

THE COUNTY WORKER'S JOB

Beef, Prunes and Ink Blots

And Other Aspects of Aid to Dependent Children

By JOSEPHINE STRODE

AS a county worker with 371 assorted social work tasks crowding my waking hours, I decided to take time out for a little serious thinking about the sixty dependent children on our roster who were eligible for that species of aid promised them under the Social Security Act. What was being done for them? What could be done for them? They couldn't vote, they had no lobby or means of organized pressure, no notion at all about the efficacy of "telegraph your congressman today." Yet here they were, sixty children for whom I, by reason of my job, had definite responsibilities. Sixty children living with anxious mothers or harassed relatives in dug-outs, in crumbling soddies, in wind-scoured shacks on the edge of town or on debilitated farms. Sixty children with inadequate food, insufficient clothing, no medical care, no suitable recreation, and without that security in their environment needed for their mental and emotional development. What could I do for them? I made up my mind to examine the whole problem and situation as realistically and objectively as possible, and not to spare myself.

Was I honestly doing anything more than giving out the just-enough-to-keep-'em-alive beef and prunes? On the level, was my case work skill anything more than a pleasing bedside manner in the bestowal of an inadequate relief allowance? With all my bundle of good intentions and my professional social work training, was my only gesture one of welcome to a small, uncertain spot in the public relief picture? Was I anything more than a dispenser of a palliative something, to which I added weak exhalations of my own personality when confronted with obvious material and emotional needs? Was my job to shake up bromseltzers of case work theory and methodology to ease client tensions, the while my eyes and mind were closed to social ills and remedial inadequacies? In other words, was I providing any degree of leadership to help these sixty children gain their rightful heritage? With my own personal inadequacies, the limitations of rural social resources, the restrictions of governmental agency regulations, and all the hazards and insecurity of economic and political changes, was there anything to do over and above the routine job of establishing eligibility to receive a few dollars a month for beef and prunes?

In facing the situation, I was determined not to overlook anything to help me do my job better. I got out the notes I had taken in a course on Child Care and Development, and scanned the headings: "Children's feeding problems in relation to food aversions in the family"; "Thumb sucking from the psychiatric angle"; "Child training for international intelligence"; "A comparative study of fourteen socially well-adjusted children with their maladjusted siblings," and so on. I was annoyed; how could all this gear in with the needs and problems of my sixty dependent children? After all, they had no food aversions, except aversions to having too little. I sighed as I thought of the professor with the aloofness of mind and the time and wherewithal to make an extensive comparative study of

fourteen socially well-adjusted children and their not so well-adjusted sisters and brothers, but all of them probably with plenty to eat and wear.

I returned to my notes. Surely I would find something helpful. What's this? Oh yes, ink blots! The Rorschach method of personality description. Not so long ago, it seems, one Rorschach, a Swiss psychiatrist, developed a series of ink blots which he used as basis for a "descriptive dynamics of personality." When a subject comes to the examiner, he is handed, one at a time, ten large cards with meaningless blots of varying size, form and shadings of color. As the subject describes what he sees in the ink blots, the examiner takes down every word he says and notes his non-verbal responses. If the subject sees only outline or color there is a certain conclusion as to his personality; if he sees shadows or animal forms the examiner is apt to spot insecurity in his emotional pattern.

THIS was too much; I closed my notebook. From the thumb-suckers of Riverside Drive to personality descriptions via the ink blots of a Swiss psychiatrist was a long and diverting jump, but I still had the survival problems of my sixty children. It came to me then, with blinding clarity, that I had large ink blots of my own—dense black ones—to resolve and interpret in addition to the fairly simple beef-and-prunes outline of mere existence for these dependent children.

There is little in published material on child welfare to prepare a county worker for the menacing ink blots which confront and obstruct when she would reach out to do something constructive for dependent children. This is true particularly in such matters as housing, foster-home care, education and recreation, and in efforts to secure the necessary community understanding, cooperation and support; and such material as there is offers less, I fear, to help the worker hold on to the vision, as she looks at these ink blots, of a square deal for all dependent children.

Take, for example, the matter of housing for dependent children in a rural county. The romantic glamour of pioneer experience still hangs over many of our worst dwellings. That dark, crumbling, smoke impregnated soddy, housing the eight Timken children, was built by the parents of the present chairman of the county commissioners, and he himself was reared in it. While he admits the possibility of deterioration, it is hard to make him face the evidence that the best of virgin-sod bricks may have a way of crumbling after years of drought and strong prairie winds. He has a sentimental fondness for the house and thinks the Timkens are privileged to be living there.

The more abstract, psychological factors involved in crowded living are even more difficult to convey and interpret to matter-of-fact rural neighbors. Through many hardships they have learned to make the most of bad situations, and to them it seems personal weakness on the part of the social worker to want to change the environment of relief clients rather than to insist that they rise superior to it.

