Manuscript: A School House

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If you were the head of a great factory, five, ten thousand men and women, or more, how would you go about getting acquainted with them? What route would you choose not only for getting your ideas to them, but getting their ideas to you? This is the heart of the industrial problem. (What method would you use for securing their cooperation in your troubles, and giving them yours in theirs?) Establish free and natural communication between all of the men and women engaged in a particular enterprise, whenever it may be, and you have gone about as far as method or system can go in preventing misunderstandings and in arriving at decisions in which everyone will feel that he has had a part, or at least might have had his part in making.

Naturally each man that has succeeded, even partially, in establishing this communication thinks his way is the best, and some feel that their way is the only way. Great bodies of organized labor see no machinery by which this problem can be handled other than that which they have devised; but without questioning what in its perfect development the union might be, it is certain that rarely in this country does it result in free communication between the management and the rank and file of industrial plants; even at its best there is frequently one sorry result, and that is that the men at the bottom are not really taken in even by their own leaders. The machinery has not been so developed that they are educated to expressing their minds openly, as is necessary if we are to have anything like genuine cooperative bargaining.

We find many men and women both in management and in the ranks believing that this or that form of shop council gives the best opportunity for free expression, and certainly some of these
organizations do bring the man in the ranks into close touch both with management and with his fellows, but there is always the danger of their having a narrowing influence, that is of confining the interest of the man to his particular factory, and not to the trade as a whole, and this is wrong, for if a man belongs to a great trade, there should be some way by which he should see it as a whole, and have the sense of dignity and importance that being a factor in a great industry ought to give.

It is of the first importance that we should try out in our industrial life every device which makes for freer communication, that we should have no narrow and bigoted notions that this or that is the only way, but recognize that all ways which aim at this result have possibilities in them, and eventually, if allowed to develop naturally will add something to better industrial practices.

I have recently seen in operation an institution in one of the great progressive factories of this country which since its start probably ten years ago, has enabled the management in a remarkable way to get over to its seven or eight thousand employees all sorts of valuable and useful things, things not only that contribute to the development of the product itself, but directly to the enlargement and the beautifying of the lives of the men and women employed. This particular institution has not been as successful, I take it, in encouraging the rank and file of the men and women to throw back on the management their ideas and feelings, but that has begun, and is bound to develop.

The institution I refer to, is founded on the thing that after all, whatever its faults may be, has made this nation what it is, and that is the Little Red School House. The school house as a possible means of collective bargaining in the very highest sense is what is developing the National Cash Register of Dayton, Ohio, and here is how I viewed it.
We were coming out from lunch, a good-sized party, 1400 of us at least. Excepting myself and a friend, the party was made up of men, men in their shirt sleeves, and men in coats, worn with darkened hands that machine oil gives, and men with the white hands of clerks. We had had a good lunch, soup, meat with vegetables, pumpkin pie, milk, all for 35 cents, eaten to the strains of an excellent orchestra, made up out of the ranks of the workers. And now luncheon was over, and we were coming out of the big hall. They came out sedately enough, but no sooner had they struck the street than two-thirds of them broke into a run. It looked as if there were a fire.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, they are just going to the School House."

Not being accustomed to seeing grown men, any more than youngsters evince that amount of eagerness to get into a school house, I of course asked for an explanation, and I was told, "Come along and see."

The School House was a handsome building, a sort of Greek Temple affair. "Not in keeping at all with the rest of our buildings," a critical man at the top said, but, putting that aside, there was no question but it was a fine dignified structure; and you mounted the steps with the kind of self-respect and pride that going into a handsome building always awakens; but it was when you were inside that your wonder broke out, for here, packed from the top of the big auditorium to the very edge of the platform were at least 1,000 men and women, not only a majority of those that I had dined with, but three or four hundred at least that I was told brought their own lunches and ate them in the hall in order to get a good seat.

And when you saw the program, you did not wonder that they rushed for seats. It began with singing, a novel sort of singing, an illustrated
song. When you sang with gusto, as everybody did, "The Star Spangled Banner," the banner waved wildly before your eyes, a beautiful flag blown by real breezes. "Junningita" was accompanied by a succession of lovely scenes, and a heroine as lovely as the background provided for her. A really noble series of pictures went along with the noble lines of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. A more stirring and amusing exercise could hardly have been devised, and it was so well done! As I found later, these illustrated songs are given careful thought. They receive vigorous criticism from different sources before they are put on, and are only finally passed when nobody can suggest an improvement.

The songs were followed by a movie, a high class movie. Now and then when the censor is napping a frivolous one may slip in, to the stern disapproval of the directing force, but to the great joy of the audience, I am afraid. Nothing that is dull is supposed to get onto that screen; and when the play is over then come all the best current event pictures. One sees in this School House in the rest hour everything that interesting that is doing in the world.

