

THE CIVIC SPIRIT OF OUR TOWN

The problem of making a town a profitable and pleasant place in which to live

The Civic Spirit of St. John

SECOND PRIZE ESSAY.

BY COLIN MACKAY.

A YEAR ago St. John, N.B., was about the most self-complacent city on the continent, with a Booster's Club, which sent to merry hordes anyone who dared to criticize anything pertaining to the city. To-day it is troubled with the contagion of the modern civic renaissance, and seethes with discontent. A civic spirit has emerged, but as yet it is ill-informed, lacking inspiring ideals and a constructive programme. Here, as elsewhere, the real city problem is to make the city a place worth living in, and that the people may have the wherewithal to live, a good place for industry to locate. To this end, St. John needs home rule; full control of its civic franchises in order to assure cheap power and lighting for manufacturing purposes, and cheap and rapid transit enabling the workers to live in healthy surroundings. The city also needs a comprehensive plan of city development, a plan which would regulate its growth and assure broad and cheerful thoroughfares designed to facilitate traffic, and open spaces and parks designed to promote the health of the people, and brighten their lives. And it needs, too, a new system of taxation—one which will take taxes off of industry and improvements.

Our city council is not actively interested in these problems, and the reason is not far to seek. Civic progress in these directions involves interference with vested interests—with men who control franchise companies and big estates, men whose wives guard the door to the charmed circles of society. Our civic fathers are usually small business men—generally the most timid class in a community—and they naturally are disinclined to take up questions which would involve a conflict with big business men and interfere with the social ambitions of their better halves.

And yet our city fathers are not wholly to blame. Their conservative attitude is merely the reflection of the apathy of the citizens generally. Aspirants for aldermanic honours are not expected to have a programme or a platform; candidates who have attempted to make issues and discuss civic affairs publicly have never been able to get a score of citizens to attend their meetings.

The city council's recent effort to deal with the power problem well illustrates its shortcomings and those of the citizenship. A group of local capitalists came before it with a proposition to develop neighbouring water powers, asked for a perpetual franchise in the city's streets, and offered a reduction of 33 1-3 per cent. on the prevailing prices for electric power. At the outset the city fathers approached the problem from the point of view of thirty years ago. They did not appear to know that power prices in their own city ranged from \$135 to over \$300 per horse power, or that in many Ontario cities the prices ranged from \$15 to \$35, or went as low as \$7.50 in Sweden. They talked of giving or granting an 80 year franchise because President Taft recommended that franchises should not be granted for too long a period—not knowing that modern municipal authorities hold that a ten year franchise renewal on the good behaviour of the company is long enough. They talked of the benefits of competition—not knowing that about every city that has tried competition in public utility services has lived to regret it. And they would probably have accepted the proposition if it had not been for the appearance of an old Fabian, who had something to tell them about power prices in St. John and other places. The city fathers were thereupon properly astonished and decided that they ought to get some information from other cities.

Now the point is that the city fathers should have had all the information necessary to formulate a sound franchise policy at their finger's ends, or at least in their libraries. Before offering as candidates they should have read some of the many books on civic government in which the franchise problem is discussed, the experience of hundreds of cities reviewed and co-ordinated, and guiding principles laid down. And the second point is that the citizens should have seen to it that aldermen and their representatives had some knowledge of these problems.

After all, the problem of securing good city government is the problem of developing an interested and intelligent citizenship, and as the old boss of

the city remarked not long since city government will only begin to be what it ought to be when we start to teach civic economy in our schools and imbue the young with civic ideals. "You'll get the quickest results that way," said the boss. "Get the kids interested in their city, give them civic ideals and they'll wake up the old folks at home."

The Civic Spirit of Oakville

THIRD PRIZE ESSAY.

BY J. M. DENYES.

WHERE there is no civic pride the city perishes. Civic indifference spells narrowness, neglect and failure. On the other hand a pronounced and well-reasoned civic pride means progress, optimism and ultimate success.

Citizenship involves corporate responsibility, social opportunity, brotherly love. Civic government is the embodiment of municipal ideals and should represent, not the selfish interests of any few, but the general weal in the most complete sense.

The external reveals the internal. Slovenly streets, unsightly landmarks, unsanitary conditions bespeak careless life, absence of civic spirit. A beautiful outdoors is a wonderful developer of patriotism. A beautiful city appeals to the best in the citizen and engenders civic pride. No municipal government can afford to neglect the cultivation of the aesthetic and artistic taste of its people. This is the first requisite to advanced citizenship.

Ours is a town of about twenty-five hundred. The civic government has been probably no worse, no better, than that of the average Ontario town of the size. The citizens have demanded nothing more than an honest attempt to keep down the tax-rate to a point limited only by the maintaining of the public service at a reasonable efficiency. Until recently no plans of civic improvement have been asked for, no ideal of the future discussed. The successful candidate for municipal office required to commend him only some political claim upon his fellow-citizens, an honest reputation, and a conceded general interest in the welfare of the town. He needed not to be a specialist, or to advocate any new measure of advancement.

