



The Community Spirit

The community is the heart of civilized society. In recent years it has suffered from a lack of care. In their concern for the quality of life, people lately have been rediscovering its value — and finding that their personal well-being and the community's are one and the same . . .

□ Nothing matters more to the mass of human beings than their need for one another. Our species would not exist, after all, if men and women did not mate. Beyond that, man is one of the few creatures to feel the need to mate for life and to gather his progeny around him in permanent families. Beyond that again, families have always answered a natural call to come together in groups.

This social instinct is the bonding agent of what we now call the community. The community has its roots in the family, which it resembles in many ways. It consists of individuals with common interests, common problems, and roughly common values. But it is not just a big family. It depends much more on voluntary co-operation, and its members are free to choose whether or not to participate in it. The ties that bind it are looser and more fragile. It is more likely to go to pieces in the absence of conscious dedication, effort and care.

The basis of a community may be territorial, religious, ethnic, professional, or what-have-you. The guiding philosophy in every case is that people are stronger together than they are apart. This should not be taken to mean that a community is merely a necessary evil. The origins of the word reflect its spirit: It comes from the Latin *communis*, which is composed of *com*, meaning "together," and *munis*, meaning "ready to be of service." "... Ready to be of service together" — that implies not only being in the same boat, but pulling in unison on the oars.

Certainly in the modern democratic sense of the

term, a community is purposeful and dynamic. It draws its strength from a willingness on the part of its members to work together towards commonly-agreed goals. Back of this is a basic *feeling* of community which transcends all the practical benefits to be derived from co-operation. Like all feelings, it is difficult to describe precisely, but some of its ingredients are comradeship, tolerance, thoughtfulness and generosity. Whatever it is, this feeling is the driving force behind the kind of progressive community we know in this country today.

The most common form of community is that of a neighbourhood. Neighbourliness is fundamental to community life. But there is a difference between being a good neighbour and being a good member of the community. In a neighbourly relationship, you help the fellow next door on the understanding that he will help you if necessary. In your relationship with the community, you indirectly help everyone in it, and you do not expect to be repaid.

The chances are that anything you do for your community eventually will reap its reward in one way or another. At the very least, it is an investment in having an agreeable place to live. But the fact is that no community could function without people who consistently give more than they get — those invaluable toilers in the vineyard who organize events, who take the initiative and the responsibility, and who urge on the rest to greater things.

This readiness to serve and share is the badge of

a civilized person. The opposite is selfishness, which is a distinctly uncivilized trait. In the primitive state of infancy, one of the first words a child will learn to say is "mine;" violent disputes over toys and trinkets are waged before babies are out of diapers. Most parents (not all, unfortunately) train their offspring out of their selfishness as they train them out of their other anti-social habits. No community is without the flawed products of this system — self-seekers who want everything their own way.

For the most part, though, there is enough civility in the air to keep communities going. That the modern community exists at all represents a victory over the savage side of humanity. The earliest groups of human beings must have been much like packs of animals which were ruled by the strongest or most cunning members. The heirs to this tradition tried to take the curse off their crude extortion by claiming that, as superior beings, they were entitled to the lion's share of other people's production by God-given right.

Lighting the beacons of democratic life

This pretence found its fullest expression in the feudal system of the Middle Ages. It was the very antithesis of the concept of the community. In a community, the rich help to support the poor and the strong the weak; that order was reversed under feudalism. The common folk were held in bondage to their lord and master. Historians tell us that the modern democratic community was conceived when the traders and merchants of medieval Europe rebelled against this oppressive state of affairs.

Merchants in the market towns known as "burgs" convened to write municipal charters setting out uniform rules governing trade and commerce. By so doing, they effectively stripped the feudal lords of their power. Once commercial order was established, civil order was not far behind; comprehensive penal codes were written. The burgs became oases of freedom and justice. In some, a serf could win his emancipation from bondage by staying a year and a day.

It was only the barest start, of course. As Lord Acton wrote in his *History of Freedom in Antiquity*, "In every age [liberty's] progress has been beset by its natural enemies, by ignorance and superstition, by lust of conquest and by love of ease, by the strong man's craving for power, and the poor man's craving for food." Injustice and inequity continued to abound; the march of civilization was set back by wars, civil conflict, plagues and famines. Nevertheless, the seeds of some of the essential principles of modern community life had been sown.

A regressive community spins inward on itself

The overriding principle was that laws should be made with the agreement of those directly affected by them, and not by some detached autocrat acting by fiat. Implicit in this was the doctrine that there can be no proper authority without responsibility. If the laws were to be made by the people on the spot, they must be applied, administered and adjusted by those same people — or, in actual practice, by representatives answerable to them. Moreover, the laws must take account of local reality to the extent that the people subject to them were willing to abide by them of their own free will.

The burgs and their satellite villages produced several other elements of the modern community. The division of labour, in which specialists took over tasks formerly performed in the home, made people realize how dependent on one another they were. It also helped to promote equality. Writing of this period, sociologist Amos H. Hawley explained: "If functional interdependencies are to be relied upon, all parties must be treated as equals, at least under the law."

The division of labour gave rise to another prerequisite of community life — standardization. The practical standards designed to facilitate trade were underpinned by ethical standards of fair dealing. A common understanding of what may and may not be done is imperative if people are

to live harmoniously together. Where there is no code of conduct and no institutions to enforce it, there is no peace.