It is twenty minutes or a quarter to one by this time, and work begins at one. Some of the audience will leave when the movie play is over. More of them will stay for current events; and always a good sized crowd for the ten minute speech that often comes from a visiting guest or someone on the staff -- the doctor, manager, anybody that is supposed to have something to say; and then, by five minutes before one, ample time you see to get into your place in the work room, the noon entertainment of the School House is over.
Every day for 313 working days of the year the School House is used at noon. Not by any means, however, does the program always follow that I saw at my first visit, and which I have described above. The School House entertains, but it never forgets its function of teaching. It was founded for that, and whatever the management at the moment thinks to be the most needed by the industrial community, it prepares for the platform. In presenting a subject every ingenious method that can be devised is employed for "putting it over", making it stir and penetrate. Almost invariably pictures are used, for to picture things, visualize them, is one of the School House's most sacred doctrines. You must see to understand; and so to teach by pictures as well as by the written and the spoken word has been a cardinal principle of the School House ever since it was opened.

Of course such entertainment and instruction are only possible when there is a fine cinema outfit. I went behind the scenes to look at the equipment at the N.C.R., and I doubt if there is a movie theatre in the country that has a better. Constant improvements are made in the plant; experiments in new effects are always in progress, and as for enthusiasm, those conducting the work are full of it. They see the educational value of it, and put ingenuity and interest into their work. They couldn't hold their positions a week if they didn't, for the dynamic force that drives the School House, the founder of the business, Mr. J. N. Patterson, tolerates nothing that is slovenly or dully done, and is never satisfied until anything undertaken is made as perfect as it can be.

The result is that a wealth of pictorial material on all sorts of topics has been accumulated. There are at least 75,000 slides now on file. Rarely have I seen more beautiful pictures. Most of
them are colored. The work is done at the factory itself for the photographic department like the cinema equipment is complete in every particular, and always the latest developments in the art are tried out. These colored slides are mounted according to subject in big swinging frames. They are arranged in proper sequence for an intelligent talk, and in many cases the text of the talk is on file for the pictures, so that if the School House needs, for instance, instruction on Russia, it is easy to put one's hand on the pictures or text, and to fit into the entertainment any new facts and pictures.

The range of topics is very great. Much is made of travel, particularly of travel in the United States. There are slides in the collection from every state and from the leading cities. There are many beautiful things from Europe. A few months ago a delegation of Swiss manufacturers visited the plant, and to their great amazement and delight they were entertained one day with a factory lecture on Switzerland, illustrated with more than one hundred exquisite colored scenes. If they had been Scotch or Chinese, Japanese or Egyptian, the same thing could have been done for them; and along with the pictures in each case, excellent maps would have gone.

As this factory was one of the first in the country to take up welfare work, and it has always been diligently and enthusiastically carried on, there are many pictures and talks upon what is done in other parts of this country and foreign lands. There is a remarkable series of slides on the progress of inventions, as there should be since the factory itself carries a staff of inventors, who constantly are making improvements on its product. One might go on over a great range of subjects. Whatever happens to be the impelling
interest of the factory at a given time finds its way into pictures and lectures.

Health is, I should say, after efficiency, the great passion at the N.C.R.; and the School House is constantly used by the Medical Department to drive in its lessons. Lectures have been built up little by little on all sorts of things, posture, cleanliness, diet, digestion, sleep, the teeth. They are given to groups, and in time are heard by all the employees. They are the simplest in their wording, for when it comes to English expression, the rule at the N.C.R. is, "Always the fewest words, and the shortest words." They popularize the last word in science, and are illustrated by the best pictures that can be obtained.

Aproof of the thoroughness of these lectures was had in the war. The factory had several years ago two painful proofs of the dangers of contagion in venereal diseases. The Medical Department was at once ordered to prepare something that would bring home to the employees the peril. This lecture was worked out with the advice of great specialists and was built up month by month until it was believed to be as sound and impressive as it could be made by careful statement, and well-chosen pictures. The war came on. The War Department saw the necessity of some intelligent teaching in the camps. It was thought it might be done by illustrated lectures.

Several institutions having lectures were asked to send their slides and speakers to Washington to give the authorities an exhibit. More than a dozen came, and out of the number the N.C.R. lecture was the one that was selected. It was given in practically all the camps in the country and given frequently. The factory contributed the lectures and outfit as a war service, and so far as I know the tag of the N.C.R. was never
allowed to be attached. All the men of the factory see this particular lecture at least once every three months.

