

THE LITERARY DIGEST

April 30, 1921: p. 34

MAKING THE IMMIGRANT UNWELCOME



"WE NEGLECT THE IMMIGRANT AT OUR PERIL."

If we are going to admit strangers from overseas, argues F. A. Wallis, New York's Commissioner of Immigration, we should see to it that they do not menace our health, morals, and prosperity.

FOUR-FIFTHS OF ALL IMMIGRANTS who come to America pass through a small, overcrowded island that lies in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Commissioner Frederick Wallis, in charge of the island, has recently, both in talks before various organizations throughout the East and through newspaper interviews, called attention to the fact that America is to some extent poisoning its stream of incoming citizens through the "deplorable conditions" which are to be found there. Welfare-workers from various organizations have amplified the Commissioner's charges of "filth, inefficiency, and red tape." All this difficulty and misery are made harder to bear, says the Commissioner, "because we have managed to pass laws bearing no relationship to our needs, such as the literacy test, and then, to make matters still worse, their application is made as inhumane and cruel as it is possible to imagine." The "indigestion" from which America has been suffering because of "unsorted and unassimilated immigration" will not be cured, we are told, until we cease to regard immigration as a mass and look upon it "as a million individuals each of whom is a human being with the right to human treatment and sympathetic understanding.



Ellis Island Museum, 2019

Our present immigration system is simply criminal."

In a report widely circulated by the Newspaper Enterprise Association, E. M. Thierry amplifies the Commissioner's charges to this effect:

Go down to Ellis Island! You will find:

Immigrants herded like cattle in the ill-ventilated, fetid detention-room.

No separate quarters provided for mothers with babes in arms.

Vermin on the walls and floors of detention-room and in dormitories.

Immigrants forced to sleep indiscriminately two in a bed or on the floors.

Only 1,100 beds, tho the overnight population averages from 2,000 to 3,000 and often is as high as 4,500.

No mattresses for beds—only blankets spread over strips of steel; bunks built in tiers, three high.

Only six bath-tubs for use of all the women and small children.

No bath-tubs for men; thousands forced to use sixteen shower-baths.

Lavatories so inadequate that they are a menace to health.

Many wash-basins on upper floors without a water-supply.

Only two pumps, with low water-pressure, inadequate against fire.

Many immigrants forced to wait weeks because affidavits and even money sent by relatives had been lost.

There are only forty medical inspectors on Ellis Island, according to an interview given by Dr. Copeland, New York

OldMagazineArticles.com

Unwelcoming the Immigrants



FUTURE AMERICANS "PUTTING UP" WITH UNCLE SAM.

Over a thousand immigrants were recently forced to sleep on blankets spread on the floors in overcrowded Ellis Island. Our treatment of the immigrant is "criminal," declare several investigators, and Commissioner Wallis agrees with them.

Commissioner of Health, who declares that conditions there are "a menace to the country." He goes on:

"The greatest number of immigrants that any one inspector ought to examine in one day is twenty. If he is forced to examine more, it means a grave injustice to the immigrant, public health, and the Government itself. Yet these forty inspectors are called upon to examine 4,000 immigrants a day, or 100 immigrants each.



"Some time ago, when I addressed about 3,000 immigrants on the island, I saw filthy blankets in the corner, piled almost to the ceiling. I asked what they were for, and Commissioner Wallis told me that 1,000 immigrants had slept on those blankets on the floor the night before.

"They had to sleep so because of inadequate bed facilities and because of the vermin everywhere," he told me.

"In addition to local blame, the responsibility rests upon the shoulders of officials at Washington.

"Only last week on one day there were 15,000 immigrants waiting on ships in New York Harbor to be received into this country."



Commissioner Wallis, speaking before an audience of Rochester men interested in the Americanization movement, said that some reforms are physically impossible, for the island is too small. Red tape and the lack of necessary funds by Congress have made him practically helpless, he said. A side-light on his character



and general attitude toward his work is furnished by an incident related by one of his friends. Late one night, in accordance with his policy of appearing unexpectedly and getting his information about the working of the various departments at first hand, he visited the dormitories. He found that nearly a thousand of the immigrants, including women and children, had not so much as a blanket to keep away the cold. At the same time he learned there were some thousands of surplus Army blankets stored a quarter of a mile away across the harbor, at Governors Island. In order to get those blankets from Governors Island to Ellis Island, the Commissioner made a special trip to Washington the next morning, spent some time in earnest argument with Secretary of War Baker, and finally succeeded so well in unraveling governmental red tape that before sunset of that day the War Department's surplus blankets were in a position to make life a little more endurable for some hundreds of future Americans.

Once we have cleaned up the channel by which immigration reaches this country, the Commissioner argues that we should take up the literacy test. He is quoted by the *New York World*:

"What we need in America are men and women strong in body and sound in mind; people who will come here to do the work which has to be done and which nobody else can do. These particular characteristics have nothing to do with a person's ability to read—in fact, there are many instances in which the literacy test excludes the desirable elements and allows the undesirable to enter. Criminals and lawbreakers of differing degrees are usually more than able to read; they are often extremely well educated, and yet we welcome them to America; whereas the poor peasant, who had no opportunity to attend school because he had to work, whose body is healthy and

Unwelcoming the Immigrants

whose mind is open to new ideas, is excluded."

"But doesn't the literacy test actually keep out a number of undesirable elements?" the *World* interviewer asked.

