



Rats, People, And Politics

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WHEN Congress authorized \$40 million for rat extermination last September, a Wall Street securities analyst created a brief flurry in "rat stocks" by listing the leading manufacturers of pesticides. The Purdue University News Bureau announced "revisions" in the school's eight-year-old correspondence course in pest-control technology, giving greater emphasis to the problems of rat control and making the course available to public-health people throughout the nation. At the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, O. Wayne Rollins, chairman and president of Rollins, Inc., an Atlanta-based firm that embraces Orkin Exterminating Company, Inc. ("by far the world's largest pest control company"), called upon the nine Federal agencies concerned with rat control "to coordinate their efforts . . . [and] supply the motivation and effective leadership to the local authorities and the private sector of the economy to insure maximum efficiency in rat control." And, Rollins added, "We are prepared to

offer the advice, training, technology and personnel to carry out these goals whenever we are called upon to do so." At this moment, Rollins's offer seems premature. Despite the authorization, Congress has yet to come up with the cash.

In his 1967 message to Congress on urban and rural poverty, President Johnson requested \$20 million a year to initiate a major eradication program. He said it was a "national disgrace" that many children in America were "attacked, maimed, and even killed by rats." Under the original legislation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development was to provide grants to assist participating localities in developing and carrying out rat-control programs, including systematic extermination, improvement of refuse and garbage collection, etc. But Congress, in a sardonic and punitive mood following last summer's New York riots, rejected the rat-control bill, 207 to 176. By September, the House had second thoughts and reversed

itself, 227 to 173, tacking onto the Partnership for Health bill an increased authorization for Section 314 (e) Health, Education and Welfare project grants of \$20 million in fiscal 1968 and another \$20 million in fiscal 1969. So-called "e" money is not earmarked for continuing public-health programs and hence is available for new ones.

Although the authorization measure does not even mention rats, Congress's intent to do something about them was made abundantly clear in the House discussion and in a Senate report. Nonetheless, as a HEW spokesman quickly pointed out when I asked what was currently afoot in the war against rats, "Congress didn't give us any money." Most of the \$62.5 million appropriated previously by Congress for "e" project grants for fiscal 1968 is already committed, leaving about \$5 million "for new projects, including rats." Whether or not Congress will come up with the \$20-million supplementary appropriation this session depends on the loudness of demands from local and state governments and community organizations for "rat money" in an election year.

ODDLY ENOUGH in this research-and-development age, we don't know as much about rats as one might expect. What we do know about rat behavior rests almost entirely upon studies of laboratory rats (an albino strain bred out of the brown rat) or of caged wild rats. Ecologists and other students of animal behavior nowadays strongly caution against projecting inferences about animal behavior based on caged animals onto their free brethren. Yet we do just this, almost without reservation, with rats.

Rats admittedly are hard to find; they live and apparently thrive in such unpleasant places as garbage dumps and sewers. And hard to take; they are carriers of the plague, salmonella (a food-poisoning bacterium), rabies, endemic typhus, and some thirty-one other diseases. "The Common or Brown rat," the English zoologists G. E. H. Barrett-Hamilton and M. A. C. Hinton declared a half century ago, "is probably the most injurious and universal pest of the human race. . . . It does not appear to have a single redeeming fea-

ture." Nor, one might add, a single human friend, though S. A. Barnett in *Scientific American* recently ventured the opinion that rats, chiefly because of their ability to survive, "are worth study for their own sake and not only as pests."

Scientific study might lead to a more accurate account of rat behavior and ultimately allow for a wiser and more efficient expenditure of energies and money in getting rid of rats. We do not even know how many rats there are in the United States or the real extent of the damage they do. However, the U.S. rat population is frequently estimated at some ninety million, and according to a leaflet issued by the Public Health Service, rats and mice together ruin at least \$400 million worth of food each year.

The Nature of the Beast

Rattus norvegicus, the Norway or brown rat, is the dominant species, especially in the urban slums. The male reaches a weight of one pound and a body length of nine inches. A burrower, the Norway rat varies in color; some are black and some brown, a matter of some confusion when it comes to quick identification. *Rattus rattus*, the black or roof rat, commonly believed to have been responsible for the Black Plague of the Middle Ages, thrives in warmer climates. In the north, it is found in port cities as a rat minority living in attics, while the brown rat congregates in cellars and sewers or burrows in garbage-strewn lots and city dumps. The more delicate black rat rarely weighs more than eleven ounces or exceeds seven inches in body length. Though black in the city, *Rattus rattus* is often tawny-coated in the countryside.

