

# A Modern Home for Everyone

By John T. Flynn

ON ELECTION day, just about the time the nation was filling the ballot boxes with grief for those who disagree with the President, I was talking with one of the leading real estate men of Chicago in his office. I wanted to find out something about the need for houses in Chicago and get his views on the idea of a government housing program. I have never seen a simple question send a man into such a gale of conversational wrath.

"Government houses!" he exclaimed. "Why? How? Haven't we always built houses enough? I mean whenever we needed them? Come here!"

And he yanked me over to a filing cabinet.

"Look here! These are vacancies. All over Chicago. Houses we can't rent. Houses that have been vacant for over a year. Some of them two years. Some of them new houses, too. And the rents! If I had time I could show you that some of these houses are not earning enough rent to pay the taxes and interest on the mortgage.

"If we needed houses in this country, don't you think the private builders would know it? And wouldn't they build them? That's their business and they'll start building as soon as the need is clear.

"Just as soon as Junior and his little wife get a job, isn't it a cinch that they'll tell Dad goodbye and thank him for the room rent for the last year or two and settle in their own little nest? Isn't the real trouble not the need for houses but the need for money to pay rent? And when Mr. and Mrs. Junior are working and have money to pay rent and thus create a demand for houses, won't the private builders start in to supply them with houses right away?"

There's a lot of truth, but some pretty big holes in this. But I couldn't even get a chance to suggest them to this explosive fellow.

"Isn't house-building and house-owning a business like every other business in this country? And isn't it in a pretty bad way now? And that because there are too many houses? The government killed the little pigs to get the price of pork up. But now it wants to have a different plan for houses. It wants to build more. That'll bring rents down more and bankrupt the landlord. Of course, I know the landlord isn't very popular. But after all, he pays just about all our city taxes out of rent. Most landlords can't pay their taxes now. And as long as real estate is unprofitable no one is going to build houses. And furthermore, isn't the government in enough kinds of business now? Why put it in the housing business? It simply doesn't make sense to me."

This little speech expresses pretty well the various forms of confusion extant about this whole business of housing. As far back as 1929 I wrote in Collier's an article calling attention to the importance of housing as a base of national prosperity and suggesting that it was building which had always made us prosperous and it was building alone which could keep us so. Twice since I have written articles urging a government housing program as a recovery measure. Now the government is getting closer to this plan, but with a good many disagreements and confusions still to be ironed out.

If you want to get a headache try reading the headlines in the newspapers about housing. They fling billions

*Our government is definitely in the home-building business. A number of low-cost home projects are either completed or under way and Uncle Sam is prepared to start on nearly two thousand more. Incidentally, this creates plenty of work for unemployed carpenters, masons and other artisans, thus reducing the relief rolls. Mr. Flynn tells you here how it works*



The Cleveland slum area where the PWA \$3,000,000 low-cost housing project will provide modern sanitary quarters for 624 families at a monthly rental of \$6.50 per room. Below, the Chicago slum area to be razed and rebuilt at a cost of \$125,000,000

about and talk about settled but contradictory programs and produce hopeless confusion. There are several schools of thought on the subject in Washington. One believes that we should build, but that this is a job for private industry. Behind this idea are Mr. Donald Richberg, the President's Number One man, and Mr. H. I. Harriman, of the United States Chamber of Commerce, and Mr. James A. Moffett, head of the Federal Housing Administration.

## Two Kinds of Housing

Another group believes the government should embark on a great program of low-cost home construction. In this group are Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, who is also Public Works Administrator, and Harry L. Hopkins, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Before this gets into print the point will probably be decided by the President. But it will be a tentative and temporary decision under which, perhaps, the final course will be left to time.

I think there is some confusion about the whole thing which is far from clear in Washington. The contending factions fail to recognize that there are two very different kinds of housing in this country.

There's Group One—which includes

homes of, let us say, the upper fifty million. They are the houses that cost from \$3,000 to \$3,000,000.

There's Group Two—the castles of the lower fifty million. The cost is unimportant.

Now this Group One belongs unquestionably to the private builders. At least, they have always built whatever has been supplied in that grade.

But Group Two belongs to nobody. Stroll around your city and look these houses over. They are the homes that rent for from six dollars down to three dollars a room. You will notice one or two things about them. They are either shacks or old houses that once boasted some respectability but are now stricken with years and disrepair. The original owners and tenants have moved out to newer houses in Group One. The poorer tenants have moved into these cast-off homes of other people. They may be thirty, forty, sixty, seventy-five years old. I can show anyone who wishes to examine the matter such houses a hundred years old. The big point is that private builders do not build in this group. Nobody does. This is the used-house or secondhand market.

