

DEMOGRAPHY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone



No New Thing

SUBSISTENCE homesteads, over which we are making so much to-do nowadays, are really no new thing under the sun. We had government-aided settlement of surplus population on the land generations ago; only the conditions were so different on the surface that we usually fail to see the underlying similarity.

Our earliest subsistence homesteaders were the very ones whom our somewhat academic present day resisters of innovation are wont to laud as the very type and model of "rugged individualism." We commonly deprive them of the benefit of Latin adjective, and call them simply homesteaders, or sometimes pioneers.

Let there be no shout that the original homesteaders were not feeders from the hand of government generosity. They most decidedly were. They got a lot more than the present subsistence-homestead population will get, colonized on their peasant-sized plots of land. True, subsistence homesteaders of today are helped to the land, but they will have to pay for it. The original homesteader got outright, absolute, fee-simple title to his land, either scot-free or so cheap that it might as well have been.

It wasn't a carefully shaved-off two- or ten-acre plot, either. The old song that "Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm," was borne out in fact: for a hundred years Uncle Santa Claus did deal out whole farms. All the homesteaders had to do was go out and subsist on them.

The subsistence problem was different then, of course. Instead of looking for a part-time job that would pay him enough cash to buy factory-made furniture, clothing and kitchenware, the original homesteader (plus his family) had to make them on the spot, except for rifle, powder, and a few iron tools and pots.

But materials for such home manufacture were available; and to counterbalance some of the scarcities of household gear, food was usually abundant and cheap. The fresh-broken virgin soil yielded many years of harvest before fertilizers needed even to be thought of, and until pioneer days were well over the woods and prairies swarmed with game. No subsistence homesteader of today will be able to fire both barrels of a shotgun into the air and bring down a bushel of passenger pigeons, without even troubling to take aim, as his oldtime namesake frequently could.

The beneficent Government took most effective means to clear title to the land it was so lavishly giving away, by sending out such active agents as Anthony Wayne, Andrew Jackson and "Old Rough-and-Ready" Taylor to negotiate with the Indians. The present administration is much tenderer: so far, at least, it hasn't shot a single mortgage-foreclosing banker, or herded even one landholding insurance company off onto a semi-arid reservation. It is actually paying them now, as it expects one day itself to be paid.

Science News Letter, May 11, 1935

POPULATION

Estimates 25,500,000 Persons Over 65 in 1980

THERE will be 25,500,000 people over 65 years of age in 1980. This is the estimate of those who would be old enough to be entitled to old age pensions under proposed legislation, made by Drs. Louis I. Dublin and Alfred J. Lotka, of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company who spoke before the Conference on Population Studies in Relation to Social Planning.

This estimate set pencils to figuring. If every person over 65 in 1980 were to receive \$15 per month as the Federal share of an old-age pension, the total bill would amount to \$4,490,000,000. This is much higher than the estimate of the President's Committee on Economic Security who figured that the maximum would be reached in 1980 at \$1,294,300,000. The Committee's estimate was based on the assumption that there would be only about 17,000,000 persons over 65 in 1980.

The use of a succession of life tables allowing for the lengthening of the life span and the increase of the proportion of older people in the population was urged by Drs. Dublin and Lotka in their report.

The birthrate in the United States has declined to a point where it is too low to allow the present population to replace itself in the next generation, they told the meeting. In the year 1920, the rate of natural increase was 5.4 per thousand. That is, 1000 persons would be replaced by 1005.4. Since then the increase has dwindled past the zero point until in 1933 there was actually a decrease of 3 per thousand, or almost as much on the negative side as it was on the positive side ten years previously.

Science News Letter, May 11, 1935

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