Both species are prolific breeders. Sexually mature after four months, with a gestation period of three weeks, the female can easily rear four six-pup litters a year. There is a fair amount of evidence that rats rarely live beyond two years although their life span is three to five years. Crowding may interfere with breeding and rats become much more aggressive when hungry. Demolition and urban renewal, too, set them in motion, accounting for the rats seen in new office buildings located in areas undergoing redevelopment. Rats are

prodigious gnawers. Their four incisors grow roughly four inches a year, so they must gnaw or die. They chew on almost anything—through half-inch sheets of aluminum, lead pipes (to seek running water), and into soft concrete. They are suspected of starting one out of every four fires of unknown origin.

According to reports, some fourteen thousand people a year in the United States are bitten by rats. Most—perhaps as high as ninety per cent—are infants. Dr. Alan Donaldson, associate director of the Public Health Service's Bureau of Disease Prevention and Environmental Control, believes that rat bites are underreported. "We don't have a nationwide system for reporting rat bites," he told me. He estimates more than twenty thousand bites a year but less than fifty thousand.

Though rats make headlines in our big-city newspapers from time to time, we have made considerable progress in rat control. L. A. Penn, director of the environmental tech-



nical services division of Milwaukee's health department, reports that no rat-borne diseases have been noted in Milwaukee in the last twenty years. Detroit reduced the incidence of rat-transmitted disease from more than a dozen cases of hemorrhagic jaundice in the 1940's to an average of less than one a year in the early 1960's and none last year. Reported rat bites there have fallen from 123 in 1951 to eight during the first half of 1967. The city uses fifty thousand pounds of anti-coagulant poisons and treats more than thirty thousand rat burrows yearly.

Rat-bite fever, according to Donaldson, is very rare in this country, as are cases of other rat-spread diseases. Nevertheless, he told me that he was "not comfortable" with the rat situation. "Wherever you have rats and fleas," he said, "there is a possibility of the introduction of the plague

organism into the rat population and its spread to man. It is highly desirable to reduce the rat population in urban areas. Nobody should have to live with them."

We are, I gather from talking to a number of experts, doing just about as much as can be done when it comes to poisoning rats. Indeed, this worries some people, for there are reports that rats are developing immunity to some of the more widely used poisons, such as Warfarin, the anticoagulant. As for sterilizers, these remain laboratory experiments at present, though New York State plans field tests of rat birth-control pills in 1969.

Much remains to be done, however, in cleaning up garbage-littered streets, back yards, and building lots in our cities. The closed garbage can remains a major weapon in the war against rats. This often is an educational matter backed up by hounding landlords into providing enough cans for their tenants.

Last summer, the Labor Department granted \$300,000 to Pride, Inc., a Washington, D.C., anti-poverty agency, to hire nine hundred youths at \$56 a week for a slum clean-up campaign and a rat-control program. In New York, where Governor Nelson Rockefeller provided anti-rat funds when Congress backed away last summer, the \$750,000 allocated to New York City is being spent to train and employ some 150 "sanitation aides" to clean up rat-infested lots and back yards.

This is what we can expect as local and state governments tap Federal rat funds. There is now considerable evidence of interest in the program. In the regional offices as of April 1, there were twenty-nine applications amounting to \$17.5 million from city, county, and state health departments and from private non-profit organizations. Nevertheless, Congress, in its present economy mood, might be tempted to pass over rat control when it makes supplementary appropriations this session. But it isn't apt to treat the matter as lightly as it did last summer because the rat, as a symbol of slum conditions, now is more than a menace to health. It is a political reality that must be dealt with.

