Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th St.
New York City

There is no surer way of finding out what is going on in American towns and cities than to listen to the talk of those informal groups which come together at great annual national conventions. The delegates come from every corner of the land eager to exchange experiences. Usually they are as jolly as a Rotary meeting, and if it is a matter of their town and their advantages boastful, but for a year now there has been in the discussion of town affairs by such groups a sober and anxious note.

I heard it expressed outspokenly last August by one of a group of what we call "solid citizens" - business men of high type who all their active lives had taken [illegible] parts in their towns in getting for them everything which made them "a good place to live." They had worked to make them healthy and beautiful, worked for good schools, for parks, hospitals, for slum clearance, for county clubs, boy's clubs, playgrounds and they had not merely given money, they had given themselves and were proud of what had been done.

But now they were anxious and they listened moodily as the speakers told with bitterness of what Federal Relief was doing to his community. "It's breaking us down. I never believed it could happen. We have always had two

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

big ideas. You've heard me talk this before, sort of hobby of mine. We went in for relief that built up men and women, saved or restored self-respect. We never called that charity - never allowed that word used - we called it Human Salvage. Everybody understans salvage in an industrial town like ours. We held them mainly by the force of public opinion, the contempt stronger among our poor than our rich for a man who does not do his part.

"When there was illness or accident or unemployment bad luck we looked on it as a community obligation and there was a lot of pride in what we did, for it was community business, not merely rich men's business. Our industries have always looked after the unemployed, that is those who have been with them over a year - considered it part of their business. That is we have always taken care of ourselves in depressions, were doing so this time, and then last year along comes the big State boss and tells us that there is $100,000 of Federal Relief money coming to us. We told him we didn't need it, didn't want it, but we couldn't help ourselves. The money not only came into the town but a Bureau was set up to distribute it, a Bureau of politicians helped out by people who mean well enough but who know nothing about those we deal with, who have no use for our ways of doing things. What they have done to a lot of the people we have been looking after for years trying to save their self-respect or restore

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

if if they had lost it, you wouldn't believe. We have dozens now on relief rolls that we have kept off for years and there is nothing to be done about it. Business is steadily getting on its feet but the more people we put to work the more go on relief rolls and we don't know how to stop it."

It is not necessary to go to an annual convention for such reports. Rather the report is significant because you cannot today get together a half dozen men and women really experienced in the problems incident to the meeting of human needs without more or less of the same complaint.

~~A point and~~ Emphasis is given to [illegible] by the disconcerting fact that while there has been a substantial increase in employment since the low level of March 1933 there has been a much greater increase in the amount spent on public relief. It was estimated that in September 1934 the first stood at forty percent, the second at seventy six percent and the disparity has continued to increase. In November 1934 there were 19,017,815 persons on relief rolls - according to F E R A reports-over 600,000 more than in September and the increase in money spent over that with which we started in 1933 - the peak of our distress-was ninety three percent.

But how are we to explain this? There is no manner of doubt that the intrusion by the politically minded which so disturbs many people experienced in social work accounts in certain quarters for something of the increase. This was foreseen and voiced when in 1933 Congress made its

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

first appropriation - $500,000,000. The Administrator of Federal Relief, Harry Hopkins, was prompt and emphatic in warning against any attempt on the part of politicians to administer relief.

"You cannot fool with this relief business on a political basis," he said. "Some people have tried it, I have no doubt in some parts of the United States that it is done. The Federal Relief Administration has no intention of tolerating political interference in the administration of public relief to the millions of people in this country."

Along with the politician Mr. Hopkins classified that individual who generally goes along with him the man or woman who knows nothing about administration but needs a job and gets it.

"There is a perfectly amazing lack of responsibility of people who are willing to turn the administration over to incompetent people. Why, even a bootlegger hires somebody who knows his business to cut his liquor. Great guns, why aren't we entitled in the administration of seventy million dollars of taxpayers' money a month, used in the care of fifteen million people, why aren't we entitled to skilled and competent direction in the care of these people?"

That was the way Mr. Hopkins felt about it in the beginning. It is the way he feels about it now.

Once those great sums were voted by Congress there was no human foresight and force that could have prevented an attack by a certain element, but while their influence accounts for a percentage of the increase in the numbers on the relief rolls, I am convinced it is a comparatively small percentage.

Certain things must be remembered when we complain that a forty percent increase on pay rolls does not produce

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

forty percent decrease in relief rolls. It has been reckoned by those familiar with the figures that only one in every ten of those who have been re-employed had been on relief. Those first taken back are properly the substantial workers, long with the industry. In the employer's mind, the job "belongs" to them.

