

Our Welfare System

by SHARON WYMAN

New Brunswick has a Rip Van Winkle personality when it comes to poverty.

The province which provided for its destitute citizens through laws reminiscent of the Elizabethan Poor Laws until 1960, is gradually waking up.

An archaic dole system which relied on municipal funds, organization and prejudices was the only source of aid to those persons needy in any way. A province-wide Mothers' Allowance Act of 1944 had been the only recent addition to the program.

The poor, according to New Brunswick's legislation prior to 1960, were too lazy to work, too stupid or too indifferent. They were not members of a family where the father and provider had been killed, or was a patient in a hospital, or was disabled, or had deserted. They were not men or women unable to find work because of lack of necessary skills or scarce job opportunities.

Towns and municipalities have an effective way of dealing with their poor. They usually force them into a ghetto and ignore them. Any town in any province or country will provide examples of tarpaper towns, slums and the wrong side of tracks. Rents are high, utilities rare, schools are poor, there are no recreation areas. This multiplies poverty.

New Brunswick realized in 1960 that the only way poverty could be dealt with effectively was to provide a standard structure for the distribution of assistance to those who qualified for it, assistance meaning money.

The Social Assistance Act provided for a sharing of funds to be used in assistance programs. The funds allotted to each municipality were to be on a case basis. Previously, the mun-

icipalities had applied directly to the federal government for funds to supplement their own collections. Through the Social Assistance Act, 28% of the money was to be provided by the province, 22% by the municipality and 50% by the federal government. The total amount of assistance in 1965 amounted to approximately \$3,500,000.

Twenty welfare offices were set up around the province to provide a uniform standard of assistance. There had been as many standards in the province as there were counties.

With a standardized system operating, the problems of the province could be scaled and seen more clearly. Studies could be made. Specific areas marked as "pockets of poverty" were studied from school attendance, to marriage ages to employment opportunities.

Voluntary organizations in areas could be coordinated with the central office. These organizations such as the UCW or the IODE provided food or clothing where needed individually but now, they could work together.

Pilot studies and small studies on municipal levels were made with the aid of trained social workers and home economists provided by the province. A home maker service was set up to help women with cooking, budgeting and child care.

Awaiting third reading before the New Brunswick legislature is the Social Welfare Act. The Byrne Commission prompted this legislation. The province will have full control of the public assistance program. It will be under the Department of Youth and Welfare without the need of administration by the municipalities. Voluntary organiza-

tions will remain and will become a greater gauge of social change. With centralization, more services will be provided because of a larger and highly qualified staff of professional workers.

New Brunswick is awake. The slums of Saint John, the decrepit farms of the St. John River Valley, the shacks of the North Shore, will not disappear next year. The increasing consciousness of New Brunswick to these problems insures that they will, gradually.