After health, I should say that the great hobby of the School House is out-of-door life, and particularly gardening and what they call "city beautifying." This particular hobby is almost as old as the factory and is counted as a no mean factor in the development of the business itself. This is admirably shown in an illustrated lecture that is often given in the School House for the benefit of visitors. It traces the development of the factory from 1864 when it occupied a floor in a small building in Dayton, and employed 50 men, to what it is today with the buildings covering scores of acres, and its employees numbering well onto 8,000.

It was in 1865 that the first factory building was put up. It was in a typical old-fashioned factory neighborhood, a place known as Slidertown. The nearest neighbors to the new factory were a pest house and two or three ancient grave yards. I believe it was generally said that everything bad in Dayton slid down to Slidertown. Particularly did the new factory have trouble with bad boys. They tried shutting themselves in by a picket fence, but whoever saw a picket fence that a bad boy does not laugh at?

Finally Mr. Patterson decided that as they could not keep the boys out, they must humanize them, make them good neighbors. He has a supreme confidence in the civilizing power of green grass, flowers, and particularly of working in gardens, so the picket fence was torn down, and the boys in the neighborhood were told, "Here is a piece of land that you may have for a garden. We will give you the seed. We are going to make gardens too. See if you can do as well as we do," or something of that kind.
The factory did wonderfully. J.C. Olmstead was called to lay out the grounds. Trees and shrubs and flowers blossomed all over the old disreputable fields, and while they were planting, the boys were digging and sowing. They took to it like ducks to water.

A little later a boys' club was established, and a tactful woman put at the head of it. Classes for girls and boys were established. That was many years ago. Today the boys' and girls' gardens and the Boys Club House and the things they have developed about them are the finest models in the country of that sort of thing.

The lecture goes on to show how this work in and near the factory spread. It spread to the homes of the people themselves as beautiful and interesting landscape gardening on a small scale as you will find anywhere in any country is to be seen in Dayton, the direct result of the teaching in landscape gardening that has been given for years to the workers in the School House.

The screen and the platform of the School House co-operate in correcting bad and wasteful working habits. A favorite picture directed against waste shows a man washing his hands in benzine instead of soap and water, simply because it can be done more easily, never thinking of the cost of the material. Nobody thinks of such a thing today in the N.C.R., unless he is an unconverted, irresponsible new arrival.

The organization of the company, and the relation of its factors are constantly explained to the people by simple and graphic illustrations, for instance, the Company in one of the lectures is compared to a three-legged stool; labor, capital and management are the legs; and it is shown when one of the legs weakens, the stool topples over.
The necessity of order and system in carrying on an enterprise is driven home by pictures of the circus packing for its nightly move, and the lecture argues that if a circus can change its base every 24 hours, without confusion, the factory ought to be a model of smoothness and harmony.

Information about the equipment of the factory, the changes in practices, the improvements, are an admirable feature of the teaching. They tend to break down the ignorance of the worker in regard to the industry and to awaken interest in the operation and the machinery which surround him and which his own operation and machine are an essential part. Some of the speakers who are invited into the School House for this purpose are men of the first calibre in the engineering world. For instance, a recent speaker was Carl Johansson, the inventor of the marvellous system of gauges by which a standard of precision in measuring has been secured which before him was undreamed of. Mr. Johansson told of his long years of experiment and of his successive inventions. He showed blocks which he declared accurate to one-millionth of an inch, and fore-shadowed instruments of precision to come. The performance aroused the keenest interest among thoughtful minds throughout the plant largely because they realized that Johansson blocks were used in the works.

Not only in this varied educational work carries on in the School House, but through it the management is doing an unusual effective kind of collective bargaining. To be sure the sticklers for strict interpretation, the man who balances his words on the point of a needle in the fashion of the school man and the lawyer will balk at my use of them in connection with the N.C.R. School House; but I shall stick to my guns, not only because of what I see it
doing, but because of what I see it trying to do. The spirit of collective bargaining at least is already very busy in the School House, and management and workers are expressing themselves to each other there more and more clearly. You see they have established the habit of using the place informally for all sorts of purposes, and it is natural enough to go there to talk things over, if that is what is needed.

What I mean can possibly be illustrated by a meeting that I saw last December. The management was not satisfied (so far as I can gather from the history of the concern, they never are satisfied,) the question of production was troubling them. Here, as everywhere, after-war production had slowed up. Here, as everywhere, the after-war morale of the worker was lower. Then the confusion of the sudden changing from making war material to the old business of the concern, changing machinery, rearranging rooms, shifting positions, all of this had caused confusion, delay and general disorganization. Comparison of the output of 1919 with that of 1914 and 1915 were being made; and it did not look good to the management. Something had to be done.

