earned by boys and girls of 13, 14, or 15 is another factor. Backwoods people actually send their boys and girls of 14 and 15 to the city alone to seek their fortune and shift for themselves. One boy came for his working papers because he had been offered a job as watchman on a ship. He was 15 years old. He had a job at \$90 a month but wanted to make \$150.

It takes a good school to hold children's interest when salaries of that dimension are dangled before them. In Alabama no child can be forced to go to school if he has completed the eighth grade, and he can quit the elementary school and get a job at any age if he is "needed for home support."

Movies and Gang Crime for Leisure Hours

There is no recreation for children in this city. When their mothers wish to get rid of them, they send the youngsters to the movies, where they sit for hours seeing the same film over and over again. There are a few small playgrounds, but there is no supervision and no organized program.

A gang of boys, aged 14 to 16, stole automobiles, robbed a drug store and a jewelry store. They were not caught until they had the amusing idea of dropping the watches from a tenth story window upon the heads of the passers-by. Some of these were local boys, some not. These boys were sent to the reformatory, and one of them

¹Immediately after the publication of Mrs. Meyer's articles on Mobile, Federal Works Administration funds were allocated to Mobile to build schools for which the city had asked in vain for about two years.

told his employer, an acquaintance of mine, that he was glad to go to the reformatory as there was no chance for a boy to go straight in Mobile.

This youth had a job of collecting money in which he had been absolutely honest and hard working, which proves that his gang life at night was merely the result of bad influences.

Delinquent Parents

How can the children help doing these things when the parents are the worst example?

Lately a man and his wife were put in jail for extreme intoxication. They said nothing about the fact that they had five young children at home, of whom the oldest was 7 and the youngest 4 months. When a neighbor noticed that the children were alone and had nothing to eat, she felt something should be done to find the parents.

"Oh, don't worry," said the child of 7, "they're probably drunk again."

In more than one American community I was told of small children coming to school crying because their homes have been broken up or because father was drunk and smashed up the furniture. Many of them under crowded living conditions are witnesses of parental immorality. In one school, a little boy of 8 told the teacher: "My mother married a soldier while she was drunk, and I couldn't come to school for two days because she had such a bad hang-over, I had to take care of her."

The new delinquency comes from psychological rather than economic causes.

Even the highest types of children are getting into serious trouble. Middle-class mothers who now have to do all

their own cooking and housework frequently neglect their children as much as those who have jobs. In one blue-blooded family of substantial means that used to have two servants, the mother, who now does her own work, has let her two children, 8 and 10, get so completely out of control that they divert themselves by pulling firegongs and stealing.

In the well-to-do part of one small city near Buffalo the father and mother of an only boy, aged 14, were both employed; the father had a good business, and the mother chose to do factory work on the night shift.

This boy's playroom became the meeting place of a neighborhood gang of boys, all of whose parents were honored citizens. They plotted burglaries, stealing hundreds of dollars worth of money and clothes for the sheer excitement of it. This gang leader is normal, mentally and physically.

Little Girl Delinquents and Zoot-Suit Kids

It is conceded in many communities that the worst problem is the sex-delinquency of very young girls. The police chief in Mobile told me that girls as young as 11 are picked up for this offense. They run away for days and weeks. Illgitimacy is high. Many of these young mothers do not know more than the first name of the baby's father, which makes his apprehension somewhat difficult.

Delinquency on the West Coast took a particularly sensational turn last summer with the outbreak of the zoot-suit movement. The very helplessness of welfare workers and of the highest officials should indicate that the problem

of the zoot-suiters is social and economic and can therefore only be solved by a slow and patient understanding of its nature and origin.

In addition to asking what ails the zoot-suiters, we should have the courage to ask—what ails America?

For the activities of these groups are not criminal. They provoke quarrels, cut up plush chairs, break windows, or crash parties where they swoop down like the hero in a Western movie and try to win admiration by starting ructions. Even their secret jargon which only the initiated can understand, is a commonplace manifestation of adolescent solidarity against the grown-up world. Likewise the costume gives them the childish pleasure of shocking respectable people and affronting established conventions. These are all typical symptoms of the neglected child who compensates for a feeling of insecurity by antisocial behavior.

New Awareness of Our Responsibility Can Save Youth from Moral Vacuum

Collecting junk seems to be the loftiest war aim which our national leaders have been able to offer them. Too young to go into the Army, made old beyond their years by the wartime collapse of social standards, these adolescents are getting on as best they can in a moral vacuum. The very fact that these young people have given a positive expression to their dissatisfaction indicates qualities of character and imagination that should be utilized for better purposes than street brawls and dancing.

On the other hand, there are communities which recognize their responsibilities and are taking constructive

action. In the Marin City, Calif., housing project, which has a community house, a nursery school, and playgrounds, I was present at the first day of elementary school and kindergarten in the sunny, cheerful little school building. The teachers were enthusiastic.

"This community is a melting pot that reminds us of the early California days," they said. "A new settlement such as we have here is a challenge to us all. The parents of underprivileged children are grateful and cooperative because their children have never had a setting and an opportunity such as this.

I shall never forget the faces of these youngsters. They were more startled than elated by the new miracle that had happened to them. Do not forget that these little migrants had been pushed around for months, in some cases, for over a year. Their eyes were still full of all the fears that had been their lot since leaving home.

Judging by all the signs of activity that I have encountered, it is not impossible that out of the present neglect, indifference, and procrastination will come a new awareness of our responsibility toward childhood. Organizations that never before have been conscious of the need for a local child welfare program are taking an interest in the "save the children" campaign. But what we must strive for at once is a national program of aid to schools, wartime nurseries, and after-school recreation programs, if we are to stem the tide toward delinquency and child labor. Unless we accelerate such assistance to our public school system, it will take this nation three generations to get over the disintegrating effects of the war upon America's future citizens.

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