



A VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY

By John Gilmer Speed



EVERY instance of which I have knowledge the most lovely of the villages and towns in the United States have acquired that part of their beauty, not purely natural, through the voluntary coöperation of the residents. This voluntary coöperation has also contributed to neatness, thrift and prosperity. As a general thing such results have been brought about through the work of Village Improvement Societies, and in this article I propose to tell how such organizations can be started with a fair prospect of success. A certain proportion of the Village Improvement Societies that are started fail to accomplish anything worth while, and then silently fade out of existence, leaving the villages, in which such failures have been achieved, worse off, if anything, than before the effort. I have assisted in the formation of several such societies. Some of them have succeeded; some have failed. I believe that, with my experience in this kind of work, I can tell, with considerable sureness, almost immediately after organization whether a new society will succeed or fail. Before going into this phase of my subject, however, let me summarize quite briefly the advantages to be derived from the improvement of the suburban and country towns and villages.

THE work in a suburban place is easier to set in motion and easier to accomplish than in the country, for the reason that a large majority of the residents are either active participants in city life, or close observers of it. In action and in ambition, therefore, they feel the quickening influence of the great movement which has founded the wonderful urban communities, and which sustains them in their growth. I have been accused of exaggerating this urban influence in other writings, and it may be that I do so, but I cannot see that I do, whether I look at the question from either extreme of my experience, which embraces both country and city life, for I live as a city man, in town six months in each year, and as a country man, six months in the country.

The future prosperity of the country village depends, in a great measure, upon its suitability for the summer residence of those who prefer, at that season, to leave the hot and crowded cities. A generation ago a little vacation was considered to be enough for the busiest and most prosperous of our city men; and the families of such men stayed in town with the heads of their houses. When a longer residence was considered desirable, and then very quickly was considered necessary, families of means took up their abode in the great hotels of the various watering-places. After a decade of this, one and another of those who had learned better how to live came to the conclusion that country life was more comfortable, less ostentatious and altogether more to be desired. And so the country place became the hobby, and then the necessity, of the majority of those who in a large sense had met with material success. But the majority of those who are well-to-do have not met with material success in the large sense—they are merely well-to-do. But we Americans are great consumers; we will have the best that is within our means. When this immense well-to-do class realized that country life was the most desirable kind of summer life, their ingenuity was at once put to the test of finding how it was possible, without the impossible country establishment, which none save a man of wealth can maintain. The country village was found to be the place for them, for in a real country village—not a suburban village—a man and his family can be as much in the country as though they owned a thousand acres with a stately castle on a commanding hill. And what is more, in such a village a family can have all the delights and privacies of country life at an expense which can be regulated with nice certainty and according to the size of the income. Horses may be kept or not, according to that income; the same may be said of servants, and the scale of living generally properly adjusted. I know many men who manage to have a country village home, though their means are quite limited, and I have heard the confession frequently made that less was spent in the country than in town.

TO take advantage of this growing taste, this taste which will surely be permanent, is the opportunity which every country village should embrace. But a village which brings to itself this kind of residents must have attractions—attractions that are natural to begin with, and which have been taken advantage of by those who own or who have owned the property. Some villages have been so unfortunately located that at a first glance it would seem impossible to invest them with any degree of beauty. But I have seen so few such that I am not competent to speak of them. In my experience the surrounding country usually gives to a village such potentialities of beauty that a few wise improvements of streets, sidewalks, shade trees, and so on, will work a wonderful change in æsthetic conditions. Indeed, where Nature has been prolific of her gifts the problem of improvement is often much more difficult, for man is dangerously apt to disfigure that which Nature has made beautiful, when he lays his hands upon it.

But it is in such work that a Village Improvement Society may be useful in a community; in such work that such an organization may confer lasting benefits upon the locality to which it belongs. A Village Improvement Society should be a pure democracy, and within its membership it should embrace every man and woman of good repute in the neighborhood, and besides this there should be established an auxiliary league of children. This league should be asked, and urged, and instructed to assist the main society. Such societies are usually supported by fees and dues. This is very well in a village where the majority of the people are quite prosperous and

