

# SURVEY MIDMONTHLY

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## Behind Washington's Marble Facade

By CHALICE COYLE

THE streets of Washington are jammed with tourists and the sightseeing busses roll past the marble buildings of Constitution Avenue. The guides point out the Navy Yard but not Navy Place; the Senate Office building, but not Schotts Alley across the street. Tourists troop through the White House and the Capitol, but not through Washerwoman's Row or Snow's Court or the other inhabited alleys where the poor of Washington are hidden away, forgotten for the most part except at Christmas time when good folk attempt to brighten dark corners with carols and Christmas baskets.

L'Enfant dreamed of a beautiful city with wide streets and large squares. Carriage houses, gardens and slave quarters originally filled the interiors of these squares but as the city grew and land values increased, tiny dwellings sprang up along winding, unlighted interior passageways. These are the famous inhabited alleys of Washington of which 176 exist in the heart of the city. A short detour on either side of Pennsylvania Avenue at any point between the Capitol and the White House would bring the sightseer to sections where people huddle like rabbits in a warren; where 20 percent of the dwellings are without running water; and more than 35 percent without an inside toilet and bath. Most of the alleys have neither gas nor electricity. Behind the marble facades of Washington are shocking cores of poverty, crime and despair.

Thousands of people in the nation's Capital are hungry, ill, disheartened. Hundreds of homes have been broken up because the wage earner thought his family better off without him. Relief agencies, public and private, are swamped; their totally inadequate funds stretched to the utmost. Case workers in the public agencies are struggling desperately under case loads of almost two hundred.

But, one often hears it said, such conditions exist everywhere. True, but in few places is the total picture—relief, housing, health and crime—as discouraging as it is in the Capital of the United States. As compared with other cities expenditures for relief are extremely low; diseases of malnutrition and poverty extremely high. For example, the figures for tuberculosis, for infant mortality, for the maternal death rate, for the venereal death rate all are above the average for the country as a whole. In one census tract, bordering on the Capitol, the tuberculosis death rate is over 300

per 100,000. The average for the country is fifty-one. The fact that the high tuberculosis death rate is due in part to the incidence of Negroes in the population does not make it less of a threat to the welfare of the rest of the residents. Most of those rendering personal services, such as maids, waiters, porters and so on come from the congested areas where the morbidity and mortality rates are the highest.

For the past two years the Health Department has had increased funds available both from the District appropriation by Congress and the Social Security Board. More money together with the efforts of a new director of public health for the district, made possible the opening of new health centers and an increase in public health work. The result has been almost startling; a reduction in the tuberculosis rate, for certain sections, from a high of over 400 to a high of over 300. Remarkable improvement has been made also in maternal and infant death rates.

IT is hard to prove that a direct connection exists between bad housing and inadequate food on the one hand and a high illness, death and crime rate on the other. But they are found together too often to be ignored. A relief applicant told the interviewer, at a time when no relief was available, that he had walked the streets for days looking for work and that he would steal rather than see his children hungry any longer. Two days later he made good his threat by stealing a purse in a doctor's office. A young man was discharged from an overcrowded hospital with a syphilitic abscess—too well to stay in the hospital, too sick to work, homeless and utterly destitute. He threw a stone through a store window and calmly waited to be taken to jail where he thought he could have treatment and food at the same time. A child, threatened with the Reform School for frequent running away said, "It's warm there and sometimes they have cake."

Washington, according to several surveys, has more police, more burglaries, more larcenies, than the average for seventeen other cities of comparable size. The Criminal Justice Association, (a private agency formed two years ago) has been successful in reducing the number of major crimes but has had less effect on those crimes arising out of a bad economic situation. The temptation to steal is hard to resist when one is hungry.

Few people realize how populous the alleys are and how close to the better homes. Residents in hotels near the Capitol can look into some of the alleys from their windows. The Alley Dwelling Authority is making a noble effort to rid Washington of its slums, but is handicapped by inadequate appropriation although its operations are 100 percent self-sustaining and in the end will cost the tax-payers nothing. More funds for alley reclamation would provide employment for a considerable number of people as well as doing away with sources of disease and crime.

In order to understand the relief problem in Washington, it is necessary to know something of the way the District of Columbia is governed and to understand the variety of hurdles that any budget must leap before it finally gets back to the department where it started.

Congress took over the management of the District in 1801 and in 1878 set up a commission form of government. Since then many boards, commissions, and offices have grown, Topsy like, through Congressional action. All District budgets (itemized) have to pass through the hands of the District Commissioners, the Federal Budget Bureau, the sub-committee and the full committee on appropriations of the House of Representatives, the House of Representatives itself, the subcommittee and full committee on appropriations of the Senate, the Senate itself, the conference committee of the House and Senate, again both the House and the Senate. Finally it must be signed by the President.