"Oh, yes, of course, it does," replied the Commissioner. "But so would a law requiring that all immigrants admitted to this country have a size 16 collar-band. A great many undesirables would be kept out by any fool kind of a test. The great question is, how many of the desirable elements would be able to enter. Our problem here is to get the people we want; there is a need we must supply.

"But it is not the stupidity of the literacy test alone which is to be condemned. It is its inhumanity. Here we sit in America and we say: 'We need you people of Europe; come along, that we may select those from among you whom we want. The rest we will send back.' So the people sell their property, they mortgage their homes, they close their stores, and they get the money to come. Only at the door to America do we begin to examine them, and if they do not happen to answer the demands of some arbitrary law we say to them: 'You can go back; we don't want you.'

"We are not concerned whether those we deport have anything to which they can return. We do not ask them where they will go. We do not want them, and we throw them out like old furniture. Hundreds and hundreds of people have returned to Europe to face utter destitution; hundreds and hundreds of families have been divided by us; children separated from their parents, husbands from their wives, and all this human suffering because we act like machines and not like plain human beings.

"I have had several such cases recently. There were three sisters who came here from Italy; they were healthy, strong, intelligent, and two of them passed the literacy test. The youngest failed; she could neither read nor write. Upon investigation I found that she had kept house for the two girls while they went to school, so she never even had the chance to learn the elements of reading and writing. Our law admitted the two sisters and excluded the youngest. Another case was that of a family consisting of parents and two children. They were Czecho-Slovaks, farmers, healthy, and anxious to go out to the Middle West to settle on a farm. What more desirable for America? But the father of the family could not read. At first he thought of letting his wife enter alone with the two children, so as to return to the old country to learn to write his name. But this was more than he could do. So the little family went back to begin all over again.

"Without money, nothing to which to return, this man's words to the inspector were: 'I'll go back and learn and come here again.' And yet we permit forgers of checks to enter because they can write."

We don't need restriction of immigration, in the Commissioner's view, so much as we need proper distribution of the new arrivals. He produced a batch of letters, and explained:

"Here is Peoria, Ill., begging for unskilled immigrant labor at \$8 per day; Columbus, Ohio, is willing to pay \$8.50 per day for unskilled workers; the president of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad begs me for immigrant labor. On the other hand, Detroit has sent an appeal to prevent any more immigrants from going there; Akron, Ohio, has a surplus of its own workers. Here is a letter from Dakota stating that unless farm help can be obtained in sufficient numbers the acreage under cultivation in 1921 will be only 60 per cent. of the amount cultivated last year. Here is Wisconsin anxious to sell 7,000,000 acres.

"No, we don't need to restrict immigration, but what we ought to do is to distribute intelligently those people who arrive, that they may reach localities where their labor is needed and will be appreciated. This talk that America has reached the saturation-point is nonsense. In Asia there are 50 people to the square mile; in Europe an average of 120 people; Belgium has 673 people to each square mile, and North America has 26 people to the square mile. That general figure is still considerable, but in the States of Oregon, Arizona, and Texas the number varies from 2 to 15 people per square mile, and we talk about the saturation-point and the need of restricting immigration! Why, there are sections of China in which the square mile holds 3,000 people.

"The trouble with our immigration policy is



Unwelcoming the Immigrants



that it is unintelligent. For example, were a line to be drawn from the northern section of Minnesota to the southern section of Illinois, thus separating about one-fifth of the country, we find that 80 per cent. of the total immigration settles in that section, only 17 per cent. reaches the West, and 3 per cent. goes down South. It is only natural that there is a lack

of work and overcrowding in that one-fifth which holds most of the immigrants. But is there any reason why immigrants should be prevented from entering this country if they could be intelligently distributed over the remaining area, where their industry would enrich the locality?"

"But there is also the question of Americanization," the interviewer interposed. "How can great masses of aliens become properly assimilated?"

"Another of those overworked words that mean nothing," was the Commissioner's emphatic reply. "What does Americanization mean? Something that is crammed down people's throats? Nobody was ever taught anything that way.

"Assimilation of the immigrant would be a simple matter if immigration were distributed. Take a piece of rock-candy and immerse it in water; it will take a long time to melt. But break up that lump and it will melt quickly and without trouble. That is my idea of Americanization. Distribute the immigrants; give them good wages and good homes; give their children good schools; treat them well, and they will become good Americans.

"But what happens at the present time? The immigrant always follows in the wake of his countrymen. He settles into masses, indigestible, with almost no chance for American influences—even for knowledge of America—to touch him. He increases food-prices, he raises the tax on courts and public institutions, he increases rents, spreads disease, and lowers the wage-rate. But if immigration were evenly distributed, with the immigrant living where his labor is needed, most of these evils would be eliminated automatically and most of the immigration problem would simply disappear."

Mrs. Helen Bastedo, "representing fifteen welfare organizations," according to the Newspaper Enterprise Association, has lately made an investigation of conditions on the island. She makes two immediate recommendations:

"Installation of a State inspector and a Department of Labor official at Ellis Island, the one to supervise passports, the other to act as an immediate court of appeals from decisions of boards of inquiry. Cooperation between immigration officials abroad and American consuls to select the proper kind of immigrants and to ban at the start all who are obviously disqualified to enter the United States."



Color images from the film "The Golden Door"

THE LITERARY DIGEST

OldMagazineArticles.com