This division ought to help at least to clear up the argument. If it is correct, then we can say right away that these Group One houses belong to the private building industry. I, for one,

do not think the government should build any houses in this group.

But as private industry doesn't want to have anything to do with Group Two, then there is no reason why the government shouldn't go into that field, provided it will help recovery.

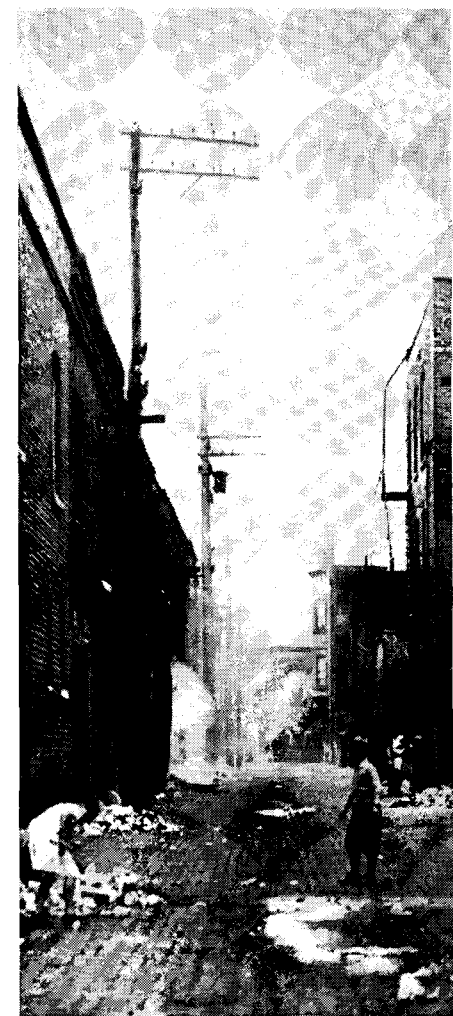
When the real estate men say there are already too many houses, they are referring to these upper crust Group One homes. When the advocates of government housing say there is a dire need of homes, they are talking about these squalid Group Two homes. Perhaps, then, we can say both parties are correct. If that is so, then it is a job for the government and for private industry. Maybe we can use the plan of Mr. Moffett and the plans of Messrs. Ickes and Hopkins. As to what all this has to do with recovery—we will come to that in a moment.

## Time is Our Ally

But, with all due respect to my irate real estate friend in Chicago, I think he has forgotten the work of an old gentleman who has been laboring three eight-hour shifts every day all through the depression. He wasn't elected to office, isn't a politician, but has been busy night and day with a recovery program of his own. This is Old Man Time.

He's been doing some wonderful things in his own way. For one thing, he has been busy producing people. He has turned out a neat net increase of two million of them in this country these last four years. These brand-new people need homes and two million of them require about half a million additional homes.

