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Ten Years

OF THE

Community Center Movement

BY

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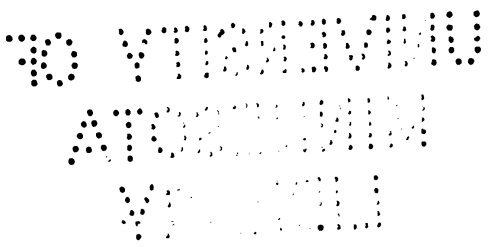

TEN YEARS
OF THE
COMMUNITY CENTER MOVEMENT

"Rapid growth — but not just as we expected" is how one of the original promoters, if he were candid, would have to characterize the development of the community center idea during the last decade. A review of the movement now is especially appropriate because it was just ten years ago—October 25, 1911—when the "First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development" assembled in Madison at the University of Wisconsin. It was on that occasion that the community center as a distinct institution, a new governmental agency, was first proposed to reformers for organized exploitation.

This new institution, which in 1911 we fervently believed would rapidly spread throughout the country, had just received a laboratory demonstration in Rochester, N. Y., at the hands of Edward J. Ward. His experiment there had received so much publicity and had seemed so promising of fundamental social advance that the University of Wisconsin had brought him on to "sell" the new institution to that state. Previous to his Rochester work, Mr. Ward had studied Dr. Leipsiger's New York public lecture system, Miss Evangeline Whitney's evening recreation centers (later supervised by Dr. E. W. Stitt), and Miss Jane Addams' Hull House. From all of these systems, as well as from the New England town meeting, Mr. Ward took something, and adding another something from his own brain produced the Rochester social center.

At the same time reformers in other cities were feeling their way toward a similar development. Boston's "educational centers," Philadelphia's Home and School Associations and Cleveland's school lectures had all exhibited phases of the plan worked out in the Rochester social center. Indeed, many communities, both urban and suburban, had already begun to make use of schoolhouses in the margin of the day for all sorts of meetings and local entertainments, but such occasions were usually sporadic and spontaneous and not brought about by systematic, definitely directed effort.

The Rochester Plan

At the Madison conference, with the picture of the Rochester social center before our eyes, we fondly dreamed of a time when every neighborhood in the land would possess a copy of this brand new institution. As we envisaged it then, it would be a place where people would meet regularly to discuss their common affairs, sing together, dance and play, study the arts; where the jobless would find employment, where the wealthy would occasionally put their art treasures on exhibition for the benefit of all — an institution which would make one big family out of the whole neighborhood. A heightened social solidarity, the dissolution of class and racial antagonisms, the rise of a civic intelligence that would see through the smoke screens behind which political bosses did their dirty work,— these are only a few of the benefits we saw readily following the realization of our dream. The peculiar beauty of it was that the foundation — indeed practically the whole edifice — of the new establishment already existed in every neighborhood. The people's schoolhouse needed only a room or two, some different furniture and equipment and a night staff, — and the thing was done. Just a few thousands spent in every city and the millennium was sweeping on toward us. We put ordinary dollars into a mill and it ground out tremendous civic results.

Aside from the structure, the main element of the community center (what we called "social center" then) was the staff. That was the body which would initiate, organize, arrange for and coordinate the leisure-time life of the neighborhood. Not to rule or prohibit life but to give it new outlets, richer expression, was the program. The benefits seemed so obvious that we felt people would readily give the requisite funds once they understood the scheme. Even at that time the sap was being cut off from the Rochester system by insidious civic elements, but that fact only confirmed our belief in its efficacy as an eradicator of political corruption. And so we came away from Madison in a state of religious exaltation — like missionaries going forth to spread a new gospel.

Ten years have passed. What progress has been made? How many cities now have centers in which a publicly-supported staff endeavors in a comprehensive way to organize the leisure-time activities of its community? Only a handful, it must be confessed. Washington and New Bedford certainly have such centers and there may be here and there a few other municipalities in the same class, but if there are such their work has not yet become conspicuous. New York City has many school centers with paid staffs but their duties

do not include the task of going out into the neighborhood and attempting to organize its leisure-time life. Boston, Chicago and many other cities also have community center systems of this type. There are those, too, which, like New York and Cincinnati, allow local neighborhood or civic associations facilities and assistance in their attempts to develop community progress and solidarity, but in these cases the organizing ability is supported mainly by private funds and membership fees. Of centers of spontaneous community life there are more than ever before, but of centers with a tax-supported, overhead organization designed and equipped to promote community life comprehensively,— of those there are few more than there were in 1911. The explanation of this situation is simple. A municipally supported staff in every neighborhood, each building up an organization, constitutes a civic machine with a political potentiality of no small order. If it was not for you, it could be terribly against you. Since it could not be controlled, no important political faction is willing to run the risk of having it as a possible enemy. There are elements also in every community which are constitutionally opposed to any vital extension of the public education system.