Emma Brady's Dream

JAMES T. McCARTIN

PERHAPS my memory is deceiving me because my grandmother used to take me with her whenever she went visiting, but it seems to me that there were an unusual number of widows on the street where I grew up in Brooklyn. On each of its corners there was a tenement with eight flats over a store. The rest of the street had three-story frame houses, the first two floors of which belonged to the owners of the house, with the third floor rented out. Only one house on the street had steam heat, and its owners were considered wealthy, not so much because of the heat but because Mr. Lighting had a steady job. Most people on the street worked on the docks or their adjoining packing houses a block away, and in the 1930's they considered themselves doing well if they worked two days a week.

My grandmother was one of the widows. Her husband had died in 1902 in Leitrim, and in 1930 my father brought her to America to take care of me and my sister Kathleen after my mother died. We owned our house, and lived in the parlor floor and ground floor until my father died. Then we had to move to the third floor so we could get the better rent available for the other two. My grandmother almost lost the house before she agreed to this change, because she alone of the widows had a large parlor.

My favorite widow was Mrs. Rossini. Her parents had sent her to America to marry Mr. Rossini when she was sixteen, and she became the mother of four children, the oldest of whom was seventeen. Ten years after she came to America Mr. Rossini died, and the following year she went to bed for the remaining twen-

ty years of her life. When she died they found under her pillow a picture of the boy she had been in love with in Sicily before her parents sent her to America. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I used to love sitting on the foot of her bed watching her as my grandmother told her what was going on in the neighborhood. As far as I know she never attempted to explain what illness kept her in bed, and the closest she ever came to complaining was when she would ask my grandmother to stop telling her a funny story because laughing hurt her side. I always hoped that my grandmother would say something particularly nasty about the neighbors because I got a thrill seeing Mrs. Rossini's brilliant white teeth sparkle in her dimly lit room.

Next to Mrs. Rossini, my favorite was Mrs. Anteboni. Strictly speaking she wasn't a widow. Her husband had had an accident on the docks, and went to Italy to recuperate. He never returned, and when Mrs. Anteboni learned that he was living with a young woman there she said, "He's dead, dead. He's dead. That's all." And it was all. Afterwards the neighbors spoke of him in the past tense.

ALTHOUGH these were my favorite widows, they weren't my grandmother's. She found it difficult to cope with their strange accents and strange foods, and her complaint against Mrs. Rossini was not that she spent all her time in bed but that she lived on black olives and ricotta cheese. Had she lived on tea she wouldn't have minded at all. Her favorite widow was Mary Kelly, who was known on the street as Her Ladyship. When Mrs. Kelly was

young her husband had been a successful contractor, and while he was still in his twenties he was able to build Mrs. Kelly a twenty-room house next to St. Michael's Church. But before he was thirty he fell off a scaffold and died, leaving Mrs. Kelly with her house, two children, and a great many debts. Mrs. Kelly held onto the house as long as she could—far longer than she should have—but finally was forced to sell it and move to a third-story flat on our street. A year after, her son Tom, aged fourteen, was killed robbing a store. Her daughter Emma then married a merchant mariner who left her after two months of marriage. Since she never heard from him again, Emma was for all practical purposes a widow too.

I didn't like going on my grandmother's interminable visits to Mrs. Kelly's because my grandmother and Mrs. Kelly always fought like sisters whenever they got together, and each visit would end with my grandmother saying to me and my sister, "So help me God, I'll never visit that skithery-looking object again." I got somewhat used to these arguments, but I never was able to get used to the way Mrs. Kelly treated Emma. Emma supported herself and Mrs. Kelly by doing housework in the wealthy Shore Road neighborhood near us. Mrs. Kelly somehow managed to make Emma's industry a calculated attempt to make her unhappy. "Now look what she's brought home to me," she'd say to my grandmother. "Did you ever in your whole life see such a rag of a coat? 'It'll be nice for your mother,' the snooty thing said to Emma. Nice for her mother indeed. When my Peter was living, I would no more think of putting a rag like that on my back than I'd stoop to visiting the likes of her."

Between Mrs. Kelly and her runaway husband, Emma's pretty face had become blurred, except for her soft brown eyes, which always seemed luminous with tears. Her attempts to defend herself or her employers against Mrs. Kelly were always ineffectual.

"AFTER ALL, Mother, they don't have to give us anything. They could give it to the St. Vincent de Paul. I only work for them."

"Isn't that just what I'm saying?"