

# T o p i c s o f t h e D a y

**Indian Rope-Trick Is a Dismal Failure** The directions for doing the Indian rope-trick are comparatively simple. You simply fling a rope into the air, making it stand upright without evident support. Thereupon a boy climbs the rope and disappears, reappearing at your command. There are variations, but these are the essentials, and, it will be seen, they are simplicity itself.

Unhappily, however, the trick can not be done, despite centuries of assertions to the contrary. Yet every few months someone leaps into head-lines by offering to do the trick, trying to do it, or saying he has seen it done. He never has seen it done, time eventually proves, and neither can he do it. There are standing offers of comfortable sums for the successful accomplishment of the trick, but year after year they go unclaimed.

There is nothing surprizing, therefore, in the news that the latest attempt to perform the trick ended in failure. After years of struggling with it, Robert Heger, an amateur magician, tried it before the public in an auditorium at St. Paul, Minnesota, tho the rope-trick, in its classic form, is supposed to be done outdoors. Heger's rope flew upward all right, but obviously with the help of a wire. The boy, climbing the rope, also vanished according to schedule, but, all too plainly, he disappeared, not into thin air, but merely behind a curtain.

Heger, disconsolate, declares he never will try the trick again. It seems a sensible decision.

**Bone-Dry Day Gone, Says Kansas Editor** William Allen White, Kansas editor, who used to say that "prohibition is here to stay" before events proved the contrary, now believes that "the bone-dry day has passed." Interestingly enough, he announced the latter opinion only a few days after Kansas, in a referendum on Election Day, had voted to retain the prohibition amendment in its State Constitution.

Tho Mr. White has been a lifelong dry, he looks to the future with some head-shaking while other drys in his State are rejoicing over their recent victory. "An arrogant, bigoted attitude by the victorious drys," he warns, might end in repeal eventually. Hence, he advocates that Kansas permit the sale of 3.2 per cent. beer and the manufacture of beer and wine in the home. He also urges that Kansans be allowed to import from other States "for their own personal use, small quantities, not to exceed a gallon of wine, or a quart of hard liquor, and to have them on hand for family use."

Coming from a dry, these sound like fairly moist proposals. Far more accurately than the Kansas referendum, they suggest the change that has come over the country as a whole with regard to prohibition.

They also may suggest why Mr. White has remained in the front rank of newspaper editors through long years. An editor who can do that not only has to keep up with his community; he has to keep a jump or two ahead of it.

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**Steamship Company Shuts Up Shop** The little Sound steamer, *New Hampshire*, tied up for the last time one day last week to its New York pier; and thereby hangs a significant if somewhat melancholy tale. For with the end of her voyage from New London came the announcement of the New London Line, the oldest steamship company on the Atlantic Seaboard, that it was closing its business.

This line, which was formerly the Norwich and New York Transportation Company, started its service in 1840, only twenty-five years after the *Fulton* had made her first trip. In the intervening ninety-four years not a single passenger of the tens of thousands tabulated on its books had been lost through fire, shipwreck or any other accident.

But such a record was not proof against the growing competition of motor-trucks which is at the bottom of the company's decision to shut up shop. There is a moral here which enthusiastic advocates of inland waterways might well consider.

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**A New Variety of Kentucky Feud** Time was that the activities of Federal agents in the mountains of Kentucky were confined to trailing makers of illicit liquor or native feudists who insisted on killing one another according to their code.

Lately, however, Federal investigators have been occupied with a new and surprizing form of illegality in the hillbilly districts of the Blue Grass State. The nation's big mail-order houses, it was alleged at Chicago, have been cheated out of \$200,000 in the last two years by Kentucky mountaineers. Catalogs went into the mountains by the ton. Back came orders, accompanied by checks drawn on non-existent banks. Investigators sent into the hills were met with buckshot and squirrel-gun bullets. Collections were few and casualties many. Warrants were issued for 219 persons, many of whom are women.

Somehow the revelation dims the romantic glow that novelists and playwrights have spread around the grim and fearless men and women who live so hardily in Kentucky's mountains. A shotgun or a rifle has always seemed their natural every-hour weapon. But a fountain pen, used in the business of writing rubber checks, strongly suggests the degenerate city slicker.

**A Famous Bird Dies in Indiana** Polly, the Weisses' foster-parrot, who passed into celestial crackerland on November 12, had two claims to fame. She was seventy-six years old, and had long been one of James Whitcomb Riley's pets. After the poet's death, Polly pined, and the Weisses, who had been his next-door neighbors in Indianapolis for thirty years, took her over to their house. Life with them had its compensations. She ate at the family table, and solemnly dunked her bread, altho she was more genteel with meat and vegetables. She had a feminine passion for ice cream, and when Mr. Weiss came home from the corner drugstore with a carton, she knew what was inside, and demanded her share vociferously. She was not a talkative bird, altho, parrot-wise, she was given to swearing.

She died after a hearty supper of rye bread and butter, and someone with an unsuitable Poe turn of mind suggested stuffing her for the museum of Riley relics. But Mr. Weiss, with a better feeling for the dignity of her rôle in life, buried her in a birch coffin under the window of the poet's bedroom in the Lockerbie Street House near the grave of Lockerbie, Riley's white poodle.

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**Legislators Dislike Cutting Own Throats** In January, 1935, Nebraska's State

Senators and Representatives will convene, hold their noses with one hand, and, with the other, tackle the complicated task of legislating most of their jobs out of existence. In the November 6 election, the people of Nebraska voted to scrap their bicameral Legislature of 133 members, and substitute for it a one-house Legislature which will have not less than thirty members nor more than fifty. It will be up to the lawmakers who meet in January to arrange the details.

