

MODEL MERION

BY
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[The following condensation is from a magazine article, voluntarily written in 1917, by the late Theodore Roosevelt, former President of the United States, and is reprinted in this form, by request, by The Merion Civic Association.]

I have in mind a community, Merion, Pennsylvania, that can stand as a model in civic matters. This is due to the public-spirited, disinterested leadership of several men and women working through a local civic association. The association has adopted the eminently sound, common-sense motto: "To be nation right, and state right, we must first be community right."

This particular association is working in a small community, not very far from a big city, so that it contains many commuters. Most of the advantages it has conferred have been to the whole community; and, of course, as in all other communities, there are some gentry of the human-hog type who wish to get all the advantages without paying for them in any way. But the association has been able to appeal to the spirit of local pride, and to the spirit—often dormant, but existent in most of us—of sheer disinterested willingness to render service, if the usefulness of such service can be brought vividly before the man's eyes. Hence, there are constant accessions to its ranks from among the citizens who already profit by the community advantages, and who become ashamed of not doing their part in maintaining the conditions that tell for the betterment of their own families and property.

The activities of this association have been many-sided. It deals with the fundamental functions incident to government; and also with many other functions which no ordinary government can possibly reach. It has grappled effectively with the police problem. Before it came into existence the community was suffering from the usual slack police arrangements which are so serious an evil in our American small towns and country districts. There was one policeman, who was on duty intermittently at night. The association secured a complete and vigilant police service, so that three policemen were on duty every night and one or two during the day, while it added two special officers on its own pay-roll and private detectives were brought in whenever necessary, with the result of an efficient preservation of order and of the community from burglary. Similar action in improving the local fire service resulted in the very practical advantage of reducing the fire-insurance rates from 30 to 12½ per cent. The roads were partly made over; then they were kept clean and oiled, and an adequate system of lights and road signs was instituted. The lighting system included the erection of over a hundred electric lamps. Not only was the light itself deemed important, but, instead of the lamps being disfiguring monstrosities in the landscape, they were so well designed, by good architects, as to become real additions to the good looks of the neighborhood.

This association is severely practical. It provides with energetic efficiency for cleaning away snow; it is preparing a campaign against those twin pests, the mosquito and the house fly (praise heaven, we have passed the stage when foolish moralists grew sentimental about "harming a little fly!"). It has arranged for the free transportation of the pupils to and from the public schools. And at the same time that it thus grapples with the elementary problems of keeping homes healthy and making it fairly easy for the children to secure an education, it energetically seeks to beautify the village by starting the uniform planting of trees along the streets—flowering horse chestnuts on one street and dogwoods on another. By the way, in Washington the lindens along some of the avenues are particularly attractive because in their blossoming season they are alive with the drowsy humming of bees. Some of the Southern California cities have shown astonishing results from the planting of trees along the streets. I recall one such case where the bare, broad, unsightly avenue was changed by its border of palms and pepper trees and flowering acacias into such a really attractive bower—I know no other word so exactly descriptive of the fact—that in this particular case beauty, instead of merely being its own reward, brought in as a by-product a nearly twofold rise in the value of the real estate.

All the activities I have spoken of in this particular community are exercised in behalf of the community as a whole. In addition there are many which concern only the members of the association. The drinking water and the sources of the milk supply of the members are kept under inspection. The association exerts itself loyally to give its best aid to any member who desires it. There are all kinds of activities. A local craft of bird houses, feeding shelves and bird baths was started, with the result that over two hundred bird homes were built. A small rifle corps was organized and a rifle range established; and this is a most excellent symptom of civic spirit; for, if there is one thing which good citizens need to know, it is that they must have manliness, and especially that type of manliness which shows itself to those who are not good citizens in virile fighting efficiency.

Such a civic association as this does incalculable good in a community. It inculcates the spirit of service without making the individual turn into an offensive prig. It translates into practice the doctrine about being one's brother's keeper, and at the same time it makes it likely that the man who tries to live up to the doctrine will neither patronize the brother nor be meddlesome and fussy with him. If he is either he had better quit the attempt altogether. It teaches the invaluable habit of collective action, which must supplement—not supplant—our traditional American habit of personal initiative and pure individualism. Above all, it represents the practical application of an important principle. Nothing is easier, than to lay down fine principles and draw up infallible systems in the abstract. Nothing is harder than to live somewhere near up to the principles, or make the systems work even approximately decently in the concrete. But it is only the latter that really counts. As a nation we suffer from a plethora of uplift books and minute statistical reports of investigations and lengthy documented schemes for every kind of reform. What we need is to have the practical experiment go hand in hand with the speculative demonstration.

A CIVIC association such as the one alluded to has done more than any writings can ever do to help us get our living conditions in proper shape. Let earnest and far-sighted men copy it, in so far as their abilities and the conditions they confront will permit.

The above is merely an outline of what has been done in one community. There are many such communities and the kind of leadership demanded is widely varied.

The forms that the activities may take are manifold. Some of the work done must be individual. But much of it must be collective; and always the man will find that the power to accomplish results increases in geometrical proportion as he combines with his fellows. The one essential thing to remember is that, unless each man actually regards himself as his brother's keeper and behaves accordingly, he forfeits all moral right to existence in a democracy; for he automatically becomes one of the forces that tend to the disintegration of the community. This is only another way of stating the great law of service. I do not wish to state it in any sentimental or extravagant way; I believe greatly in sentiment, but I abhor sentimentality, and I entirely disapprove of extravagance and exaggeration. I not only admit but insist that the man who does not take thought for himself cannot serve others. I not merely admit but insist that the man who is not able to care for himself and for those immediately dependent upon him will be a burden to his friends and a nuisance to the community. But if the man thinks only of himself it would be better that he did not exist at all; and if he cares only for those immediately connected with him, he will represent but little more than a dead weight. The fact that a duty is the first duty does not mean that performing it is a sufficient performance of duty!

“The Merion Civic Association does more for Merion in one year than a borough does in ten years, or twenty.”

The Philadelphia North American

“Merion has become a model suburb. It may standardize ideal suburban life, certainly for Philadelphia, possibly for the United States.”

LYMAN ABBOTT, D. D., in *The Outlook*