Community Activities Greatly Expanded

But if the organized, all-embracing community center has not spread, nevertheless the various lines of activity we hoped it would promote have enjoyed a tremendous expansion. These activities are so varied and so mixed that it is difficult to classify them. Like all departments of life, in actual practice they continually overlap, but in a crude way they may be discussed under these heads: (1) Recreation, (2) Adult or extension education, (3) Neighborhood civic life, and (4) Community services. In each of these fields the evidence shows there is more activity than ever before. People are going vigorously after the things they want — whether it is money or culture. They do it generally in groups brought together by interest in a common purpose. Often these groups meet in the same community structure, the schoolhouse, but they may also meet in a church, a private hall, a branch library, a park house — anywhere convenience dictates, so that in many neighborhoods there is found not one but several community centers, each one the scene of a different activity.

The expansion in these four departments of community life has been mainly due of course to human striving but it has also been accelerated by two other factors,—(1) increased hospitality on the part of municipal institutions having facilities suitable for the housing of the activities themselves, and (2) specialized promotion by national and voluntary associations.

Schools More Hospitable to Neighborhood Life

The hospitality factor has played an especially large role in the increased after-class use of school buildings for neighborhood purposes. Reliable statistics on the precise amount of this increase are not obtainable but, if we give the name "center" to a schoolhouse which is open twice a week for recreational and civic occasions, it is probably not far from the facts to say that the number of such centers (about 300 in 1911) has tripled in the last ten years and the number of cities having a definite "wider use" policy and program (about 100 in 1911) has doubled in the same period. Within these school systems there is today not only a much larger staff conducting athletics and club-work than formerly, but there is also a much larger number of the groups which come into the centers bringing their own leadership and their own organization. Within the last decade the Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts and Junior Red Cross have all come into existence. By opening its doors freely to these groups the school has greatly increased the activities going on in its halls without adding to its overhead expense.

This greater hospitality has been manifested mainly by speeding up the letting procedure. In many cities every application from an outside organization for the use of a school hall had to be acted upon by the board of education, or one of its committees. Each case was decided upon its merit, sometimes after much debate. Today, in the progressive systems, an application is handled quickly in the office of the superintendent or the head of the school centers. Fees have been standardized. Regulations have been formulated for disciplining groups which misuse their privileges. Associations doing work of a philanthropic or civic character are encouraged by lower charges. Most important of all, some cities, like New York, have a system which permits clubs and civic associations having cultural and public welfare objectives to carry on income-producing activities in public schools. Money is the sap of life to an organization just as it is to the individual. By requiring regular voucher-supported financial statements and applying penalties for infractions of regulations it has been found practicable to play host to large numbers of young people's societies which, without a meeting place and without the stimulus of a money-making opportunity, would never have come into existence or enjoyed a vigorous life. These groups carry on activities similar to those conducted by paid leaders and they are obliged by the condition under which they use public property to devote all their surplus to purposes consistent with public welfare. Under

this system club-life is stimulated and at the same time the burden of leadership and organization is laid upon the group itself. That citizens respond to this sort of opportunity is evidenced by the fact that the after-class occasions in the New York public schools increased by some 25,000 during the period from 1916 (when the new policy went into effect) to 1920. Growth in the lettings of schoolhouses is noted also in the reports of many other cities.

The hospitality factor has promoted specialization in the organization of community leisure. It has done this by furnishing a place in which the energy of groups devoted to special lines of activity can find expression. Every neighborhood is the scene of continual group formation. Some individual, or coterie, throws a new project into the air and immediately those whose lives are touched by the new plan swarm about it like moths around a light. Such groups may meet first in a private home but soon, if they are to grow, they must have more commodious quarters and be able to meet inexpensively and without creating obligations. The public park or schoolhouse, by supplying this need at a nominal expense, makes it possible for such groups to live and flourish. Besides the neighborhood associations, there are national agencies devoted to special community programs having local branches whose work has been helped in the same way.

Public Recreation Increased in Volume and Diversity

The developments in the last ten years in the field of recreation exhibit a remarkable growth and one which shows plainly the influence of the two factors of hospitality and specialization. While again no exact figures are available, the statistics of the Playground and Recreation Association indicate that the number of public play centers has more than quadrupled, while the annual expenditure on public recreation activities has probably tripled, and even that may be an understatement. But more significant still, in 1910 the Association year book mentioned only **three** municipal departments under the head of "managing authorities." In 1920 **twelve** different kinds of city departments are shown to be handling recreation activities. In 1910 the Association grouped the private organizations engaged in this work under **three** heads, while the 1920 year book shows the same classification grown to **twenty-five**! Could there be more striking evidence of the rush of reforming groups toward the bandwagon of organized recreation as the great social cure-all? The same tendency toward specialization appears in the play program. The **ten** lines of play activity listed in 1910 had in 1920 jumped

to thirty-two and a number of these specialties, such as scouting, canning, gardening and junior Red Cross work, had behind them a great national agency of their own. The private organizations, both local and national, have been greatly helped by the hospitality of the municipal institutions.

