

WORKING STUDENTS IN READING CAMPS

The Story of a Successful Educational Experiment

By ALFRED FITZPATRICK

EXPERIMENTS carried on by the Reading Camp Association, during a period of nine years, in lumbering, mining, fishing and railway construction camps demonstrate the practicability of camp education, even in the case of men weary after ten hours of hard manual labour. They reveal wonderful possibilities if there existed better sanitary conditions, more commodious quarters and an eight-hour day.

There is a certain prejudice in camp against men who do not engage in the regular routine of the work in hand, who are mere hangers-on. There is danger of their being classed with "tin horn" dudes and other sharks who shadow the camp for the sole purpose of exploiting the men.

Nothing but efficiency appeals to these men—efficiency not in mathematics, literature or theology, but in actual labour of the hands and in their particular brand of manual labour. It is nothing to them that one has taken a double first in any of the colleges or even has won renown as a pitcher, catcher, or half-back on the campus; to be personally popular with the shantyman one must handle the axe and saw, cant-hook and peavey with any of the old-time beavers, fallers, and junkers. The river driver's standard of character is ability to ride a log and break a jam. The navy sizes up his hero by the number of cubic yards of earth or rock he removes or by his handling of the wheeler, slusher, slip or excavator. The miner judges a man by his ability to drill holes and handle dynamite. The fisherman respects only the man who can manipulate his nets and trim his sails satisfactorily in the roughest weather. The student who would win the frontier toiler and help develop his mind and soul must first be his hero; that is, he must excel in the special work of that labourer whether on the river, in the woods, the rock cut, mine or right of way. Were adult education compulsory, this heroic method of winning the men might not be necessary; but when the education of children is not compulsory in some parts of Canada we can scarcely hope for that ideal condition in the very near future.

It is easy to get students to take up this work, especially in the spring and summer, but difficult in the winter season, and very hard at any time to get instructors suited to the manual part of the work, that is, who know how to work with their hands. This is a great weakness in our educational systems. Young men are qualified in our schools and colleges for positions that do not exist. A bright young school-teacher from the south-western part of Ontario told me recently he had two pupils, sixteen and eighteen years old respectively, whom he could not grade beyond the third reader, but whose father, a well-to-do farmer, intended selling his farm in order to give the boys an education. This very unmistakably points to the great weakness of our educational system, its one-sidedness. What we term education is only partial. It is an attempt to educate half the man only, the intellectual side, while the physical is wholly neglected. These boys are of a mechanical turn and can learn only through the concrete. Instead of sitting physically inactive at a school desk six hours a day, they should have a practical teacher to help them in the laboratory of the farm, to teach them useful knowledge, as, for example, how to prevent worms in apples and other fruits, how to check the spread of diseases of trees, cattle, hogs, horses and men, how to sterilise and pasteurise milk, and better still, how to keep cows so healthy that sterilisation will be unnecessary.

It is exceedingly probable that these two boys and thousands of others in favourable conditions, that is with plenty of physical exercise, with a farm and dairy for a laboratory, would become highly educated and useful members of the community. As it is they are doomed to a tenth-rate place in the world, will be unable to earn an honest living by their wits, and in order to keep soul and body together will be compelled to fall back on the most sordid forms of manual labour.

NOT more than seventy-five per cent. of the Canadian students who apply for the position of camp instructor have the necessary training, and not five per cent. of the English, Scotch and Irish. These latter, however, make excellent men when once they learn how to work with their hands. So well do they learn when given the opportunity, that it serves to emphasise the possibilities of a more practical educational policy both in Canada and the older countries.

The Association has engaged so many instructors who were excellent scholars in the commonly accepted meaning of that term, yet who could not

satisfy their foremen and therefore could not awaken any enthusiasm in the men, that it has decided to try to train most of its teachers from among the ranks of its own frontier pupils.

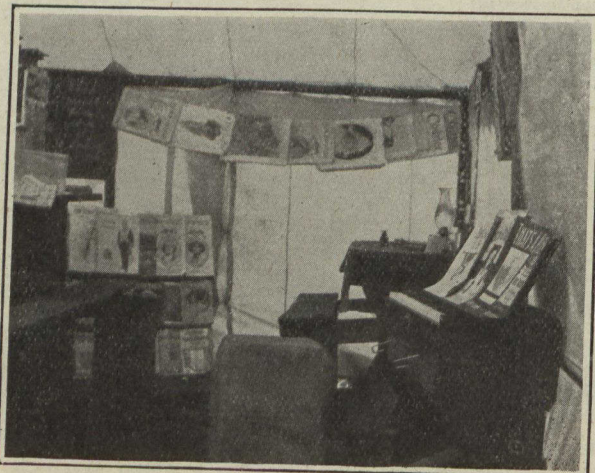
Mr. T. S. Scott, B.Sc., Assistant Toronto City Engineer, when a superintendent of T. & N. O. Railway construction, said: "As long as you send out men who can act as leaders in actual work, if only for a short time, you will get the confidence of a large portion of the men, whether foreign or native. You sent five or six good men whom no employers of labour would let go till the last wind-up." Mr. Scott is unquestionably right. These are the kind of men needed, but unfortunately our present systems of education both in Canada and Britain qualify so many men for positions that do not exist, that they seem incapable of training boys for positions that do exist.