usually have a store of ready money at their disposal. But even in such places I prefer the method of supporting the society by purely voluntary subscriptions of money, labor and material. Labor is just as good as money, and is given much more freely by all save those who are rich. Now when one person concludes, or two or three or more decide to embark in the enterprise of starting a Village Improvement Society what is the first step to be taken? My advice is this: Let them enter into correspondence with a person of experience in such matters, and if their means justify it, engage that person to deliver a lecture to the people on the subject of village improvement, and at the same time make suggestions as to the needs of the particular village. This being done let them call a free public meeting to hear this lecturer, and have this meeting and lecture announced in all the churches. Then they should talk up the question among the people, securing, if possible, the interest of all the leaders of public opinion. But none should be left out, for enthusiastic assistance and wise counsel often come from the most unexpected sources. The gossips, those who know more of their neighbors' affairs than of their own, should by no means be omitted in this preliminary organization, for these gossips in a country neighborhood serve very much the same purpose as the daily papers do in the great cities. They should be sought and their habitual cynicism conciliated by flattering attentions. Then it should be arranged that some person of local distinction, and of commanding prominence in the community, gifted with readiness of speech, should call the meeting to order and introduce the lecturer or chief speaker of the evening.

Before the meeting, however, eight or ten of those who have responded most heartily to these advances should get together in a preliminary or committee meeting, and arrange as exactly as possible the order of proceedings. Without this the first meeting, upon which very much depends, is sure to drag. At this committee meeting a simple constitution should be drafted, and committees agreed upon to nominate the officers and also propose the constitution. After the lecturer is through with his remarks some one, previously agreed upon, should move the immediate formation of a Village Improvement Society, upon the lines the lecturer had suggested, and, also, that the chair appoint a committee of three to report a constitution. This committee will be ready to report at once, and the constitution will surely be adopted. The constitution being adopted, the election of officers is in order, and I recommend that a constitution should provide for a president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary, and that these officers, together with three other members, should constitute the executive committee. Upon the selection of these officers, and especially the president, the whole success of the society will surely depend.

WHEN the officers have been elected and installed some member—fluent of speech and popular in manner—should move that a specified day be set apart as the first labor day of the society; that on that day all the men and teams in the village should congregate to work under the direction of the executive committee; and that the ladies of the society should provide a picnic luncheon for the workers that day. Such a resolution will be carried with enthusiasm, and the audience will then look alert and interested. Then a committee on membership should be moved and appointed, and another committee on subscriptions. Cards should be prepared for those who wish to join to sign, and these should be passed around the audience; later the committee on membership should circulate these cards about the neighborhood. Money subscriptions should be asked from the people of means in the village or neighborhood, and pretty nearly all of them will respond. The constitution should provide for monthly meetings, and the first labor day should be selected on a date previous to the next meeting. Then the executive committee should arrange what work shall be attempted on the first day. This should be the work that is most obviously needed, and that which, when done, will show. The beginning is the great thing. It is supremely important that the work be started right.

In some untidy villages the whole of the first labor day might be given to cleaning up; in others the sidewalks might be put in better order, or pieces of new sidewalk constructed; in nearly every village it would be a good thing to put the grounds and fences of the public schoolhouse in order. But there are always very obvious needs everywhere before the advent of the village improver. But what is done that day should be done with some thoroughness, and the noonday luncheon is apt to invest the day with some of the characteristics of a festival. Provision should be made in the preliminary arrangements for this first labor day, that if the day be rainy another stated day be set apart. All the plans for this day should be thought out, and all of them carried out. What is done will be discussed in every house of the village, and the achievements will inspire confidence or provoke criticism. Even though a great deal should be done on this first day the society may still fail for lack of staying power in the controlling spirits.

THE controlling spirits will naturally be the executive committee. Of this committee the president will naturally be the leader. If he or she has not energy, enthusiasm, patience, public spirit, some measure of wisdom and great self-control, allied to entire unselfishness, then the society is pretty sure to fail. No one not conscious of the spirit and capacity thus indicated should accept such an office. It will not always be a picnic like the first day, but, on the contrary, there will be times of discouragement among the weak-kneed, and revolt on the part of the reactionaries. Then the president must bolster up the one and suppress the other.

Of course, no Village Improvement Society that is either sectarian or politically partisan can have any chance to succeed. The neutrality of the society in these particulars should be a part of its fundamental law. But it makes no difference how plainly these things be expressed in the constitution, the executive committee will find that political rivalries and sectarian prejudices are every now and then interfering with the plans of work. Then

comes an opportunity for the display of high diplomatic skill which ordinarily is reserved for the service of nations. But it is possible to steer between the Scylla of sectarian animosity and the Carybdis of political wrong-headedness, and escape shipwreck, though none but a strong hand should be at the tiller during the dangerous passage. Then the reactionary, who opposes everything new, will be found in every village. There is no use whatever in trying to conciliate or win him over, though it is not wise to precipitate a quarrel. But when the fight begins, as it surely will, then make it a fight to the death with no quarter. The reactionary—he usually calls himself a conservative or something of that sort, though, to be sure, the real conservative may not be a reactionary at all—is an evil influence and should be treated as such: Men of that kind have no real ability and are easily whipped, but their bigoted ignorance has in it a power of evil which has wrecked many a Village Improvement Society within my knowledge. Then the village improvers will come in conflict with those who stir up strife for the sake of the fight. My advice is to treat such with contempt; they love to fight, but to be scorned is death to them.

