

NEW

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Nobody Starves!



by Ruth Steward

Is the New Deal relief "too efficient"? The Federal government has spent \$4,000,000,000 for relief since the Roosevelt Administration came to power. This is one of the most important facts in the history of the New Deal. What this is doing to the one class of recipients of relief in a typical mid-Western city this article discloses.

AN embarrassing problem claimed the attention of relief work authorities in a medium-sized middle western city recently.

One of the beneficiaries on the county rolls parked his car overtime while calling at the commissary to obtain his supply of free food and coal. The zealous officer on the beat had left him a ticket with the result that he had to appear in court and answer a summons to show why he should not pay a five-dollar fine.

The defendant, in innocent confidence, expected that the county officials would gladly advance the necessary cash. Their service was slow—it was their fault he had had to wait. He was disappointed, however, for some conscientious person started an inquiry. Why, said the objector, should public funds be used to provide shelter, fuel, food and clothing for a man who could find the money to pay for the maintenance of an automobile? This in a small city, easily covered by a good walker, and conveniently centralized.



Someone else raised the question that perhaps many other persons on the relief rolls, accepting free rent, free food and free coal from county or Federal funds, were using what they could earn to buy gasoline for the purpose of cruising about the countryside.

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Authorities started an investigation. Their books showed that 7,522 families, numbering 30,298, were receiving material aid at a cost of \$187,128 or more a month. Several thousand of these were driving cars, it was proven beyond a doubt, mostly for pleasure. A smaller per cent were using

their machines to bring in a part-time income in their efforts to find work.

After serious deliberation, the authorities decided that it would be impossible to continue to dispense aid to the pleasure drivers. The old argument, why should one class benefit at the expense of the others, here gained weight in an unusual direction. Why, indeed, should taxpayers—in this county paying exactly the same taxes as in 1929—be assessed to provide necessities for those persons who by some hook or crook found the means to buy luxuries? For, in an impartial analysis,

gasoline and motor oil can hardly be compared with bread and shelter as the mainstays of life. Thus, after some thought, the gadabouts were given the choice of foregoing the use of their cars, or being stricken from the rolls.

The thousand who were found to be trying to make a living with their vehicles were left on.



While contemplating the situation, it might be interesting to examine what service is offered relief families in this middle western, typically American community. First of all, a house. Remember, conditions here are totally unlike those in the eastern cities, where even rich people may be strangers to a grass yard and rarely see more than just a patch of sky.

The house may be, and probably is, located in a yard of its own in a nice, though unfashionable, part of town. It has a front porch and two stories containing six rooms. Up until 1932 it rented for anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five dollars per month. Up until then the wage-earner was pleased to get a comfortable dwelling, conveniently situated, and equipped with gas, electricity and plumbing, for such a sum. When prices tumbled, just before the Presidential election, this type of renter suddenly found he could secure a newer, smarter bungalow for as little or a trifle more than he had been paying, and he was quick to take advantage of the situation.

Suddenly, hundreds of property owners found themselves with empty houses on their hands. They had to make sharp reductions or face the probability of having houses stand vacant all winter, the water pipes freezing, the windows broken by mischievous boys and plumbing or electric fixtures stolen. In this city, every passerby seems to possess a skeleton key—and uses it. Let a house be tenantless, and it is at the mercy of everyone who wants to look over it, whether the owner gives his permission or not.

Thereupon, rents for the six-room, two-story house dropped to eight or ten dollars. Ten dollars became an incredible sum. Renters refused to pay it unless the house were first repapered from top to bottom, new fixtures supplied, and, preferably, a garage built at the rear. Failing this, the landlord had to be content to receive the eight dollars monthly assured by the county for its relief roll tenants. With paperhangers, plasterers and carpenters charging from five to eight dollars a day or more (spot cash), the taxpayer, in desperation, accepted what he could. His taxes were still the same, and if he fell behind in their payments, the property for which he had regularly been assessed year after year could be seized and sold for the arrears. On the eight dollar rental basis, his yearly income for the property would be ninety-six dollars—his taxes ninety, providing there were no special taxes for paving, etc. Exactly six dollars would be left to pay for upkeep and repairs—hardly a large enough sum to lay one open to the charge of being a capitalist.

