

Our Workers Are Not Slackers

By Frank Gervasi

There have been hot words on absenteeism from employers and employees. But the heat-treatment phase is over. Both sides have discovered that absenteeism is a human problem which will yield only to intelligence and understanding

At a shipyard near Seattle, this kangaroo court "tries" absentees. "Convicts" may be fined cash or a round of cigars

EVERY night, usually between eight-thirty and nine o'clock, somewhere in the hold of an incompleting ship at the Lake Washington shipyards near Seattle, a kangaroo court sits.

It's probably the only court of its kind in the nation, but if there were more of them, it might be possible materially to reduce the dimensions of one of our biggest manpower problems: absenteeism. This is the name of a disease as old as industrial man: absence of workers for any one of about 250 reasons, from unavoidable illness down to thoroughly avoidable hangovers.

The judge of the shipyard court is a former storekeeper from near-by Bothell. The clerk is an ex-bank teller from Omaha. The members of the jury are some 20 Americans who left good jobs in gold mines, the feed and grain business, law firms and lumberyards, and went to Seattle to see what they could do to win the war. Few had ever seen a ship bigger than a Mississippi River flat-bottomed boat or had smelled salt water, and about all they knew about electricity was that it was used in light bulbs. But they're all electricians now.

They learned all they know about electricity from Jack Scott, who is 49 years old, a power-transmission expert from North Dakota and about as American as apple pie with cheese. Jack had never seen the sea either, until two years ago. He is boss of the gang and prosecutor of our kangaroo court. He opens each session with praise for work well done.

Then he looks around and says, "All right, you fellows, who pulled a Brodie tonight? Okay, you birds, confess your

crimes or I'll call on witnesses to indict you."

It's a rule of the court that if a man refuses to admit his poor splice of a cable, his failure to solder a joint properly or his error in reading a blueprint, he may be exposed. If indictment by someone else is necessary, the punishment might be twice or three times worse than if he had confessed. He might have to buy three rounds of cigars or candy bars instead of one, or he might be called upon to pay a sizable cash fine—especially if his crime was lateness or absenteeism. And if he can't take it all good-naturedly or shows congenital disinterest in his job, he is welcome to quit and try to find work elsewhere. There's no place for him in Jack Scott's gang.

The shipyards throughout the nation have the worst absentee record in the country. Absenteeism in the Lake Washington shipyards area averaged about 11 per cent, an almost irreducible minimum. This record has helped to bring down the company's average to well below the national average of approximately 6 per cent for all industries.

Absenteeism isn't new. Industry has always suffered from it. In the last war, according to the Journal of Political Economy for May 1919, the absentee average in the steel shipbuilding industry was 18 per cent, much higher than now; but absenteeism isn't peculiar to shipbuilding or wartime. In peacetime, there has always been some, due to accident, illness, death and just plain laziness. Some employers estimate that the national average due to those and related causes was about four per cent.

In wartime, absenteeism produces matériel loss, which might mean the difference

between a short war and a long one, perhaps between victory and defeat. If absenteeism continues at the present rate of about 6 per cent (assuming that 1,200,000 of the twenty million Americans employed on war jobs continue to be habitual truants) 2,800 million hours of work will be lost by the end of 1943. With those man-hours you could build fifty battleships or about 8,000 freighters, and astronomical equivalents in tanks and guns and planes. Absenteeism must, obviously, be reduced.

Yellow Slips Discarded

It's one disease, however, that sulfa drugs won't cure. It won't yield to nostrums and panaceas and it won't budge with bullying. That has been tried. In one Middle Western plant, an employer tried to reduce absenteeism by putting little yellow slips in absentees' pay envelopes, identifying the recipients as slackers and conveying the thanks of Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito for lying down on the job. Too many slackers had good reasons for their absences. One of them, who'd been away from work for several days, had just buried a wife and child, dead from pneumonia. The yellow-slip method was abandoned.

The best minds say that absenteeism can't be cured. It can be arrested and remedied, but it can't be entirely eliminated from industry's blood stream. When absenteeism burgeoned in epidemics all over the country, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and irate congressmen decided there ought to be a law. They concluded that all absenteeism was basically due to lack of patriotism, to selfishness and to wage ava-

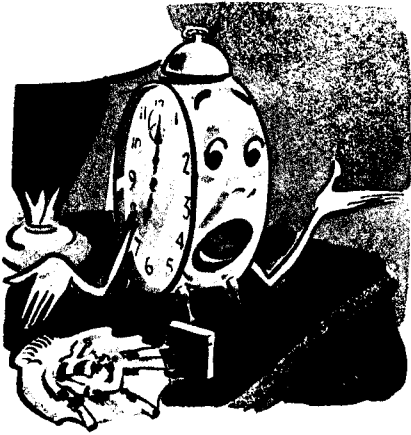
rice. They blamed organized labor's insistence on high wages and the union shop. Congress moved to legislate the absentee phenomenon out of existence.

The labor unions retaliated with charges that Rickenbacker and the congressmen were using absenteeism as an excuse to abrogate the Wagner Act. They saw hard-won social gains of the past eleven years endangered by what they called, in the shopworn language of the labor movement, a minority of "vested interests." They reminded Congress, among other things, that absenteeism in the House and Senate is seven times as bad as in industry. Neither side at first bothered to determine the real causes.

Then investigations and researches and surveys began. With the same energy with which they had previously denounced one another, government agencies, labor unions, the industrialists themselves, Congressional committees and independent agencies hurled themselves into the job of finding out what causes absenteeism. Labor admitted that there was considerable gold-bricking and leaf-raking among its members. Industry confessed it had made mistakes which contributed to absenteeism, such as failing to provide sufficient housing. Both sides discovered that there were not two or fifty but at least two hundred and fifty direct and indirect causes. On one thing all parties seem to have agreed: American workers aren't slackers and traitors.

