

Building a Better Citizenship

By D. A. SKEEN, in the Lions Club Magazine

IN THIS TIME of growing complexity of society and, as is often claimed, over-organization and scattering of responsibility, every civil or social organization must by its work show a justification for its existence.

It is my thought, and I will endeavor briefly to emphasize this, that the chief concern of a citizen should be "Always to bear in mind my obligations as a citizen to my nation, my state and my community, and to give to them my unswerving loyalty, in word, act and deed. To give them freely of my time, labor and means."

The status of every nation, state and community is fixed and maintained by the quality of its citizenship. Citizenship is the foundation of our civic and social structure. As we improve our citizenship we develop and improve our civic and social life. With the growth and advancement of civilization, and the congestion of population, the civic and social problems increase and the standard of citizenship must be raised to meet this increased obligation of the citizen to society.

In the growth and development of our great nation three distinct periods in history may be seen from this light:

First, the individual sacrifice and hardship undertaken and endured for an ideal, as shown in the life of the Pilgrims in their first venture for liberty and freedom from restraint, and as repeated in the life of our western pioneers, with property and worldly possessions a secondary consideration.

Second, the individual sacrifice and hardship in the material and property conquest, as shown in the movement to the West for land possessions and the great gold rush to California, where personal liberties as gained through organization were a secondary consideration, and the rights of the individual in the community, understood as an incident to worldly gain, were enforced through the vigilance committee.

Third, in the modern realization of the value, and indeed the necessity, of real, genuine citizenship as the very foundation and keystone to the structure of society; be it in the nucleus of the summer camp or temporary community, or the permanent town, state or national unit. Every such unit of society has its problems to be solved, and their solution comes from the citizen—coöperative effort—and the effectiveness of solution depends upon the standard of citizenship. To improve community life, then, both civic and social, we must build up and maintain a high standard of citizenship.

Good citizenship means loyalty to nation, community and home. Good citizenship means to build up and not destroy. Good citizenship means coöperative effort toward the great idea of service to society. Good citizenship means interest and intelligent activity on the part of every individual of every community. Every community problem is the problem of the citizen. The community must

humanize these problems to gain an intelligent solution. It must have a balanced viewpoint by taking counsel from all. This means coöperation of the different classes, professions and callings in every community—not in theory, but in practice. The problem effecting one class may not be properly solved by another class or profession. Our own national exposure of the conduct of unscrupulous officials demonstrates that we may not entrust the administration of our government and the solution of our national problems to the politicians alone.

Had there been a right appreciation of the obligations of citizenship by our national would-be leaders I venture to say the humiliating and disgraceful scandals at Washington, regardless of who may be responsible for it, would never have occurred. My neglect of the obligations of citizenship upon me should preclude me from criticizing the unfit public official, who became such by my default. The exercise of individual rights as a citizen will bring about an appreciation and a recognition by every public official of the fact that right of suffrage as well as a public office or responsibility, whether great or small, is a public trust.

The constant occupation of the professional man or business man, in whatever line, must necessarily narrow his viewpoint. The shoe dealers' association may protect the shoe dealer. The grocers' association may protect the grocery man. Likewise the doctors and lawyers in their own organizations may protect their own interests; but what about the interests of the public or the business not so organized?

Recently, in one state, a movement was undertaken to secure legislation, and the consent of the board of corrections as the governing body to create, by appropriate means, a factory or source of state employment for our prisoners—and in this time of enforcement of many laws, we must shamefully admit that we have too many prisoners—which movement was in recognition of the obligation of society to its citizens. As the movement took definite form, and at the request of the merchants and manufacturers of the state, a meeting was called, at which they were ably represented in their claims that to permit prisoners to work and produce and to place the product of their effort on the market, would destroy the legitimate business of the merchants and manufacturers.

In this they saw only their own condition, and refused to recognize the public and society as a whole, which was and is carrying the burden of the support of the families of these prisoners left upon society without provision, and the support of the prisoner in idleness when work, properly provided and supervised, would produce a product, which, properly handled, would provide his own support and assist in the support and education of his dependents or the victim of his wrong-doing and, by occupying his time,

bring him back to a realization of his rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

For every major crime the law provides a prison sentence. We cannot dispose of all prisoners by execution. We must either provide permanent confinement or provide a means for the prisoner to overcome his weakness, recover from his fall, and come back into society with proper restrictions in the enjoyment of his citizenship. "An idle brain is the devil's workshop."

The average prisoner, unless given an opportunity to improve himself and overcome his weakness and provide for the future, resents his confinement, devotes his energy and intelligence to planning further crime, and when under our present system, turned onto the street with the stigma of his confinement preventing his gaining ready employment, too often sees but one course, and that to repeat his criminal acts as the only way he knows to come back into society and meet the necessities of life.

This is not an exaggerated condition in any community, because every community in our nation is experiencing a similar problem, which is a check on its social and civic growth, and the proper solution of this problem means social and civic development. The solution of this problem alone will make for better citizenship.

Instances are many where the criminal, when given an opportunity to work and reform, is restored to society as a useful citizen; and in building citizenship it is just as important to recover one temporarily lost and who, unless recovered, may be a menace to society, as to build citizenship in the first instance. Society regrets the fall of a citizen, but may not close its eyes to the fact—and it is a fact, not a theory—that every day, for an infraction of our laws, citizens are falling through human weakness and must be restored and helped back or they will be a menace to society. This is one of the duties of society to the individual.

Another and a very important test of the functioning of any civic or social club is its activity. No citizen should feel content to see and acquiesce in existing conditions, but ever be organizing social and civic problems and then to press vigorously toward their solution. As we have read the poem, at first hearing it we were all impressed by the lines of the writer, who said: "Let me live in a house by the side of the road, and be a friend to man." This is expressing the negative sentiment. I believe that the contrary to this is fundamental, not only in theory, but should be so in practice. And may I express in the language of one far more able to express it than I, the following sentiment, contrasted with the lines on the house by the side of the road:

'Tis only a half truth the poet has sung,
Of the house by the side of the way;
Our Master had neither a house nor a home,
But he walked with the crowd, day by day.
And I think, when I read of the poet's desire,
That the house by the road would be good,