The Reading Camp Association has always maintained that as the present systems of education are inadequate, leaving the average boy as they do at the third reader, the state should remodel these systems and fit them on to the needs of boys in the frontier settlements in the woods, mines, railway and other camps. It is just as practicable to supply books, magazines and newspapers to men in the farthest confines of civilisation as pork, beans and butter, and surely instructors fresh from the college campus or farm are as portable as the average cook, cookee and bull cook.

THE reports of our night schools in lumber camps from year to year are abundant testimony that when given an opportunity and encouraged, ninety per cent. of the men who can read take advantage of the reading material afforded, and fifty per cent. of all the men in camp will attend study classes more or less regularly, making the average regular attendance about thirty per cent. In construction camps the regular hours of labour are so long and there is so much overtime that the actual attendance on study classes is much lower. It is safe to say, however, that even with conditions as they are the great majority in all kinds of camps look at the pictures, attend concerts and magic lantern exhibitions. The Bickmore travelling illustrated lectures so kindly loaned to the Association by McGill University, are very popular and attended by all hands. This convinces us that if the state will provide commonsense practical instructors, buildings, magic lanterns,



One of these men is from Queen's University. He works during the day and instructs at Night.



Interior of a reading tent, on G.T.P. near Cochrane.

globes, maps, and other educational facilities sufficiently concrete and entertaining, and will make manual labour over eight hours per day a criminal offence, will establish what we might call for want of a better expression entertainment schools or theatre-colleges at every camp and hotel in the land, then and not till then will local option or prohibition be wholly effective.

Sir W. C. McDonald and Prof. Robertson have done much in initiating and popularising consolidated schools in rural, sparsely-settled frontier districts. It is devoutly to be hoped the scheme will be more generally adopted in the near future. The plan contemplates the combining of groups of isolated, weak school sections into centrally located, efficient graded schools. In Ontario attention has mainly been given to the bringing together of the older pupils of scattered settlements for the purpose of placing them in a position to take advantage of continuation classes.

The only objection that could be raised is that of transportation of the children farthest from the central school. To help offset this something, however, should be saved in economy of building, heating and teaching. The expense of building and heating one graded school of four or five rooms is not as great as that of heating four or five separate school buildings of the same size as these rooms. The wages of three or four well-qualified teachers in one central school should not exceed that of four, five or six poorly equipped in isolated schools. In practice, segregation is thus the only extra expense in the operation of consolidated schools. In camps, however, we have the case of men brought together in groups of from twenty to two hundred solely for industrial purposes. Thus consolidated schools are practicable here without the expense of segregation.

The opportunity for improving the minds of our frontier labourers is unique, and the state that does not take advantage of this but allows these young men to live in groups, not only neglecting them as if they were horses or cattle, and caring only that their employers feed their bodies, but also licensing agents of hell to ruin them, is criminal. The whole state suffers in outbreaks of contagious and infectious physical disease and what is worse, in outbreaks of mental and moral disease. These groups of men, idle intellectually and degenerating morally are the nursing beds of the tramp, the drunkard, licentious and insane and are a menace to any state. From these come the slum population of the cities.

THE clergyman who casually visits the camp is regarded as living in a sort of paradise altogether beyond the reach of men who have to turn out of their hard bunks at the sound of the gong long before sunrise, who eat only one meal by the light of day, and for whom society provides nothing better than the saloon. His ideal, they think, is scarcely realisable for them in their present condition, and he would catch them better if he spent his time trying to get the state to improve their actual environment on earth. The only heaven that commends itself to them is one that has a compartment for denizens of earth here and now. But the student who works and smiles, who doesn't lose his temper, swear nor drink, who is cheerful in the gravest provocation, shows them his heaven contains pure air, elbow room, daily newspapers, magazines and standard novels, music, etc., here and now, and is possible even in the worst conditions, gets sympathetic consideration. For these reasons and because funds go much further when the student earns a good part of his salary from the employer, all the Association's instructors engage in manual labour during the day.

In camps where instructors have first won the men by actual contact with them in the bush and on the grade, the services of visiting clergymen of all denominations and the song services of the instructors in their absence are more largely attended than are the services of clergymen at camps where there are no educational facilities. The churches will have to aid the state in her great task of public education. They will more and more have to take the place of the saloon and become social and educational centres, not only in frontier camps but also in towns and cities. They must cease acting on the assumption that the preparation of the soil is of the least importance in the sowing of the gospel seed or fail in their mission.

I HAVE ventured to add the report of one of our camp-instructors, Mr. C. V. Combe, because of its characteristic tone:

"I was located at the City of Winnipeg Hydro-