But how had they been getting on? Some had nest eggs, insurance, bank accounts, stock in the industry to which they belonged, membership in fraternities which prepare for the evil days which all human experience proves comes and must be provided for if lived through - the seven lean years to be cared for by the seven fat.

Generally speaking men and women who have had the wisdom to provide for a bad time are people who know how to piece out savings. They understand "subsistence farming." Thousands upon thousands of people who never heard the term until now have from time immemorial looked to it as part of their support. Little farms, thousands of them - gardens, more thousands, exist throughout the country particularly in the neighborhood of industrial towns.

There is one great mining company in this country which for twenty-five years has seen to it that the eight thousand families in its towns had opportunities for gardens and on an average seven thousand five hundred of them have had gardens in good and in bad times, filling cellars with vegetables and canned stuff, sometimes in summer selling vegetables.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

Savings, subsistence farming, odd jobs account for no small number of the one-half of the unemployed who have not been on Federal Relief. No insignificant number is accounted for by that energy and ingenuity which leads men and women in time of stress to seek opportunity, force it. Hundreds have set up little businesses in the last four years which in more than one case have developed into substantial ones.

But there are many, many people in this one-half pretty well worn out with their struggle. Their savings are exhausted. A garden may keep a family in food - a few hens may give eggs and an occasional "chicken in the pot," but where is the money to come from for taxes, up-keep or rent if he does not own his place? With what is he to buy fuel, clothes? Probably the largest part of those added to the relief rolls since employment began to increase has come from those who have weathered four years but have nothing left for the fifth.

But if I understand the man whose experience I have quoted, his complaint goes much deeper than the fact that through the efforts of politicians and untrained workers, people in his town are being put on relief rolls that he thinks have no business there, ~~would not be there if "outsiders" had not increased the town's organizations for charity with un-employed~~. What alarms him is what they are doing to a fifty years effort to build up ~~his town~~ a system under which those in need could be brought back where they could take care of their own needs - a system of rehabilitation instead of one of disintegration.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

This alarm is shared by many people. It is one of the phases of relief administration that should be squarely faced. The idea that men and women should not be allowed to go to pieces because they can no longer meet even such fundamental needs as food and shelter, that they should be rebuilt, come in with what we call Organized Charity. Every man and woman in the country over fifty who once was accustomed to giving to the begger, the tramp, remembers the struggle he had with himself not to give to all who asked, but to give his sympathy, his time and his money to building up institutions which would help cut off the beggars and the tramp at the source.

Rapidly there has been developed a fine program for holding together crumbling families, for caring for dependent children, for preventing delinquency by giving boys and girls clubs, playgrounds, vocational work, incentive to decency and effort, for caring for illness through hospitals and nursing service, and men and women were trained to carry out the program. Between the institutions necessary for the work largely supported by private funds and the local relief work there has come to be increasing co-operation.

To do anything to break down this system would be parallel to breaking down the scientific management based on experiment and training which we find in many great industries. But that is what happens, is happening, not only is our sound and practical service for meeting human needs being demoralized by the obvious difficulties of mass relief but on all sides the

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

fact of Federal Relief is being seized on by former supporters of such essential institutions as hospitals, nursing services, family restoration as a reason for backing down on contributions. "Let the government do it - we pay taxes."

That is, there is a general weakening of the sense of individual responsibility to support and strengthen the very social agencies which they have helped build.

Who today is giving ten percent of his income to support Human Welfare? Yet there was a time when men who realized their social responsibility talked in terms of the ancient tithe and many religiously observed it. Before the writer is an accounting of one man's tithing. It is entered in four little books, six by three and a half inches, the ordinary ten cent paper bound note book. On the outside in a clear strong hand - LORD'S BOX. Look within and you will find on the title page "Accounts with the Lord's Box." The first account runs from January '83 to December '93. The second picks up the account from January '94 and carries it to August 1903 when the book gave out and a new one was bought. The third carries the Box from September 1903 to December 31, 1927. The fourth and last begins with January 1, 1928 and its last entry is of November 7th of the same year, within two months of his death.

That is, these little books give the accounts running over forty five years of steady giving of ten percent of all money earned by the man who kept them.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

This man, David L. Holbrook by name, was a minister whose salary seems never to have been over $1400 a year. Regularly he gave ten percent of whatever it was. You find it credited properly month by month in the Lord's Box. And he gave ten percent of all the little sums that came his way. There was a time when the Church paid the Parsonage rent and always ten percent is credited to the Lord. He sang sometimes and received fees, and ten percent went to the Lord, as did ten percent of the marriage fees and other small royalties and the whole was painstakingly distributed to those institutions which he believed most useful to his world.