The difficulty here, as ever, is what we can do about it. Looking back over my own attempts to "rouse" the community, I can see that most of them were of the "tear-jerking" variety, the "ain't it awful the crowded way they live" sort of thing, which raises nothing but a lot of emotional calluses on the community conscience.

A method of handling the question of living accommodations for her clients, good because it worked, was figured out by a lone county worker in the Southwest. Being extremely knowledgeable about her community, she made a spot map with every tenant house and farm indicated. In an index file was information about each place, the exact number of rooms, windows, leaks, barns and hen-houses, and the fair rental price for any given place. When any house was vacated, clients in less desirable dwellings were notified; single old ladies in big houses were informed about small houses and big families about larger ones. Demands made of landlords had to be respected because the social worker and the clients stood together in refusing to rent until necessary repairs were made. The social worker conferred with landlords in the matter of rents and did what she could to insure clients' ability to pay. All of which may have violated some theory of the clients' responsibility, but it sure did improve housing conditions for them. As an unexpected by-product the people in the community took cognizance of what she was doing, notified her of vacancies and helped her with recalcitrant landlords.

County workers out on social work frontiers have to make adaptations of their skills to fit pioneer situations. When grass roots are too tangled and tough for the plows of urban social work methodology, we get us a pickaxe and tackle our job realistically. We learn to improvise, to initiate, to change and adapt. Our aim is to achieve with professional conformity if possible, but achievement comes first and if we cannot have both, conformity must go.

IN the matter of foster-home placement for our dependent children we thought to do orthodox case work in securing the best possible social and emotional environment for them. It was Mrs. Hawley (grain-elevator Hawley) who gave the first blow to our naïveté. Finding Mrs. Hawley "over-protective," with strong, unconscious needs for dominating people and situations, we concluded that she was an "emotional hazard" for little Hubert, her second cousin's child whom she had "taken in," and we advanced cautiously to remove him from her influence.

"Well! Of all things!! The very idea!!!" She, Mrs. Hawley, the widow of pioneer, grain-elevator Hawley, had never heard of such a business! Just barely in time we remembered that anything unusual in a small community achieves the status of "national," almost religious significance. The matter of young Hubert easily could become the subject for a general town meeting. We saw that if he were removed summarily from the home of Mrs. Hawley her friends and sympathizers would rally 'round in a way to make it impossible to do anything further for Hubert, or for any other children for that matter.

We of the social work staff remained undaunted although our tongues fairly ached from holding them. We knew that mischievous, noisy, so-called problem children are hard to keep in foster homes. Foster parents, as a rule, prefer a docile, quiet child of inoffensive behavior, such as Hubert was fast becoming under the eagle eye of Mrs. Hawley. We recalled that Hubert had not always been so subdued, and while I would not say that we set out deliber-

ately to change his conduct pattern, well, we plotted.

Our professional conscience was clear, however, for had we not learned in a course in psychiatry that excessive docility has serious implications, that the "holy terror" who makes his needs and wants known has thereby achieved a sort of adjustment, while the quiet, retiring child, introverted, anxiety-ridden, turns aggressively not against society but against himself, inducing sickness, poor school achievement, and worse. We saw clearly that unless something was done soon for young Hubert he undoubtedly would become a serious personality problem. With active cooperation from his kindergarten teacher, and from a few well-selected hoodlum pals, Hubert soon became too much for Mrs. Hawley. She herself came one day to the welfare office to insist, no less, that Hubert be removed from her home. And for proof that all the efforts on Hubert's behalf were worthwhile, one has only to see "Bert," now on his Uncle John's farm, as lively a young rascal as ever was.

THIS business of caring for dependent children is a serious one, and there is no end to the learning how to do it. There is, for example, the kind of information we should have before we even think of placing a child in a foster home. We should know something about his past and present physical, emotional, mental and social life, and the same things about his real parents. We should know about his relationships to his brothers and sisters, and about the behavior patterns laid down in his early conditioning experiences. And then, of course, there is the new home where the entire family must be studied for their probable influence on the child, and their potentialities for helping him emotionally, intellectually, and physically, particularly in their capacity to give him a sense of security, a real feeling of belongingness, free from intense emotional conflict and from tensions due to the worries or anxieties of the foster parents. Perhaps we can't do very much to shunt worry and drive fear from the lives of our dependent children, but if we understand their need for emotional security we sometimes can find ways of fortifying them.

Often because of environmental or social lacks, the rural child presents unique problems. Isolated as so many farm children are, there is grave danger of personal stagnation and even degeneracy, unless stimulating and compensating factors are a part of their experiences. Sociologists have shown how even comparative isolation produces a sort of gelatinoid mental life, which is sometimes mistaken for deficiency in innate intelligence. Unless children are provided with stimulating play and social contacts, they do not achieve the personal growth and develop the creative ability which normally might be theirs. If it is not possible for farm children to have the experience of working and playing with other children, provision should be made for stimulating toys, books and other educational materials. Sometimes, it is true, extreme passivity on the part of country children when play or play materials are presented to them is not due wholly to lack of social experiences. Lack of proper and sufficient food, poor health, affection denied or rejection by parents may be involved.

