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of Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio.  
C. F. Schweinfurth, Architect

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## THE ASSOCIATIONAL IDEA IN BUSINESS

BY S. WILBUR CORMAN

**W**HATEVER may be said or thought of the idea of trade and industrial and professional associations, it must be admitted that it is a big idea. Emmett Hay Naylor in his fine book "Trade Associations," published last year, lists no less than 821 of these organizations, and I know of a number that he does not mention. Moreover, new ones are being created almost daily, and relatively few cease to exist once they come into being.

They embrace a wide range of activity—all the way from the American Medical Association, whose members bring most of us into the world, to the Casket Manufacturers' Association, the membership of which takes care of us at the finish.

It has been suggested that trade associations constitute only one aspect of the constantly changing kaleidoscope of American industrialism; that they are the fad of the hour; that they simply represent a new phase of the old game of trying to quell competition; that they are largely a holdover from war conditions; that they are unsound economically, subversive of public welfare, and therefore rightly doomed to rapid extinction.

The underlying idea of men with a mutuality of interest associating themselves together to their common advantage is extremely old—how old I am not prepared to say—but the Bible contains several references to organizations of goldsmiths, apothecaries, etc., and profane literature almost as ancient provides abundant evidence of organizations predicated upon similarity of occupation of the members.

Every one is of course familiar with the fact that there were associations of merchants in Greece and Rome many centuries ago, and the guilds of mediæval Europe were originally merchant guilds, and only later on craft guilds, the progenitors of our modern trade unions.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that Carpenters' Hall, constructed of small imported bricks, was built in Philadelphia in 1770 as the home of the Honorable Society of Carpenters, which would seem to indicate that the English craft guild idea was firmly established in America at that time.

The Hall is still standing. It was the meeting-place of the First Continental Congress of the British Colonies in America in 1774—the real beginning of the associational idea that later developed into the United States of America.

The ancient merchant guild may properly be regarded as the legitimate parent of the modern trade association, although there are of course wide differences of method and administration, perhaps the most noteworthy being the ready acceptance nowadays of the principle that pools and combinations in restraint of trade and industry are inimical to the common good and not to be tolerated.

Many sub-standard practices are now

illegal, but it is only fair to observe that the modern straight-thinking business man quite generally would recognize the advantage of standardized 36-inch yards and 16-ounce pounds, even were there no law to curb individual eccentricity in such directions.

Great National trade associations, in the modern sense of the word, came into existence in this country about sixty years ago—there are a large number still going strong with an honorable record of from 25 to 50 years to their credit.

Down through the years, making many mistakes, committing countless blunders, but sound at the core, the idea of co-operation and mutual helpfulness within a given trade or industry has persisted and developed.

No one yet has invented a human institution which is either foolproof or immaculate. Indeed, quite recently our highest court has ordered an association of hardwood lumber manufacturers to discontinue certain practices in restraint of trade and of virtual price fixing.

Secretary Hoover, of the Department of Commerce, has already undertaken to clarify the position of trade associations in their relations to the public and the Government, and I predict that this extremely useful and very interesting tool of modern business will not be lost to us, but, as is so frequently the result in such circumstances, will be made even more efficient and helpful.

The general public is amply protected by the makers and custodians of our legal fabric; but, entirely apart from any such precaution, no trade association has the right to exist if it is not of benefit to those within its membership, to its industry as a whole, to general business, and to the public at large. It has no business to attempt to eliminate the natural and necessary forms of competition.

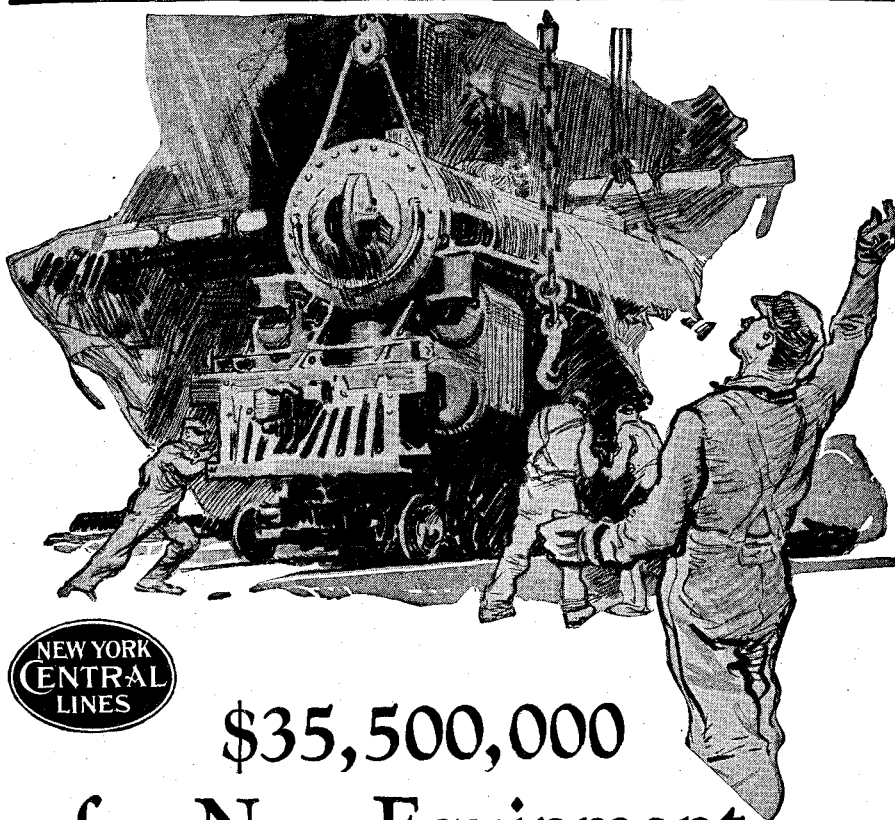
Every thoughtful American business man knows the difference between fair and unfair competition; every successful trade association must learn the exceedingly simple fact that business grows by building up, and not by tearing down, even if the tearing down operation is directed at the "other fellow." We are all "other fellows" from the "other fellow's" point of view.