Who can match that today? Certainly it is not to be matched by reading the reports of giving by Federal income tax payers. Take the records for 1926 - our most prosperous year. The returns included 111,123 persons whose average income was $1,742. Their contributions to Human Needs averaged not ten percent but 2.2 percent. Drop to the bottom of the list - the biggest incomes, $5,000,000 and over - there are twenty six of them averaging $10,763,077 each. These persons gave just half of what Mr. Holbrook gave or five percent. Five percent netted a tidy average sum, $537,185, but it was only half of the amount it would have been if Mr. Holbrook had been doing the giving.

Not to support our needed agencies now, to find excuse in the burden of Federal tax is like hauling down a flag in battle and the worst of it is that it weakens what is the most important thing in the United States, or any Democracy,

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

the individual and his collective community efforts. They are and always have been the strength of this country. They are our true experiment stations - laboratories in which we learn how to do things, things industrial, educational, social, philanthropic.

The country is not built from the top, it is built from the bottom by these collective efforts. The great problem in this country is to save what is good in them, to correct what is evil and go on building. The fundamental criticism of the man I have quoted had of Federal Relief was not that pork and cotton came to them where they did not need it, that money was poured in with orders to make work for people to do when already the community was looking after its people, it was that their local personal responsibility which they were meeting with courage was invaded, that self-respect at both ends of the line among those who received and who gave was weakened, the one reverting to his old begging psychology the other to his hoarding.

But the day of Federal Relief in the form we have known is passing. It never pretended to be any more than an emergency. What we could have done without it no man can say. It was essential at the moment, like building ships, training men in war times. It was done on a grand scale because the emergency was on a grand scale.

The experience now is chiefly valuable as a guide to the administration of what the government plans to replace it.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

The present program proposes to substitute at once jobs for the dole and $3,000,000,000 are asked to make work for those who have none and can find none. What kind of work? Work that men know is sound and useful, such as the projects of the C C C or extemporized jobs like too many of the C W A, the memory of which remain in some communities I know as laughing stocks to government improvisation.

How is this vast project of public works to be managed? What are the communities effected by it to have to say about that administration - men given jobs and allowed to loaf on them are as badly demoralized as men ~~who refuse jobs when they can get relief, as men~~ who give up jobs if they can though by political intervention get relief.

How are the responsible citizens of the local community to be used in carrying on these attempts to replace relief money by work?

How are ~~the~~ how citizens and his community to exercise their responsibility in the grandeose and essential programs of social insurance which Congress is now considering? That program is planned to ~~fully~~ take care of the worst suffering which comes in depressions. It proposes to take care of unemployment by building up funds sufficient to carry those out of work through for what may be counted a reasonable time. It proposes that State and Nation combine to make old age secure in all times, good or bad, so that come a crisis we have the

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

satisfaction of knowing that men and women, too old for labor who have for any reason been unable to provide for themselves will be sure of a pension; it proposes to extend and naturalize the great work for public health already in operation ~~and to make enlarge, make general~~ as well as all of the efforts to aid the child which ~~already~~ pepper the country. It is a ~~great effort~~ affair to make general those benefits which communities, industries, societies, bureaus - local, state, national, have proved to be ~~possible~~ desirable & practical

But here again how about the administration. The community alone knows its old, its child, its health. It has a practical method of handling ~~unemployment~~ all these problems, as it has for handling unemployment.

The bill recognizes the need of co-operating with local agencies, but the reality, the strength of that co-operation will depend more on the insistence of the local authority that this is their business than on any desire of outside authority to work with them. And always there will be the danger in the administration of these great new national agencies for human welfare that the politician holding the purse strings will attempt the same intrusion of which Harry Hopkins warned when the Federal Emergency relief began in 1933. And he will succeed if those people of the United States who have been running their local affairs give up the job with the hope that all of these cares that they have

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

been managing with more or less success are going to be taken off their shoulders, that the only thing they will have to do henceforth - and which they can do with infinite grumbling - is to pay taxes. No greater disaster could come upon the United States than this releasing the individual and the locality from this fundamental obligation to look after these neighbors who for one reason or another are out of work, old without resources, sick without funds, those for whom always the responsible people of the United States have regarded it their business to provide.

Digital Image, 2009, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library