Such a house, then, is occupied today by a family on the relief rolls. Sometimes, indeed, the family is large—and



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small children may be hard on the property; if so, it is only the owner who bears the brunt of the wear and tear. On the other hand, many of the families which receive county assistance are small, numbering not more than two or three.

Visit the home, and you will find it, in good weather, a comfortable spot with its porch and screened doors and windows, with plenty of space for a vegetable garden (for which, under the circumstances, seeds may be obtained free). In winter, the well-built old house is snug, permeated with a cozy warmth from the glowing warm coal, provided by the county, burning in the stove. In its corner a radio croons merrily all day long, almost without cessation. Explore where you will, you'll never find one of these houses without a radio. True, the radio consumes electricity, but one can manage to pay the bill when all the necessities are provided free of charge.



Once a week paterfamilias rouses himself to go down to the commissary and bring home the bacon. Bacon, yes, and all the food he can carry: meat, vegetables, canned goods, fruits, pickles, flour, coffee, cocoa, tea—better quality and more variety than one would get in a boarding house. Good substantial food and plenty of it. Nobody starves, indeed.

Persons on relief are also, depending on circumstances, furnished with shoes and clothing paid for by the county at a scale of standard prices and specifications as agreed upon by the local merchants. Only merchants operating under the NRA codes are given the business, but among these the relief client may make his choice. Among other articles of such clothing, as itemized on the official list, are silk stockings, described as follows: "Full-fashioned silk hose: pure silk 42 gauge, service weight, with lisle top, reinforced foot—59 cents."

Serviceable stockings can be bought for much less at the variety stores of the city. Warm, nice-looking cotton ones, for as little of 15 cents a pair—decidedly more comfortable in cold weather than flimsy silk. Rayon mixtures, very decent in appearance, for 20 cents. Other grades of rayon, up to 35 cents. And for 35 cents, or three pairs for a dollar, full-fashioned silk, lisle top, in all fashionable colors, attractive enough to pass severe inspection.



This same community also makes more than adequate provision for transients. A four-story fireproof plant, home of a prosperous rural publishing company, until the depression bankrupted it, has been taken over as a Transient Center. Located on the riverfront, it is handy to both



main highways and railroad stations. Here are provided meals, baths, beds, games and recreation, also reading material. It has had as many as a thousand customers a month. Several of the more promising of these have been selected and sent to the state agricultural college, tuition free, jobs found for them that they may earn board and rooms. Others are active in various ways. They even print their own newspaper, the "*Transient Crusader*," which advocates that newcomers to a community, like themselves, should be given the privilege of voting there.

Other buildings and houses have been repainted, made spick and span and equipped for an extension of the transient service. One such serves as a headquarters for young married couples; a second, for families with children; still a third, for unattached women. Sometimes one wonders why anybody stays home.

Now, with winter coming on, the pessimists as usual shake their heads, and wonder what is to become of us all during the cold weather.

But the really poor people don't need to worry. They are snug and warm in their little homes.

Not that any thoughtful person would begrudge this comfort and sustenance to deserving souls. . . . He might, however, contrast the standard of poverty in such a community nowadays with that, say, of Lincoln's time—the day of the log cabin and the tallow dip. Or he might contrast it with that in pre-World War days, when few of

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the average persons wore silk stockings or drove cars. Or even with the days—only a decade ago—when “Coolidge or Chaos” was the slogan, and a radio an investment which cost real money.

And sometimes the struggling professional or small independent worker, who must bargain in coin for everything he gets, who pays ceaseless assessments on the home and possessions he has managed to acquire, and, in addition, a sales tax on each fifteen-cent article he buys, including food, who scans coal and electric bills with an anxious eye, and foregoes a car because of the expense of license, tires and upkeep, he who is thankful that 15 and 25 cent hose are available and can never cut loose and succumb to the adventure of the beckoning highway or empty freight-car—sometimes in reflecting on the condition of the “other half” or three quarters, he feels poor indeed!

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