No man has risen to demand that municipal representatives should be expert in planning a town that would be attractive to people who are seeking the best in urban life and can afford to choose the best. No objections have been registered against the unsightly billboard or the unnecessary obstruction on the public highway. Nobody has remonstrated with his neighbour for locating his new residence a few feet farther from or nearer to the street—line than his own, or for painting the said residence in as many colours as the most fanciful taste might suggest. In other words, the corporate sense has been absent.

Nature has done remarkable things for us. She has given us a most beautiful and healthful situation, a splendid lake beach, a mid-town river in a delightful ravine, groves of ancient pine and maple. The work has stopped with Nature. Possibilities of civic improvement have not been grasped. Weakness of civic spirit is thus revealed.

All this is past and has to be chronicled in the present perfect tense. New influences are at work. The vision has burst. The civic sense is become keen. Somebody has awakened. Advance and improvement are the watchwords. The man who is satisfied with things as they are must be replaced by the man with enthusiasm for better things. Nature must be assisted. Among the whole population real interest has been awakened in the town as an entity and as never before each man is able to see his important relation to the community, as a whole. Individual and selfish interests are being obscured in the general welfare. As a result there is a greatly increased interest in municipal affairs.

This interest has been manifested in the formation of a Civic Improvement League working under the direction of and in harmony with the local branch of the Ontario Horticultural Association. On the initiative of a number of public-spirited citizens intent upon civic improvement conferences were held and the Horticultural Association was approached as to the adoption in their plan of work of the suggestions offered by these conferences. The Association heartily welcomed these approaches and at a special meeting named and elected a number

of committees to act under their direction. These include in their scope the cleaning and beautifying of the town, the removing of everything prejudicial to the public health, the obtaining of larger park areas and public playgrounds, the improvement of transportation facilities and railway station grounds, the awarding of prizes for the best-kept lawns and garden-plots, the enlistment of the assistance of the ladies and the children in the schemes of improvement, and generally the encouragement of a more pronounced civic pride.

A Publicity and Programme Committee was appointed to place the new movement before the citizens, and they issued an introductory circular pamphlet setting forth the aims of the organization, to be followed by a monthly bulletin of suggestions for the work to be carried on. It was explained that it was intended that the new civic force should work in harmony with the committees of the town council, the board of health, and any other organization with similar aims for the improvement of the town.

Thus will a public sentiment be cultivated for the appreciation and attainment of the good and the beautiful in all civic affairs, a sentiment which cannot but have a beneficial reflex influence upon the moral life of the people. The claims of health, comfort and enjoyment are given their rightful consideration, which after all are the prime requisites to happiness in the social life. The saying is trite that ours is an age of materialism. If it is true as well, such a movement as I have indicated in the fostering of a lively civic spirit will prove the most effectual and powerful corrective. The aims to be kept in view are the beautifying of the natural surroundings, the elimination of all public nuisances and the improvement of living conditions to the end that they be clean, healthful and attractive. This is the true policy of national conservation.

The Civic Spirit of Trenton

HONOURABLE MENTION.

BY E. V. ILLSEY.

THE progress or stagnation which marks the life of any town or city, is almost entirely dependent upon the existence or non-existence of a spirit of co-operative aggressiveness in its citizens. It might be argued that the success of certain well-known centres has been incidental to their geographical position or transportation facilities, and to a certain extent this is true. A careful investigation proves, however, that a town with the proper energy can overcome seemingly unsurmountable difficulties, and bring to its doors prosperity. In our town, endowed by Nature with a splendid location, and benefitted by the hand of man, through the provision of lines of railway, a spirit of lethargy seems to have enervated our life for years, and allowed possibilities—rare opportunities in fact—to come and pass away unused, neglected. Our citizens have stood for years, agape at the wonderful progress of such cities as Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver, and in the class of smaller towns, Berlin, Brantford and Peterborough. Most of us have wondered how they seem to get all the new concerns when they have not half the natural advantages we have. Fatalistic nonsense! Could we reasonably imagine for a single instant that the industrial concerns whose advent has spelled prosperity, delved and searched among all the places available, and then because Berlin was Berlin, or Peterborough, Peterborough, made up their minds that there was the best place in the world for them to locate? Nonsense again! They came because they were sought after—sought after through the media of well-placed advertising, and the "boosting" of the town through the press, and through the mouths of its citizens travelling away from home. When they came to investigate the town, they were met by the town council, the board of trade, warmly welcomed, shown the town's advantages, existent and potential, and told that every citizen in the place was their loyal friend!

Manufacturing firms, firms of any kind soever are merely human beings. They appreciate appreciation—a handshake warms their hearts. What newcomers to any town dislike most, and what impedes progress and healthy civic life most, is the doubt-producing "cold-water-throwing knocker." He is a burden to himself, the disturber of his neighbour's peace and the "enemy within the gates" who retards