GROUP INVESTIGATES TYPICAL MILL TOWN

Commonwealth Teachers and Students Get First-Hand Impressions

_Editor’s Note:_—Bill Reich, Commonwealth teacher, and several students recently visited a typical southern mill town. The following account of their impressions was written by Libbie Volpe, one of the students.

This is company town. Niggertown, Uptown, the mill, fenced off from the rest of the world like a prison, or a cemetery. Only one road leads into the enclosure. Over that road there is no welcome sign.

Niggertown. Rows of boxes, whitewashed in some prosperous past. As befits the lowly Black, his part of town is situated in marshy lowlands. The shacks touch the water’s edge of the surrounding swamp. Some of these shacks are built right over the water. If the water were deep enough, they would probably float away. Water, we later learn, is the only public utility which is free. Why not? It can be dipped out of the back yard. Clambering up a stairless porch, we inspect an empty interior. There are two rooms, perhaps eight feet square. Paper is peeling off the walls. Windows without panes, light sockets without lights, leaks in the roof, wide cracks, a back door opening on to the marsh—the Negro half of the population call this home. We walk down a street where grass always grows, passing one after another of these houses. All are empty and all are alike, stark symbols of poverty.

Uptown. Here the white folks live. Quarters here are at least habitable, but no more. The business section is adequately represented by one main street, with a sidewalk two blocks long. On it are

College Bell Rings From New Tower

Singing a melancholy song especially written for the occasion:

_The old bell tower_  
_It ain’t what it used to be._

Commoners pushed over the old bell tower which has for eight years served as a support for the bell upon which all community signals are rung. The new bell tower, made by B. H. Stevenson, was then fittingly dedicated.

COY TO RETURN

Harold Coy, teacher of current history, will be at Commonwealth during the spring quarter. For the past several months he has been working in St. Louis.

$500 GRANT MADE BY ELMHIRST COMMITTEE

Work to Start on New Barn

When Banks Release Money

The Mrs. Leonard Elmhirst Committee has granted Commonwealth $500 for the purpose of erecting a barn and potato cellar. A check for half of this amount was received by the school, was deposited in a St. Louis bank, and was, of course, frozen in the financial blizzard which hit the nation. As this is written there is no immediate prospect of a thaw. Work will start on the new barn as soon as this money is available.

A hundred-dollar check from Mrs. Louis D. Brandeis remains in the college strong box. The school has little cash on hand, but Mena merchants are selling on credit and are accepting checks upon the Commonwealth checking account in a Mena bank. So far the panic has caused little inconvenience at Commonwealth, but money will be necessary soon. It may be impossible to mail the next issue of the Fortnightly for lack of cash with which to pay the postage.

Plans are going on to make the college as nearly self-sufficient as possible. A large garden crop will be planted and the flock of chickens will be enlarged. Several pigs were acquired recently and the herd of cattle is growing.

Every possible way of cutting down the cash budget is being considered. In the past Commonwealth has bought most of its meat from neighbors, but it is now planning to can meat as well as vegetables and fruit, during the coming season. Meat canned in summer is economical because livestock can be fattened when pasture is good at very low expense.

The garden planned for this summer is the largest in the history of the school. If weather conditions permit, seven or eight acres will be planted.
I walked down Pennsylvania Avenue from Washington Circle to F. Street. The fall rains had begun, but the air was heavy and warm. An occasional tree was influenced by the changing season. Soft reds and yellows mixed with the green foliage brought the gray sky down more closely, and added to the melancholy of the morning.

Such a day was not one to choose for walking, but I was on the job hunt, and my need was great.

First, I would go to the agency. There Miss Brown had been polite if not cordial, and she had suggested that I come in every day. Then I would take the offensive and go the rounds of cafes, offices and department stores. During the past few weeks I had been to all I could discover. Somewhere there must be a job! I determined to repeat my calls.

Miss Brown sat calmly at her desk. How pink her finger nails were! Her hair was so smooth and so deliberately waved that it seemed to be pasted to her head. "See," her whole make-up shouted, "you must be well groomed to be successful!"

"No, there is nothing yet," she said to me. "You might come back later."

Of course, I had known that it would be like that. I had put down as the minimum wage for an eight-hour-a-day job as secretary or clerk the amazing figure, $15.00 weekly. "I have girls who will work for $12.00," said Miss Brown. "But I can't live on $8.00 and pay rent." That is a little matter.

By the elevator were posted many little hand lettered signs:

"Use your head! Be different — Think!"

and,

"An employee should produce for his employer ten times the amount of his salary to be correctly paid."

I felt discouraged. And my need was great.

So I walked down past the Treasury, the United States of America Treasury. The moonlight cast dark shadows on the windows behind them. Columns were originally designed to hold up — to support. Those tall columns needed no strength for the building was complete without them. But the poor people who daily pass them need strength, and the power of our Treasury columns can not be transferred to them. Treasury money. I must have money. I must earn money.