ONE more difficulty that will have to be encountered and I am done. In every village Improvement Societies have been heard of, and more or less discussed, whether the formation of one was imminent or not. It is my experience that the village idea, until it has been informed and cultivated, is that improving a village consists in pulling down the front fences and throwing all the houses into the road. Removing the front fences, and making a village park-like in its appearance, is an undoubted improvement, but it is not all that improvement means, nor yet the first improvement that should be made. Instead, it is one of the finishing touches to village improvement, and one that a society usually need not bother about. If the roads are made good and the sidewalks so constructed that they will be neither dusty nor muddy, then the fences will be taken down, little by little, and soon all of them will disappear forever. But the question should not be agitated in the beginning, as it is pregnant with danger. The majority of old-fashioned people think that their security and privacy are supported by front fences, and even their property rights maintained. They will, therefore, contest the pulling of them down, and readily become obstinate and antagonistic if they be pursued with much insistence. Let the front fences alone till such time as the sidewalks are good, and then depend upon it that when each front fence falls into decay it will be removed rather than renewed. Where sidewalks are not good the lawns will surely be trampled over in muddy weather if there be no intervening fence. The power of example, and the beauty of a grassplot stretching to the front walk, and then over the bank and beyond the gutter to the roadway, will settle the front fence question so soon as the time is ripe.

THE property owners of a village cannot make a better paying investment than in the maintenance of a well-organized Improvement Society. Through such a society the value of every piece of property in a village, and the neighborhood thereof, may be enhanced in value; village life may be made to take on new interests and new dignities; stagnation may be kindled into an exhilarating activity. Let the people become interested in a Village Improvement Society and they will soon begin to discuss plans and policies with a gratifying alertness. They will discuss how best to secure a public library; they will talk over the ways and means of getting running water into the town; they will argue over the best way of establishing a fire department; they will study drainage and sanitation; they will recognize the value of street lights when the moon is shining on another part of the world; and when they vote on these questions they will vote with entire intelligence, and they will go away from the meetings refreshed by what they have heard, and what they have said, and what they have done.

Indeed, the meetings of a Village Improvement Society should be of great value to the intellectual life of the community, and in a measure, at least, take the place in the training which used to be a part of the equipment of every American freeman when the town meeting was the local parliament, and the neighborhood affairs were regulated by a majority vote of the electors. But the managers of a Village Improvement Society must always bear in mind that what the society does is by general consent, and that their zeal in their operations, or that of their executive committee, to work improvements, is no reason for them to entertain the delusion that they are the owners of the town.



GUESTS AND FAMILY WORSHIP

By Amelia E. Barr

THERE is probably no mistress of a household who has not felt an uncertain hospitality about asking her guests to join in her family worship. Every one has acquaintances they would not hesitate to ask to their table, and would hesitate to ask to their home altar. Perhaps the reluctance arises from a dissimilarity of creed, and a fear of offense in consequence. More likely it arises from that sin of restraining spiritual confidence, which is a peculiarly besetting one in this materialistic age, for the diversity of creed is no bar. Prayer has nothing to do with creeds. Prayer is the universal religion; and men of every creed, and men of no creed may meet together at the feet of one Heavenly Father. The reluctance more likely arises from that weak shame-facedness that too often prevents sympathy between friends on spiritual subjects. They are afraid to be misunderstood, smiled at, criticised.

This latter dilemma is one that even good and great men have not always met bravely, for when Dr. Fuller once had some guests of great quality and fashion—God-fearing as he was—he omitted his family worship on their account. This act, which he bitterly repented, he designated as "a bold bashfulness which durst offend God, whilst it did fear man." But we should remember with the grand old preacher, that our guests, though they be ever so high or rich, are yet by all the laws of hospitality below us while they sojourn under our roof. Therefore, whoever comes within our door should also come within our household customs and discipline. If they sit at our table for meat it is but kind and right they should also bow at it in prayer.