But while Old Man Time has been producing new folks, he has been as in-





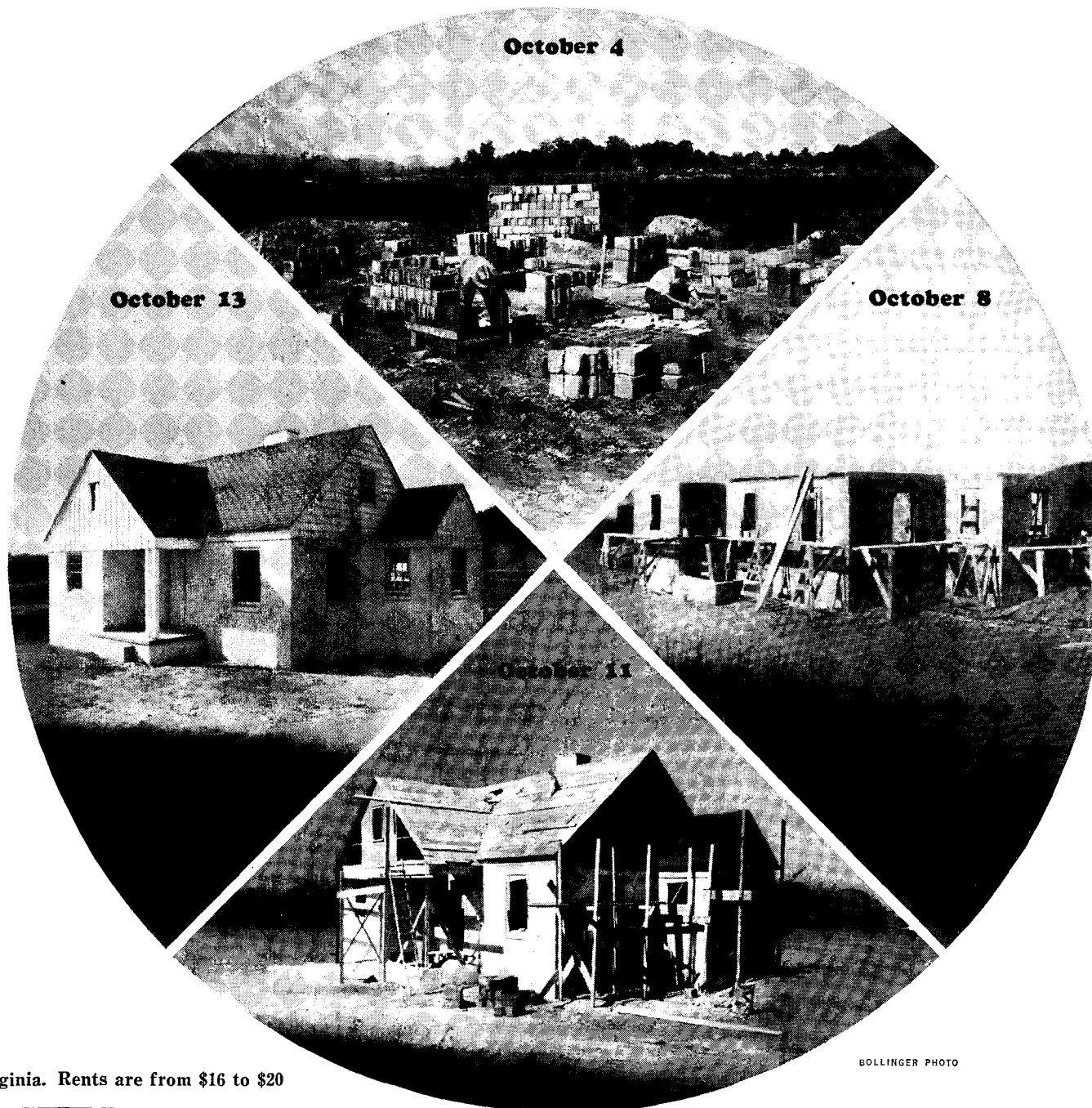
dustriously eating up old houses. I think you would be surprised if you could know precisely the number of houses we knock down in this vast country every year. The figures are not obtainable. But here in this little village of New York there are some facts obtainable which are worth your attention. For instance, think this one over:

In 1933 in Manhattan, which has more than two million population, we did not build a single apartment house. But we demolished 179. Of course an apartment house contains many dwelling units. So to put the matter differently, we built not a single tenement dwelling unit, but destroyed 2,556. The year before was nearly as bad. We built 10 tenement houses with 643 dwelling units in them. We demolished 156 with 1,713 units. Last year we built just three, mostly with government funds, containing 859 dwelling units. We demolished 156 with 1,872 units. As for private homes, we put up seven new ones last year and destroyed 98.

#### Wanted: Two Million Homes

There are several ways of checking our new-house needs. In 1930 we had 18,000,000 dwellings in America. Obsolescence is at the rate of two per cent a year. That's fairly reasonable. You probably know that houses do not average over fifty years of age in this country. Well, at two per cent a year we should be losing 360,000 homes every twelve months. In four years that would be 1,440,000 houses. With an increase in population of 2,000,000 we would require 500,000 additional houses. Add these two figures and you will see that we ought to build at least 1,940,000 houses just to keep abreast of where we were in 1929. To do that would cost around six billion dollars, at the very least.