The District commissioners are hampered by lack of any real authority and are restrained from making any contract not provided for in the organic act or otherwise provided for by Congress. This Congressional control over the affairs of the District, administrative and fiscal, leads to much irritation and annoyance on the part of residents of the District and members of Congress alike. The sprawling and uncoordinated setup invites buck passing. Nowhere can definite responsibility be fixed. The members of Congress who serve on the District committees carry a double burden since the District has a population greater than that of several states and, since it ranks both as a city and a state, has a proportionate number of problems. Accessible as they are, the representatives and senators are bombarded by pressure groups of all kinds. It is not surprising that the turnover on District committees is high. Many of the members are Congressmen serving their first term who did not realize when committee appointments were made what they were letting themselves in for. How can a new Congressman discriminate between the statistics presented by a civic organization with no ax to grind and those presented by the paid executive of an organization the sole purpose of which is to keep down taxes for its members? To make matters worse, the civic organizations do not agree as to what should be done and how. Because there are no elections there is no way for any group to prove that it really does represent the majority of the citizens of Washington.

**T**HE life of the members of the District Committee is not easy; and even when they try to do something progressive, they hear much more from those who are displeased than from those who are pleased. Not infrequently constituents "back home" protest to a congressman over what they consider preferential treatment for the District. This puts a Congressman under heavy pressure to vote for reduced appropriations for the District. After all his reelection depends upon those folks back home.

Innumerable surveys and reports have been made of the

relief and related situations in Washington. It is really a pity that statistics and reports are not edible. Then the poor might have something to nibble on while another survey was being made. But there is little nourishment in figures except for controversy. Often the reports themselves serve to divert attention from the main issue—the need for adequate and intelligent care for the unemployed and the under-employed.

The Jacobs Report, made in 1937, compared the 1935 appropriation with relief expenditures in seventeen cities of comparable size and concluded: "The expenditures of the District are extremely low, its relief payments being approximately half as large as the average of the other cities." Yet in 1937 the appropriation was so limited that most cases having an employable member in the family could not be accepted by the public assistance division of the Department of Public Welfare.

**I**N the winter of 1937-38, there was so much controversy about the need for relief and the type of person receiving it that a committee of twenty-five women, members of the League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women, undertook a survey of the situation. Some 500 applicants, turned away by both public and private agencies because of lack of funds, were interviewed; questionnaires were filled out; home visits made.

Contrary to the common belief, the typical relief applicant did not turn out to be a transient, an undesirable citizen or a person with a large family. About 77 percent of the applicants had lived in the district for more than five years, many of them unskilled workers who had been imported from the South by contractors in the late 20's and early 30's when Washington was indulging in a building boom. Most of the applicants were young, (61 percent under forty); the majority of them unskilled. More than 70 percent had fewer than four dependents; one percent had more than six. More than 30 percent had never been on relief before, and many of them needed only temporary assistance. A large percentage were colored since Washington has many Negroes who have relatively few opportunities in the predominating clerical and professional occupations. Practically all of those applying for aid were in dire need. All members of the committee were shocked at the inhuman conditions which they found.

In spite of the report of this committee and of other reports, the appropriation for relief for 1938-39 was cut so drastically that almost a thousand relief cases classed as unemployable had to be dropped during the year. Congress further restricted the amount to be expended for personnel to 8½ percent of the budget, and reduced the maximum grant per family to \$60 a month. Case loads varied from 150 to 200 per worker as against sixty to a hundred in other cities. Such limitation of staff has led to a variety of undesirable effects. Since cases cannot be properly investigated some applicants get relief who do not need it as badly as others and case workers do not have time to give the more promising families the help that might keep them on their feet or put them back to self support. The success of certain private and public agencies in rehabilitating individuals should have demonstrated the wisdom of keeping a man on a self-supporting basis.

The public assistance division of the Department of Public Welfare estimates that 50 percent more cases could be closed if there were adequate staff to make proper investigations. When applications for relief increase suddenly as they do when WPA drops large numbers of workers, ap-

pointments for first interviews have to be made weeks in advance. And how do the children eat in the meantime? Some of them don't.

In 1938 the sub-committee on Appropriations of the Senate and the House authorized an investigation of public relief in the district. While the investigator found much to criticize he pointed out that with the limited staff and heavy case loads, it was impossible to do a good job. A greatly increased staff was recommended.