It seems to me that we may safely conclude that the associational idea is ancient and worthy; that it is fundamentally sound; that it possesses potentialities of untold benefit to all concerned.

The associational idea is so important a factor in American business that there is even an Association of Trade Association Executives. It is the type of idea that just naturally develops into an ideal.

The greatest ideal in the world to-day is democracy. Three principles are clashing—whether it is better to be governed by a few strong men, by ourselves, or by no one. This struggle is going on everywhere—in world politics; in National, State, and local politics; in industry; in individual businesses.

Generally speaking, a very strong man is usually in favor of being permitted to



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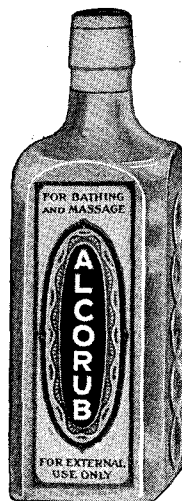
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## THE ASSOCIATIONAL IDEA IN BUSINESS (Continued)

rule. He has more confidence in his own wisdom than in mass intelligence. Weak men prefer to be ruled.

But when a nation or an industry is composed of men having a high average of intelligence, courage, and self-reliance you always find a condition unfavorable to autocracy.

Our fathers would not be ruled by others; hence they discovered how to rule themselves. They would have naught of autocracy—they knew that around the corner from autocracy lurks anarchy.

Business has had largely to formulate its own rules—has had to learn how to govern itself. Even governmental laws to control or direct business—aside from those curiously silly ones which most every one nowadays recognizes as having been ill-advised—have sought to establish rules and regulations for business in accordance with already widely accepted standards of good conduct.

Almost every industry has had, at some time, its would-be strong man—its autocrat who sought to establish the customs and practices of that industry. But in no single instance has he been strong enough. American business men have refused to accept autocratic rule. As a result, each industry has known its period of anarchy, of lawless practices, of sinister tendencies pointing straight to wreck and ruin.

And then, almost without exception, American business men have had the character, decency, and wisdom to get together, iron out their differences, root out the evils, and create trade laws acceptable to and observed by all.

I firmly believe that the vast majority of trade associations formed in this country were born of a high-minded, clean purpose to eliminate evil practices, to introduce law and order, and to elevate business. A dishonest or dishonorable purpose is not well expressed in a constitution and by-laws.

Of course mistakes have been made. Many policies have proved unsound. Endeavors to do away with bad practices have sometimes developed other practices almost as bad. Selfishness, unfair competition, treachery, and bad faith are elements that have not been easy completely to eliminate.

Every trade association with which I am familiar has endeavored to benefit its own trade or industry, and usually has succeeded in benefiting business as a whole. The mere getting together and trying to be human and decent to erstwhile hated competitors is really a tremendous step forward.

You can't work with a man to-day on a committee seeking to formulate a code of business ethics, and stick a knife into him to-morrow.

The reason trade associations pretty generally are successful in this country is because American business men pretty generally are honest and decent at heart and want their industries to be the same. That is why they get together and stay together.

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WITH the closing of the schools many letters have come to The Outlook from teachers, telling of the help which The Outlook has given them in the teaching of civics and current events. We publish herewith a few extracts from the many letters which we have received:

I have used The Outlook for current events study in both English and history classes for the past two years. Before that time I used the "—," and I have been careful to study fully the "—" and any other weekly papers as to school use, but I find none so valuable as your own. Though I often disagree with your point of view, yet I find no paper written so clearly and studiously and carefully as yours.

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Richmond Hill High School,  
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BERTHE A. DANIEL,  
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I propose to use The Outlook exclusively as a current events guide during the coming year. During the past year I used the "—" in one class, the "—" in another, and The Outlook in a third. It is my belief that the class using The Outlook made the best progress and knew most about current events at the close of the year.

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