Harry L. Hopkins, Federal Emergency Relief Administrator, has made some researches into this matter. The



BOLLINGER PHOTO

PWA houses at Alta Vista, Virginia. Rents are from \$16 to \$20



INTERNATIONAL NEWS PHOTOS ©



Proof that the government can really build low-cost houses at low cost. Four stages in the construction of one of 150 houses at Red House, W. Va., by FERA workers. Average cost, including barn and  $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre plot, was \$2,150

figures are based not on estimates but upon actual conditions found by visiting practically every house in 64 American cities. After making ample allowances for error and for vacancies, he found an apparent deficiency of 442,000 houses in these cities. These 64 cities hold one seventh of the population of the country. If the same figure holds for the nation he estimates that we have an actual deficiency of approximately three million homes. Of course, he includes great numbers of houses in which people are living merely because there are no better accommodations—structures which should be fed to the wreckers. Cut Mr. Hopkins' figure in half and you have a deficiency which is a challenge to the nation which has the men, which has the machines and which has the money, too.

The facts are about as follows—and they are pregnant with meaning for those who are charged with the business of recovery: In the upper group of houses—the better homes which should be built by private industry—a shortage is developing, a considerable shortage in some places. In the lower group of homes it is not so much a question of shortage as of an absolute lack

of decent housing. In an article published in Collier's last year I enumerated the almost unbelievable lack of modern conveniences—even water and air—in a great number of these homes.

#### Low-Cost Homes the Answer

In Group One, private builders will go to work as soon as the shortage becomes acute and the demand effective—that is, as soon as our people have the incomes. In the lower group, private industry will not go to work. Now, then, here is the nub of the whole matter: If the government will go to work in this lower bracket, will build low-cost homes for the workers with small incomes, this will stimulate the whole building industry—will put lumber mills, brick yards, cement plants, plumbing and wiring and hardware manufacturers to work.

Despite the name of government housing, the actual construction and supplying of materials will come from private industry. The government merely supplies the funds and direction. Then presently, out of the employment and income thus created, we will see the demand for the better class of homes take on vitality. The effect will be the stimulation of the private building industry in the field which is peculiarly its own.

(Continued on page 32)

The first home in the PWA-built community at McComb, Tennessee



# The Manager

By Frederick Hazlitt Brennan

*Who ever heard of a naval officer going into the woman's dress fashions business! Well, prepare to hear about not one but four who did just that—and Miss Emily P. Simmons, the girl behind the guns*

WE HAD an impressive ceremony at the Jolly Bachelors Club in Long Beach that night. Good old Spud Geraghty had left us. We stood his chair against the wall and broke his beer stein and tied a black ribbon on his clay pipe. Jojo Mellish, our secretary, wrote in the roster opposite Spud's name: "Entered Into Matrimony, December 12, 1933. Vale, Spud!"

One more good man gone the way of all weak flesh. I looked at Greg Dunbar and winced. We didn't say anything—the moment was too solemn—but I knew what Greg was thinking and he knew what I was thinking. We were guilty of the marriage of Spud Geraghty to Emily P. Simmons. This thing was our responsibility; ours and Harry Nevins'. The three of us had got Spud into it.

Four young Navy lieutenants, meaning us, had gone into the women's dress shop business on the side. Four happy, care-free bachelors had bought stock in Right Dress Inc. And now there were three. Poor old Spud. He never had a chance, really. We all stuck our necks out, buying that dress shop, and the silken cord tightened about Spud's throat. Hereafter, ladies and gentlemen, I will make the songs of America and you can make its dresses.

Post mortems are always grisly, and all Greg said when the meeting broke up was: "I hope the poor guy's happy." All I said was: "Yes, I hope so." But we avoided each other's eyes. We envied Harry Nevins, who was stuck with a Quartermaster detail in Panama, and had escaped the full horror of it. Greg and I had been on the scene from start to finish.

"You're taking this too hard, Milt," Shivvy Patson said, as the meeting broke up. Several other Jolly Bachelors grinned. I managed a smile, but all the time I was thinking: "You here—smiling. And poor Spud married."

Being an officer and, by Act of Congress, a gentleman, I can say nothing against the girl. Her name was Emily P. Simmons and it is now Mrs. Loring J. Geraghty. We Jolly Bachelors have our ethics. We fight like men to save a brother club member from catastrophe, but we stand with heads bowed and tongues silenced before the altar. We are bound by that sacred maxim of the Jolly Bachelors which reads: "Speak nothing but good of the married."

I am not bitter toward Emily P. Simmons. It is as natural for a young woman to desire a husband as for a

tigress to hunt the gentle antelope or the female cobra to fang little Hindu children. It is quite true that Emily used tactics beyond the pale of masculine ethics, but I bear her no ill will. My bitterness lies in the thought that Greg and Harry and Spud and I bought stock in Right Dress Inc.