The standards were set and policed by the merchants' and craftsmen's guilds, the forerunners of our present service clubs and chambers of commerce. In a way these were communities in themselves — associations formed on the common ground of a particular trade. Their members were naturally concerned with establishing and maintaining orderly, prosperous conditions in their markets. Thus they began the first municipal works by undertaking such organized programs as cleaning the streets where they kept their shops.

The guilds make an interesting study in the growth of the institutions which are the vital organs of any community. But perhaps the most interesting thing about them is where they went wrong. At their zenith, they were genuinely community-minded; while they acted primarily in the interests of their members, they did much to improve conditions for the general citizenry. Then they became obsessed with perpetuating their monopolies and privileges. When they lost their public spirit, they slipped into decline.

The limits of utopia are set by human nature

The object lesson of the guilds lies in the fact that they stopped caring about *all* the community. They came to act as factions, each fighting for its particular interest at the expense of everyone else. They went from being progressive to being regressive. A progressive community may be thought of as a spiral, spinning out concentrically in ever-widening circles. A regressive community has the same shape, except that it spins inward on itself.

In a regressive community, the natural tendency to think in terms of "them and us" may be twisted into a mistrust — even a hatred — of others. The healthy feeling of pride in one's own kind may be channelled towards destructive ends. In contrast, progressive communities find constructive outlets for their pride by trying to be more friendly or efficient or neater than the next place. In sports and other competitive activities, they challenge

each other to prove which is the better at a given place and time.

It is no accident that communities express themselves in acts of co-ordination such as a hockey team or a school band playing together. The ideal of teamwork is for everyone to perform his specialized part in conjunction with others towards a common cause; that is also the ideal of democratic community life.

The ideal community, however, has proved to be as much of a will o' the wisp as the ideal hockey team in which the players never miss a pass or a scoring opportunity. The 19th century utopian communities in the United States and France failed ingloriously. If nothing else, these experiments proved that the limits of utopia are defined by what human nature will allow.

An intrinsic part of that nature is what William James has called "the instinct of ownership." In the utopian communities, everybody's produce and property was pooled. Soviet communists subsequently extended this to the extreme of confiscating property and redistributing it throughout the population. By taking away the right of people to dispose of their own efforts and possessions as they saw fit, communism also took away the right to follow one's conscience and to assert one's individuality.

The communist experience has demonstrated that the community spirit cannot be forced; it thrives only when free men and women think for themselves in arriving at a consensus as to what is best for the majority. The difference between a commune and a democratic community is that members of the latter willingly participate in it; a community in which people had to be coerced into giving blood or holding a bake sale would not be a pleasant place to live.

Neither would a place in which all the good works were performed by professionals. Until recently, it looked as if this might happen in Canada as part of a centralization of social, educational and municipal services and the formation of regional and metropolitan authorities. Economics dictated that small-scale localized institutions be

replaced by larger units operated by central bureaucracies. Lately, however, the economics have changed: necessary cutbacks in government spending have again assured that there will be plenty of vital jobs for volunteers.

The urban revolt and a fresh look at values

Centralization is only one of the trends in recent years that have threatened the survival of the progressive community. Quick, efficient transportation created "bedroom communities" whose commuter-inhabitants are detached from local concerns and activities. Television has tended to cut off contact among neighbours; the sort of people who once stood chatting on street corners may now be found glued to their sets in their living rooms. Commercial development has eradicated some urban neighbourhoods and left others as dilapidated areas with transient, rootless populations.

In fact, the strong roots which once nurtured the sense of community have been eroded everywhere in Canada as well as in other western nations. In a highly-mobile society, families have been scattered all over the map. The cultural homogeneity which held communities together has been diluted. The community spirit can no longer rest easily on the safe ground of sameness. Cultural diversity has called upon people to rise above the simple ethos of the tribe.

The pressures on the community are a direct cause of the psychological condition the experts call "alienation." Its sufferers feel left out of the system of mutual commitment and support. This feeling swelled to mass proportions in the United States in the 1960s when urban dwellers went on the rampage to burn and loot their own neighbourhoods. It has been said that the urban revolt was really a revolt against the indifference and impersonality of 20th century western society. The authorities sought a solution in the strengthening of neighbourhood institutions: In other words, they tried

to redirect a community that had turned destructive back onto a constructive road.

The episode helped to bring about a reassessment of social values. This also took place in Canada, where many of the values are more or less the same as in the United States. Since then, the community spirit in both countries has slowly been reviving. The movement seems to be in touch with the new reality. It recognizes that, because of the many strong challenges to the community, ordinary citizens will have to try harder than ever to make their communities work.

The quality of life must begin at home

Communities have learned to check the heavy hand of centralism by asserting themselves sharply when their interests are in danger of being overlooked in a bureaucratic shuffle. Imaginative new forms of participation and service — "walkathons" and the like — have been devised. Cultural diversity has been turned to advantage to broaden the outlook and deepen the character of communities. Run-down neighbourhoods are being repopulated and attractively restored.

The revival has drawn impetus from the current quest for a better quality of life. People are beginning to realize that the quality of life begins at home. It obviously depends to a large degree on how much they are willing to co-operate and share in the pursuit of common objectives. If they cannot co-operate and share more in their immediate neighbourhoods, then how can they expect to improve the quality of life world-wide?

It all comes down to the community spirit. That spirit is made up of helpfulness, consideration, accommodation and mutual respect. If it could ever come to rule the conduct of human affairs, men and women might yet live to see peace on earth as a permanent condition. And if the millennium ever arrives, it will have started out in our own back yards.