This investigator also called attention to the great number of unemployed in Washington, 50,000 during 1938, for whom there is no provision. He said:

Of special and vital significance is the plight of those persons rejected by WPA because of physical and occupational unfitness and who have previously applied to and have been rejected by the Public Assistance Division. No more graphic illustration of the inadequacy of the present relief funds is possible than the picturization of this tragic group caught in the marginal zone between two nonmeshing welfare programs. Refused on the one hand because of employability and on the other hand for unemployability, the consequences cannot fail to induce a sense of utter futility and frustration on the part of these families.

Although some 7500 of "this tragic group" had been accepted by WPA they had received no assignment at the time the report was made. The figure had risen to 8100 by April 1939 and since has been increased by further WPA reductions. Another 1500 were awaiting interview. The report recommended some provision for the employable group, and an increase in the appropriation to cover this and other groups. It also recommended a maximum of \$90 per family per month with a provision for more if approved by the commissioners of the District.

The House sub-committee, ignoring the recommenda-

tions of its own investigator, recommended for 1939-40 an appropriation approximately the same as the previous year. The Senate, in its turn, increased the appropriation, made provision for the employable group and removed the restriction on the amount available for personnel.

The bill as finally passed by both houses supports the House proposals. It appropriates \$900,000 for public assistance purposes and stipulates that not more than 10 percent of all available funds may be expended for personnel. Maximum monthly allowance for a family of two is \$30, plus \$6 for each additional member up to a top of \$60. There is no provision for unemployed employables whose only resource apparently will continue to be surplus commodities.

As it was about to pass the bill the Senate was informed that the commissioners of the District had appointed Otto J. Cass, deputy administrator of the local WPA, as superintendent of public assistance, and that Mr. Cass proposed "an immediate investigation of the relief case load in the District," as a result of which the commissioners would know whether or not to ask later on for an appropriation supplementary to the \$900,000. "In view of this," the commissioners said that they felt "that at this time . . . the Senate would be justified in receding" from its proposal to increase the relief appropriation to \$1,500,000. It should be noted however that under the terms of the law only one-twelfth of the appropriation may be expended in any one month. A deficit may not be incurred.

Thus after all the investigating, Washington is back where it started from with one more report gathering dust on the shelves, one more investigation in prospect and with a great segment of its population still ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-housed, huddled out of sight behind the city's glittering marble facade.

## Looking Two Ways At Once

By MRS. PAUL R. REYNOLDS

FOR something like twelve years I have served on the Westchester County Recreation Commission. For many years I have been a member of the American Association of Social Workers, having gotten in when it was a good deal easier to do so than it is today. I find myself a divided personality, constantly asking myself why it is that the recreation worker ignores the social worker, and the social worker overlooks, to put it mildly, the recreation worker? The social worker says, "You have no standards, no measure either for yourselves or for their attainments. After a child has been in your hands for a year or so what do you know about him?" We say, "We know he is bigger . . . !" She interrupts, "But is he better?" She wants to know: Does he stand by in silence as his mother puts the frying pan full of porterhouse steak under the bed when the social worker comes around to establish need for home relief? Does he tell his Pa that he ought to reveal a legacy now safely concealed in the next state? Has he character? We say that we wouldn't know. All we know is that he is a good ping-pong player.

As recreation workers we believe that we deal with needs, but of another kind than those dealt with by the social worker. To be honest, we know that meeting a child's recreation need is pretty much a matter of his individual

good fortune and his personal drive. He must pick his own way through the labyrinth of crafts, athletics, music, folk dancing, which among other things we offer him on a silver platter. If his lungs are not so good, and his teeth worse, we probably don't discover it. If he steals, we learn it usually when he is caught going off with some bit of playground apparatus. We don't refer him to clinics, nor see that he gets there, and, alas, if he comes once or twice to share in our enterprise and then drifts away, we don't follow him to find out where he has gone or why.

Many of our clients—to use a word the social workers understand—wear clothes that don't fit the seasons and many of them wear the latest style. At a hearing before the Board of Supervisors on our recreation budget, it was thrown in our faces that ladies arrived at our door in mink coats. Instead of hiding our heads in shame, as we were expected to do, we cheered as politely as we could. Here at least is democracy. If a lady in mink and a boy in tatters both want to sculp, it's their work, not their garments nor what they do or don't pay for lessons, that establishes their positions. Personally, I should not care to give odds on which one gets the most out of the experience. But the best man wins. Such differences as we might detect in their clothes or in their teeth or tonsils are of no consequence. We prob-