It wasn't lack of patriotism, for instance, which had kept a Detroit woman at her workbench seven days a week every week since April 1942. She was often sick but

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1. Boy, I've got a thankless job! Kay Roberts is a working girl and I'm supposed to get her up on time! Huh! I ring my head off at 7:30, but—



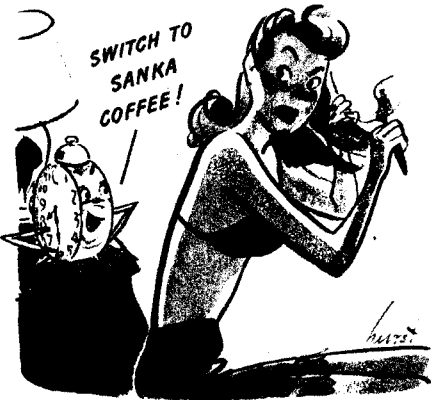
2. She gets up, muzzles me, and plops back for more shut-eye. I know what's wrong. Why, she doesn't fall asleep till the roosters rouse! I've discovered—



3. She's one of those people whose nerves are jangled by the caffeine in coffee! Even a little coffee makes her so jittery she can't sleep. And it's making her a wreck!



4. Gosh, Kay, if you like coffee so much, switch to the coffee that can't make you jittery and can't keep you tossing all night. Switch to the coffee that's 97% caffeine-free...



5. It's Sanka Coffee! It can't jangle anyone's nerves! It's all coffee, real coffee, delicious coffee—nothing is removed but that sleep-robber, caffeine!



6. Ah, yes, Kay, you'll like Sanka Coffee. Easy on the palate and easy on the nerves. And it's so good for an alarm clock's morale. Start today.

SANKA COFFEE



NOTE: Your grocer probably has the new "all-purpose" grind Sanka, swell no matter what kind of coffee-maker you have! And it's vacuum-packed!

BUY U. S. WAR SAVINGS BONDS AND STAMPS!

SLEEP ISN'T A LUXURY; IT'S A NECESSITY. DRINK SANKA AND SLEEP!

TUNE IN... 5:45 P.M., New York Time, Sunday afternoon. Sanka Coffee brings you **William L. Shirer**, famous author of "Berlin Diary," in 15 minutes of news over the Columbia Network.



KENNETH THOMPSON

YOUR LIFE TOMORROW

By David O. Woodbury

New Homes for Old

WHEN your home of tomorrow gets old and battered and out of date you will not have to sell it and move away. You will merely turn it in for a new one with all the latest improvements. Built-in furniture, lightweight material and standardized shapes will make the small houses of the future as simple to replace as automobiles and gas stoves.

Every community will have its rival house agencies competing for your spring trade. You will only need to drop in some Saturday afternoon to pick out the model you want and close the deal. A few days later, workmen will come and pull down your old house and set up the new one in its place. The cost of the exchange will probably not exceed a thousand dollars.

"Used" homes will go back to the factory for overhaul and will soon be on the market again at secondhand. There may even be home-service stations in the larger cities where turn-ins can be refurbished and set out in a vacant lot for display.

If you don't need a complete new house, "spare parts" will be available at small cost. Thus, when a wall or ceiling is damaged, or an extra room is needed for the new baby, you will simply order the structural sections by number and have them sent out. If you are handy with a screwdriver and wrench you can easily install the replacements yourself.

Mailbox Telegraph Offices

Sending a telegram tomorrow will be not unlike mailing a letter today, and the message will be received just as you send it, in your own handwriting. If you wish you can include sketches and fancy doodling, too. You will have all the freedom of a sealed letter transmitted at the speed of the electric current.

The system will be based on the present "facsimile" method of transmitting pictures by wire and radio and will possibly do away with small telegraph offices altogether. Automatic telegraphing machines will stand ready to receive your messages in the foyers of office buildings, hotels and stations, perhaps even in the corner drug-store. You will merely write out your telegram on a prepared blank, drop it in the slot, follow it with a coin and go away.

Delivery at the other end will be by messenger, thereby saving much time and trouble.

In China, where writing is in picture words, facsimile is likely to replace all conventional telegraphs as soon as machines are available, in order to eliminate the army of operators now required to translate each picture word into code and then back again.

Plastic Dishes of the Future

Dishes and other utensils will be made of a plastic that won't crack when they are dropped; nor will it absorb foods or liquors and become discolored.

Already General Marshall carries a set of this plastic tableware in his private plane. The pieces are so light and strong that they save him many useful pounds of pay load. The clippers are using them, too. In a plane of that size, these plastic dishes save as much weight as that of one passenger.

Pin Things up with Magnets

The annoyance of sharp-pointed thumbtacks will be forgotten tomorrow. Your bulletin boards of the future will be made of steel and you will pin things up on them with small magnetic "tacks" that will damage neither paper nor board, and will not lie around on the floor to be stepped on. A new alloy of aluminum, nickel, cobalt and iron, many times more magnetic than steel alone, has been developed to solve the Army's pin-up problems. The war's end will bring it into general use.

Bulletin boards in schools, churches, hotels and factories will simply be sheets of steel, enameled in tasteful colors, while the tacks may be of any desired shape or size and will stick to the boards anywhere, firmly gripping the papers to be displayed.

Your kitchen will have one of these bulletin boards so that you can quickly fasten up shopping lists, menus and memoranda and take them down again without breaking a fingernail. The new magnetic material is so powerful that hooks made of it can be attached to metal strips in closets and on walls, strong enough to hang up pictures or clothes. Such hooks can be moved from place to place without leaving a mark of any kind. ★★★