There was a restaurant. It was spacious, and glistening with black glass tables. "That would be a pleasant place to work," I thought. "I shall go in there and see."
"Poor Man's Cake" is described in proletarian language. Rye bread, oatmeal wafers, up-side-down cake, chili, corn fritters, never-fail cake. But not all of the verse herein is severe and practical. Here is a fine stanza entitled "Sea Foam Frosting" by Mrs. Bosch. It begins "Boil sugar and water until it spins a very fine thread. The tempo of the poem increases — until it achieves a tom-tom rhythm: "As soon as put on stove beat continually until done."

"Ginger bread (college rule) price 47 cents," Bran muffins. "Bird nest pudding (figs.)" Some of the recipes are written in terms peculiar to Commonwealth. For instance: "add Dorothy Alfrey's handful of salt."

One item is puzzling. It is labeled "Debating Class." It reads: "Skilled labor. Willie S. $75 for a union card. Attitude of the A. F. of L..." We soon discover, however, that this is not intended for a recipe. The truth is that this old cook book was once a notebook belonging to Willie S.

There is a story here, no doubt. We can imagine Willie slipping into the kitchen between classes, when the cooks were not about, filling his pockets with poor man's cakes—"Willie, what in the world are you doing in that bread box?" Willie is caught. We can't imagine how Willie got out of the scrape, but anyway, in the confusion, he forgot his notebook.

Cooks in general are a Spartan lot. We are always amazed at the instruction they give each other. Commonwealth cooks seem particularly cruel. Here are some of the feats calmly advocated in the Commonwealth cookbook: "Wash and soak over night in brine." "Stir constantly when hot." "Wash head and place in boiling water." "Flatten and bake in oven."

We have the utmost respect for Commonwealth cooks of the past. Not only did they stir constantly when hot but they found time to spin the day with such passionate words as: "eggs in the crock, beat."

Pan Cakes
eggs in crock, beat
small handful of salt
water till three forths—half milk
beat pan cake flour
hot fire and skillets

Thus in one swift stanza some cook of long ago expressed the mood of the day. How much more vivid is the eulogistic line: "hot fire and skillets," than the weakly sentimental: "God's in his heaven, all's well with the world!" Here in the battered—yes, battered—old cookbook is a fine, naive literary power.

Everyone on the campus was surprised the other day when Warren Smith admitted that he knew all about farming. Tall, blond, good looking and even with a varsity sweater in football, Smith would pass any place for a bank clerk. But he bundled out a pair of overalls and became Commonwealth's stockman when the regular man of that trick headed for the tall timber and got a job as a lumberman. Born on a Dakota farm, Smith grew up in Ohio, where he was news boy and a boot black; in Wisconsin, where he lived in the North woods and went after deer; in Illinois where he drove a speed boat at a summer resort lake and in Minnesota, where he was in an army camp for two years. It had been twenty years. Warren wants to be a teacher of social sciences and came to Commonwealth to study that field. As an avocation he has music, which means a slide trombone and a portable phonograph, one of which Commonwealth owns and the other which he and his room mate disparage. You can figure out which is which, and you'll be wrong about it.

In his dual role of librarian and executive secretary, O. Hittenrauch shuttles back and forth between the office and the library. When it all gets too much, he pulls the cover over the Remington and goes out on the wood crew and does what he can with an axe and gum slabs. Hittenrauch came to Commonwealth from a small Eastern town where he was ill for only four years. At first he war put to work here on the farm, doing such things as fixing fences, picking strawberries, sawing wood and pouring concrete. Last spring he became a typist in the office and did odd jobs on the Port Nightly. During the summer session, news leaked out that he was a librarian by profession, so he took over the reins when the regular librarian left on vacation. At the beginning of this year, Hittenrauch became the executive secretary and a student member of the college association. He lives with a Nebraska mule-skinner in what, due to long-term swapping and careful collecting of furniture, has become one of the campus' desirable marriage suites. Hittenrauch comes from Marion, Ohio, where he clerked in grocery stores and painted wheels in a tractor factory, among other things. Blond and twentysix, he runs frequently and badly, plans as a vocation administrative work in labor education and as an avocation, writing.

THE KANS FRIENDS

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Mar, 15, 1933 COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE FORTNIGHTLY Page Three

INTRODUCING
Members of Commonwealth Group

March 15, 1933

Commonwealth College Fortnightly

Culinary failures are not recognized in this public manner. But it is a hardy-natured cook who can dish up eight bowls of scorched gravy or an obviously insufficient amount of slaw without being disheartened by the knowledge of social disapproval soon to follow. An office worker may have his errors noted only by the foreman and a few fellow workers, but the product of a cook's efforts is set out for judgment by the whole community when it is in a critical mood.