Naval officers should stick to men and ships and guns. Naval officers should invest their savings in gold mines, in oil wells, in patents or in any of the hallowed and traditional methods of losing money. But let them not, O Lord, ever again become involved in a women's dress shop.

It was Greg Dunbar's fault, mostly. His mother, the widow of a naval officer, had started Right Dress Inc. in Los Angeles. Her idea was to sell dresses by mail to the wives of Navy and Army officers stationed in out-of-the-way posts. One in a million, Mrs. Dunbar, and her scheme was absolutely sound. But the depression came along and also those fifteen per cent pay cuts. Mrs. Officer in Coco Solo, Panama, Guam, Manila and Shanghai decided to wear the same old dress.

THE radiogram announcing Mrs. Dunbar's sudden death reached Greg on a cruiser at Guantanamo. Harry was in Panama and Spud on the China tour and I was at submarine school in New London, Conn. Greg flew to California and wrote the rest of us about the situation. He explained that six thousand dollars would clear up his mother's debts and save the business. He offered us one-fourth interest each in Right Dress Inc., saying that the business was on the upgrade and should be worth at least thirty thousand dollars.

Well, what could a chap do? I realize now that we should have offered temporary help and forced Greg to close out the business. But I didn't see that then. Greg and Harry and Spud and I had been best friends at the Academy. Harry Nevins did radio, Greg suggesting that he liquidate Right Dress Inc., but Greg insisted that we carry on as the only means of getting our money back. So we bought Right Dress Inc.

Trouble started almost at once. Greg wrote us that he had engaged one Emily P. Simmons, sight unseen, to manage the dress shop. He explained that Miss Simmons had been his mother's ablest assistant and was just then in Paris on her vacation.

I couldn't see Miss Simmons as manager. I felt the manager should be a man. Harry agreed with me by radio-



gram, and I wired Greg at Pensacola. I also cabled Spud, who was at Chefoo with the Asiatic Squadron, urging him to stand with Harry and me in the matter. Spud didn't reply until about six weeks later and in the meantime Greg said he had signed a contract with Miss Simmons.

It just happens that I have a very good eye for women's clothes. I looked over the Right Dress Inc. catalogue and it seemed to me that much of the styling was very poor. So I wrote Miss Simmons a friendly letter, mentioning several dresses I had seen on women at our Navy shindigs around New London and in New York.

Miss Simmons replied as follows:

"Dear Mr. Greer:

"As I designed most of the dresses shown in our current catalogue, I was much interested in your suggestions. It seems to me that the cocktail party gowns you describe would be a little extreme for our customers.

"Very truly,

"EMILY P. SIMMONS"

This letter didn't set so well with me, especially as I had consulted several of my young women friends and they had all agreed that Right Dress Inc. styling was not so hot. In fact, Hilary Morcum remarked: "They might do for a captain's wife, and I'm sure I've seen several of your dresses on captains' wives. But for the younger element, my dear, they are just too stodgy." She added, however, that the service discount we were offering and our prices were attractive.

I SAW Harry Nevins in New York that September leave, and he agreed with me that Greg had blundered in appointing Miss Simmons manager.

"She's no business woman," Harry said. "I asked for a statement on costs and she wrote back, 'That all depends.' How's that for crust? I wrote her again demanding a complete double entry summary of the current month's operations. You should have seen her idea of a summary. She had the bills payable items in the wrong column."

Harry, being in the Quartermaster Corps, was thoroughly sound on proper business procedure. He also agreed with me that something would have to be done about styling.

"I think we ought to fire her," I said.

"We can't," Harry said. "Greg signed the contract and it's a partnership. We'd all have to agree to buy up her contract. Even then, we'd probably have to go to court."

We were behind the eight ball. Harry had to return to Panama and I was tied up with my course at New London. Besides, I hadn't got any reply from Spud out in China.

The check for my share of the first six months' earnings came to \$27.97. So I sat down and wrote Emily P. a kidding letter saying that there must be some mistake; that I only wanted a fourth of the earnings. Miss Simmons replied as follows:

"Dear Mr. Greer:

"The check is correct as drawn. Mr. Nevins has demanded an audit which will cost \$90. I am charging this against his next earnings. If you wish a copy of this audit and will pay half of the cost, I will send you one. In times like these, when so many businesses are showing a loss, I think we are fortunate in staying out of the red. As you know, Mr. Gregory authorized me to put two thousand dollars of our earnings back