The growth in public lectures, evening schools, reading classes, clubs for self-culture and other forms of extension education has been plainly evident, but the basis for any statement of the amount of growth during the decade is lacking. Public lectures and evening classes in schools are commoner than ever before. More states are supporting university extension work. The Chautauqua plan has multiplied. More women's clubs and similar local groups are presenting public discussions. A little-theatre movement has come into existence. Indeed, it is a rare neighborhood now in which the cultural opportunities open to adults have not been greatly enlarged during the last decade.

The process of continuing an education has also been improved. For the worker, exhausted with his day's duties, any reduction in the mental effort attending the learning process increases the amount of knowledge he can take in during the margin of the day. So the motion picture now often supplements the lecture (a number of state universities include a film service in their extension systems and recreational and social elements have been introduced into many evening school systems.

Civic Forums Show Specialization

The field of neighborhood civic discussion shows a like expansion and specialization. Mr. Ward's Rochester groups discussed not only better sewage systems for their respective districts but such national questions as collective bargaining and free school textbooks. Today there is a tendency to divide the discussions. Local affairs are handled by taxpayers', ward improvement, and home and school associations and community councils, while the broad questions, with no special local reference but which touch everybody, are handled by some special voluntary forum organization. The open forum work requires such a particular technique that a national organization has now grown up devoted solely to the promotion of this kind of social effort. While one does not hear of "town meetings" as such, nevertheless the leading and public-spirited men and women are coming together and talking over their common neighborhood problems more frequently and more generally than they did twenty years ago, and no small part of this development is due to the greater hospitality shown to civic associations on the part of school systems.

Under the head of community services any observant eye can also discover increased growth and specialization. There are more branch libraries, health centers, relief offices, information and vocational bureaus, and neighborhood bathhouses than ever before. Attempts have been made to use public schools as distributing and operating centers in schemes of co-operative buying and selling but they have not progressed very far, nor are they likely to go further, because they involve day-time use of school building spaces and most schools already lack room for the pupils they need to accommodate. Several of the activities named above are being promoted by national or local agencies each working more or less independently of the others.

A New Community Structure

In the smaller population centers some 300 community buildings have been erected within the last decade, most of them in the last five years. They generally provide a hall, a reading room, facilities for community banquets, restrooms for neighboring farmers and sometimes a gymnasium. They are used as the general headquarters of the community's social, recreational and civic life. They constitute the only kind of composite center that is now multiplying in the United States. In them a genuine centering up and coordination of neighborhood activities is occurring, but they are so far appearing only in the more prosperous and homogeneous villages and small towns.

With so many different and powerful influences concentrating on neighborhood life, each entirely unrelated and uncontrolled with respect to the others, it is not strange that overlapping of effort and waste of community resources are occurring in many localities. In Chicago many thoughtful citizens feel that the luxurious park field-houses duplicate public school facilities. In Boston there are a number of insufficiently-used ward municipal buildings having assembly halls, gymnasiums and baths, while nearby schools are inadequately equipped with facilities for physical education. If in the same neighborhood a church builds a social center, a dramatic group constructs a theatre and the board of education puts up a school, community resources are tapped by all three enterprises and it is obvious that waste results if one structure could, by comprehensive planning, have been made to serve all three purposes. Economic loss of this sort will go on in prosperous localities, and poorer districts will go without the requisite facilities for a healthy civic and cultural life — feeling they cannot afford them — just so long as the problem of community organization remains un-

solved and a community coordinating mechanism remains unestablished.

The Community a Civic Unit

A "community" in the sense in which it has been used throughout this article is practically synonymous with "neighborhood." Virtually it is that part of a populated area whose inhabitants would find it practicable to come together in a mass meeting at which all elements were represented. It is that part of a city or town that can meet face to face, for the making up of its own mind on matters of common import. A community center is the point where the spokesman of a new cause or of a city administration can come into personal contact with a section of the populace. Community organization, according to Professor Giddings, is the neighborhood experimenting for itself. He might have gone further and said that an organized community is one that possesses the machinery, not only for experimentation, but for becoming an intelligent, coordinated, wise-acting civic unit.

An efficient manufacturing corporation maintains a research staff to carry on and systematize experimentation with new processes. It provides machinery to keep its board of directors fully informed of the concern's affairs. It believes that an intelligent mind on the board is worth more than a dummy. It forms shop committees and establishes channels through which complaints can flow without hindrance. It consciously takes the necessary steps to keep up the morale of its organization. A municipality which provided a staff to organize its communities and establish community centers would be imitating an up-to-date business corporation.

New York City is at the present moment the scene of a struggle for the presidency of its corporation. Are facts, fitness, qualification, having anything like a decent chance to determine the choice? Two great classes, like two entrenched armies, stand off and pelt each other with the paper missiles of their journalistic artillery. Investigating committees drop their bombs. Campaign orators turn on the gas. What results? Partisanship, prejudice and class isolation—the whole atmosphere of the fight — make duds of the shells, cause the bombs to miss their targets and the gas to blow anywhere but towards the enemy. Are we not clearheaded enough, and possessed of sufficient business acumen, to set up within our municipal corporations a publicity and research mechanism which will, in a scientific fashion, keep our directors constantly in a position to use their minds, rather than their prejudices, in electing officers?

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