It is really all very difficult. Sometimes when we think we have figured out a good way to achieve some objective

*This is the sixth of a series of articles by Miss Strode on "the processes and problems of social work where the county is the unit of service and practice runs out over the back roads to the villages and remote farms." Coming next month: *Swinging the Depression with the Killer-Dillers and Alligators.**

for a dependent child, community pressure or the rules of the agency present obstacles. It never is easy and the best we can do inevitably falls short of what we want and even know how to do. But we are a tough lot, we sod-busters of social work, and little by little our continuing experiences are helping us to improved ways and means of doing more for these children than merely passing out beef and prunes.

But now my time-out for thinking is up, and where have I gotten? Not very far I'm afraid, except as I have fortified my faith that our contribution to this hard perplexing problem must come from our own ingenuity, the quality of our understanding and our never-say-die-ness. To which I would add my conviction that the best interests of dependent children at the present moment demand that we put

aside notebooks and psychiatric formulations, quit peering at ink blots, and lift up our voices.

The Social Security Board recently has recommended that federal aid to dependent children be put on a 50-50 basis, which should bring milk and, perhaps, cod-liver oil to the beef and prunes account of your dependent children and mine—over half a million of them—in the hummocks of the Southland, in the timberlands of the North, in the mining districts of the East, in isolated counties and in crowded cities. Children can't vote, but they all have congressmen and so have you and I. Now is the time for us all to use a technique not mentioned in any book on social work, nor referred to in any course on child welfare: Buttonhole Your Congressman! Send a Wire!!

Schools of Social Work Take Stock

By ALICE LEAHY SHEA

REALISM and vision characterized deliberations at the annual meeting of the Association of Schools of Social Work held at Cleveland in late January. From the opening address by A. Delafield Smith of the Social Security Board, Washington, D. C., speaking on "The Interrelationship of Education and Practice in the Development of a Profession," to the final session of the three-day meeting, the association was concerned with what social work education is and what it ought to be. The promise for the future was sympathetically portrayed by Mr. Smith who sees social work strong in its own right—an indispensable interpreter of knowledge to man, a conveyor of human needs back to the scientist and statesman.

The regular sessions brought out vivid delineations of the functioning of the public welfare services throughout the country, and precipitated a spate of such questions as:

Can the existing schools supply the demand for trained social workers?

Do the present curricula meet the needs of students soon to be employed in rural communities?

Does the administration of social service have its proper place in the curricula?

Is classroom teaching sufficiently well correlated with practice in the field?

Should a pre-professional course be recommended? If so what should it include?

Naturally the social work educators did not offer final answers to these questions, but they discussed them frankly and fairly. What any one school was doing or could do was described and evaluated. To the curriculum committee and its subcommittee on rural social work fell several assignments for future study.

The first of the questions: "Can the existing schools supply the demand for trained social workers?" was met more specifically than any of the others. On the recommendation of the committee on revision of the constitution, under the chairmanship of Prof. R. Clyde White of the University of Chicago, the association voted to accredit two types of schools: Type I, the new offering, a school located in a college or university approved by the Association of American Universities, staffed by a minimum of two full time faculty members of valid and authoritative experience and offering the basic one year graduate professional curriculum

prescribed by the association of schools; Type II, a school equipped to offer two or more years of advanced study. Credits earned in Type I would be honored in Type II.

While on the face of it this action might appear to lower standards for social work education, the association did not see it that way. On the contrary, it saw the action as assuring that the control of professional standards would be retained within the leadership of the association. Further, it saw the action as establishing a firm base for the development of professional training in universities of the South and West in order that they may serve the expanding public program in those areas. In passing, a generous meed of credit should go to the advisory committee on state universities and membership requirements under the chairmanship of Prof. F. Stuart Chapin of the University of Minnesota, which, in order to clarify the issues, had worked for a year with a joint committee of college and university presidents representing the National Association of State Universities and the Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities.

Perhaps the report of greatest interest to the association was that given by Marion Hathway and Robert T. Lansdale on the progress of the association's special study, "Education for the Public Social Services," undertaken just one year ago under a special grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The study promises to set the focus of future professional education. Its findings are due November 1, 1939.

While the thinking of the delegates was directed forward, it also was charged with the obligation of looking backward. Old gains, it was emphasized, must be held; leaders with ideas and ideals are necessary today as always.

The one person whom the association chose to honor at this annual meeting was Porter R. Lee about to retire after twenty-two years as director of the New York School of Social Work. Mr. Lee's health does not permit him to participate now in the business of the association, but the membership formally expressed its appreciation of his wise counseling through the years and resolved to hold fast to his ideals, as he himself said, to "keep in touch with the firing line," and seek, as he has done, to raise the level of social work practice through the preparation of personnel possessed of "philosophy, knowledge, and skill" adequate to the demands of the field.