The fame of a Commonwealth cook is not fleeting. Her skill at bran muffins or chili may be remembered long after she is gone. But Commonwealth cooks have left also a literary record of themselves in a unique cookbook that rests upon a kitchen shelf. Here in terse cookbook English are set down the specialties of the cooks of yesteryear. The book contains also actual samples of the ancient batter dough, grease, etc. accidentally dripped upon its pages from spoons held suspended while its authors sought the proper phrase.
GROUP INVESTIGATES TYPICAL MILL TOWN

Continued from page One

the barber shop, the post office, drug store, general store, a tennis court, company offices, and the combination town hall, church, and theater. From the main corner, the homes of the superintendents are visible. They stand white apart. Next yards surround them. From their two-story height, flanked by their two-car garages, they sneer down at the town. Only three such homes do we find, in this town of almost half a thousand mill hands.

Across from these comparatively palatial homes, overlooking the town from a hill slope, is the school. Company built the school. Company pays the teachers. But the mill's children who attend must buy their own books. There are three rooms. Each has several grades and ages, supervised by one overworked teacher. Here daily gather the white children, to drink at the company-owned fountain of knowledge.

BARBER SHOP INFORMATION

With the inquiring investigating instinct of a Commonwealth instigator, Bill Reich steered directly to a barber shop. Here the party gathered its richest fund of information.

We were surprised to learn that the mills were going full blast. Not as they were in their heyday, of course. But all the men were working full time. Full time is ten hours a day, six days a week. Sixty hours a week. For this the company rewarded company style—nine cents an hour. Five cents and forty cents a week. Pay is part in cash, part in charge slips. Charge slips mean that the employee receives no pay. But he can charge all his debts to his creditors then settle with the company. Thus he is saved a great many bookkeeping worries. He can run into debt with no effort at all. It requires at least a slight effort to run into debt when one is expected to pay cash. That many have so indoctrinated themselves to the company is not surprising. That these debts make them slaves to the company is a foregone conclusion. The bookkeeping involved in charge slips is a simple matter, since the company owns all the stores and utilities.

SUPERINTENDENTS AIDED

Out of his somewhat conservative pay, a man must pay his rent, electricity, food bills, and bills for other necessities. Rent is $6.50 a month for the Wreckers. The superintendents pay $22 a month. But company reduced theirs to $17 a month, due to the depression.

From the preacher, an obese and purple-veined gentleman in the employ of the company, we learned something of social conditions. There is no official welfare work for the Negroes. But the company takes care of its own. Those who are incapacitated for work are permitted to retain their hovels rent free. The needy are cared for by a town fund of $500. This fund is supervised by the townpeople, with the "moral support" of the company. A more blunt person might have said that company deduces the contributions from the wages. The very sick are sent to the company hospital about 50 miles away. To this hospital come the employees of all the company's scattered mills. Other charities are maintained by the church. The Negroes have their own charities. All receive contributions from the company. Accidents in the mill are not so numerous as they once were. A safety campaign has lowered the accident rate—and has enabled company to dispense with a $6,000 safety supervising force. Government rests in the hands of a town marshal. This functionary is chosen and paid by the company.

NOT MUCH DANGING

Social life is circumscribed by the church. There is a movie or some such entertainment about twice a year. Dances are rare. Who cares to dance after 10 p.m.? And as for the women, dancing is not for them. One single fact can describe their life as well as volumes: in this little hamlet, there had been born an average of one baby a day for the past two weeks. Only the Negroes, irrepresible brood, remember how to be happy. They have dances and social affairs.

The mill, background and dominator.

The warp of the pattern of the company town, through which the whole of town life is threaded. From the outside, it is seen as a gigantic scale of buildings, noise and smoke. Entering the circle of buildings, we stop to admire the one aesthetic spot we find on the mill grounds. The water aerating plant, with its numerous slender fountains through which a rainbow is playing, is charming. Charming, that is, until we notice the lamb-like unsanitary toilet about 60 feet away.

STEEL ARMS

Inside the mill is the mechanistic nightmare of a technologist. The machines, huge and splendid brutes, pull, hack, slice, polish—deft despite their size. As we follow step by step the transformation from raw to finished product, the grandeur of these powerful monsters is strong upon us. Especially are we held by a great steel arm that has grown, with the ease of half a pound. A member of our party waxes facetious. "Aw, I bet Dempsey could lick it," he remarks. Admirable and compelling is this machinery, brain child of man.

But act at all admirable are the human cogs who make the machines go. They stand before us, creator of the mechanism we are witnessing. Driven by will and intent, they feed the machine endlessly, as though that were the purpose of life. One would think men were made to serve machines. Difficult to believe that that were made to serve men. We try to measure what life has given them. Sixty hours a week of soul-stifling toil. $5.40 in pay. The better part of their waking life in slavery. Charge slips and debts the reward. It does not balance no matter how one juggles the scales.

As we leave the mill, our attention is held by one last sign. It is a notice to employees that once the product of their toil is completed, they must keep hands off it. Under it the men have scrawled their comments. Emphatic comments but not quite printable. With this last affront of the company to its slaves ranking in our minds, we leave the mill. This is the screw off the company town gives us. A fit farewell is it. We leave this morass of human degradation, to breathe the free air, not company owned, with a grateful sigh.