Now I have been accustomed to seeing the jacking up and reorganization which such a situation requires come solely from the top, descending upon bodies of superintendents, foremen and job foremen in a series of orders emanating from many long meetings of hard-worked directors, or possibly after an occasional superintendent or foreman has been called in for consultation; but the orders all came from the top. But here was what went on in the School House in this case!

Five or six hundred superintendents, and foremen were called together, and the situation put bluntly and squarely to them, man to man
fashion: "Something is the matter with our production. Wages are better conditions are better; hours are shorter; but we produce less this year, 1919, than we did in 1916. Where is the fault? We have some ideas, but you, being closer to the task, must have more. Let every man in this room give us his ideas, write them out," said the speaker and the head of the manufacturing department. "I will answer it to the best of my ability. If I can't answer it, I will take it up in our directors' meeting; what we want is to get down to the bottom of the difficulty, and we want your help in doing it." There was no time lost. The answers came firing in, tumbling over one another, short and to the point, questions that challenged the management, one department after another, the man at the machine, the hours, the profit-sharing scheme, the wages; challenged everything, the economic system the federal administration included; indeed they touched all over the upheaved globe.

Many challenged the statement that production had fallen off, and brought out point after point to show that it should have been qualified by this or that circumstance; and more than one point the chairman admitted to be well taken. They demanded to have it prove to them, these five hundred or more men, that there were not reasons that would be satisfactory to the management itself for the falling off in production. I learned more in 40 minutes about the running of the factory and the intricate problems involved than I could have done in many days of casual observation.

They challenged the worker. He had a fear of doing too much, feared his piece rate would be cut; and here came a violent declaration from the chairman that if he found anybody cutting a piece rate there would be a change in that foreman, and if any worker had any reason to suppose that his piece rate would be cut, it was for him
Now anyone will agree, I think, that the directing body had been taken in, had had a fair man-to-man chance to discuss the matters which were troubling the factory; but there still remained the 6,000 or so. \( \text{operators to be taken into account} \). The problem now was to say to John Jones, "What do you think about these matters?" "What is your opinion of the profit-sharing scheme?" "How does this new idea about hours or piece work rate or what not seem to you?" -- to say that to him and to get his answer back as frankly as the answers had been coming back from the 500 men in the directing body. After all, here is the most difficult and delicate of all our industrial perplexities, and the one which has the greatest need of being straightened out.

The management did not shirk it, as managements so often do. In the first place they knew that what had been going on in the school house was getting over to John Jones and his fellows. These 500 superintendents, foremen and job foremen were spending their working hours; it should be remembered, among the 6,000, one to every 15 at least. 90% of them had come out of the ranks of the workers. They were holding places that 90% of those at the machines would some day in the future be holding. Most of them had the habit of communicating with those men whose work they were directing. They were their neighbors. They travelled back and forth from home to factory in the same cars. Inevitably what had been going on in the ten days' discussion was filtering out through the body of workers; but the management was after something more direct than that; and so at the end of the tenth day of discussion, they sent out to the factory this notice:

"We will continue to hold meetings until a satisfactory solution
has been reached for the problems of wages, hours, profit-sharing, piece work rate, etc. We will probably call many of you men and women into the meetings to help us. It will take some time, and we need the cooperation of every man and woman in our organization to do it."

The suggestion that they should call in men from the rank and by file was immediately acted on. They have begun to take them departments, and to follow the same procedure that was followed with the directing body. Whether they are getting as frank a response as they did with that body I am not able to say, as I have not had the opportunity of following one of these meetings. It would be surprising if they did for the men and women concerned have not had the education in expressing themselves that the directing body has had, and must be educated to it; but this should be remembered as is in favor of the undertaking: these men and women have the habit of using the school house. It is not a strange place to them, any more than their work room. They are often called upon to give their opinion of a movie, to make a request for a song. Almost every week somebody comes out of the rank and file in the School House to sing a song, or give some kind of a performance. There is always a vigorous search going on to discover talent, talent outside of that required for the work room. This very familiarity with the place will make discussion easier; but whether the N.C.R. reaches at once the result it seems or not is of far less importance than the fact that it has seen the possibility of this institution it has been building up so long, and that it is \textit{eagerly} seeking to take advantage of it. It is one of those things which in any case is all to the good.
Now anyone will agree, I think, that the directing body had been taken in, had had a fair man to man chance to discuss the matters which were troubling the factory; but there still remains the 6,000 or so. Are they to be taken in? The problem now was to say to John Jones, "What do you think about these matters?" "What is your opinion of the profit-sharing scheme?" "How does this new idea about hours or piece work rate or what not seem to you?" -- to say that to him and to get his answer back as frankly as the answers had been coming back from the 500 men in the directing body. After all, here is the most difficult and delicate of all our industrial perplexities, and the one which has the greatest need of being straightened out.

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