Naturally, the prospect displeases them. When the American Legislators' Association polled Nebraska's Legislators on the unicameral plan before Election Day, the State Senators voted "No" by about two to one, the State Representatives by four to one. Legislators of other States, and of the Federal Government, who also were polled by the Association, were similarly hostile to the one-house plan. Somehow or other, most legislators seem to think most legislators should keep their jobs and their salaries.

Professors of political science doubt it. Five hundred members of the American Political Science Association, asked their opinion of the one-house plan, approved it by nearly six to one. For the life of them, the legislators can not understand how the professors can be so stupid, not to say cruel and subversive.

## At the Observation Post

### *A Count of Local Government Units in the United States Gives Valuable Statistical Support to the Charge of Their Incredible Multiplicity and Waste of Revenue*

A GREAT deal of discussion in the last few years of depression has been devoted to the costliness and obsolescence of local government. In his frequently quoted book, "Looking Forward," published within a few days of his inauguration, President Roosevelt gave an eloquent chapter to the subject, pointing to the incredible multiplicity of local administrative units and their prodigious waste of revenue. "As the machinery of local government exists to-day," he wrote, "we have, very probably, five hundred thousand units of government."

He was wrong. The number is 175,418, large enough in all conscience but a considerable modification of his figure. All of which is merely by way of noting that in the absence of an authoritative census of these units even as acute a student of them as the President must indulge in some tall guesswork.

Only within a few days has such a census appeared, altho early this year the Bureau of the Census published an enumeration since acknowledged to be faulty. In other words, only within a few days has the nation possessed a reasonably reliable statistical foundation for the study of one of its most appalling problems.

For this it is indebted to Public Administration Service, one of those private non-profit associations whose function it is to act as guide to the American people in the labyrinth of their governmental affairs. At the behest of the Service, whose headquarters are in Chicago, William Anderson, professor of political science at the University of Minnesota, and a staff of assistants undertook to count and classify the units of government of the United States, national, State and local.

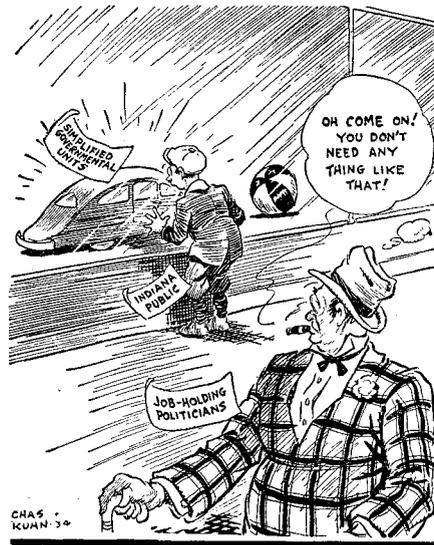
#### Two Years to Do Work

They consumed two years over their task—a fair indication of its size and complexity. Now their findings are embodied in a report which not only lists figures and facts but supplies an interpretation of them by Professor Anderson together with his suggestions for a scheme of municipal organization better adapted to modern conditions and the taxpayer's pocketbook.

"The form of local, county, and town government, as we know it in most of our States," the President wrote, "dates back to the Duke of York's laws, enacted about 1670. . . . It is astonishing how few changes have been made in their form since the formation of the nation. . . ."

Professor Anderson's survey bears him out. To the one nation and the forty-eight States, which he includes in his enumeration, add 3,053 counties, 16,366 incorporated places (cities, villages, etc., and the District of Columbia), 20,262 towns and

townships, 127,108 school districts, and 8,580 other units (fire, water, lighting, sewer, sidewalk, park, and other districts of the sort). Each one of these units, to be eligible for his list, has its own separate



#### Trying to Discourage It

—Kuhn in the Indianapolis News

continuing governmental organization independent of other local governments; it has the power year after year to provide some governmental service on its own responsibility, and—here's the item that gripes—the power to raise revenue by taxation, or by special assessment, or by fixing rates for service rendered.

"No citizen of the State of New York," to quote the President again, "can live under less than four governments—Federal, State, county and city. If he lives in a town outside of a village, he is under five layers of government—Federal, State, county, town and school. If he lives in an incorporated village, another layer is added. If he lives in a town outside of a village, he may be in a fire, water, sewer, lighting, and sidewalk district, in which case there are ten layers of government."

New York is one of the worst States, tho not the worst, in respect to the complication and overlapping of its local jurisdictions. Illinois leads the list with 12,186 autonomous school districts, and with 2,439 other districts, including water-control districts, rural road and bridge districts, urban improvement districts and urban utility districts. Much simpler in their local organization, tho still far from ideal, are the county-unit States stretching from Virginia to Florida, and the town-unit States which comprise mainly the New England group. It is from New York west that one finds for the most part the so-called district system and the correspondingly large numbers of units—the Duke of York's dead hand.

In this area "there are thousands of school districts, with separate boards and corporate authority, that provide schools for not more than a dozen children each year." As for special districts, their variety stuns the imagination. "Thus one State has irrigation, conservancy, drainage, flood-control, flood-protection, levee, county irrigation, county sanitation, sanitary, county water, metropolitan water, municipal water, storm-water, water-conservation and water-storage districts, among others."

Here are layers of government *ad infinitum* to confuse the citizen. How can he be expected to keep effective watch on their administration or expenditure? Consider the overlapping overhead of such a maze. Is it anything to wonder at that in normal times the local units of government within the States spend out of current revenues about one and a half times as much as the State and Federal Governments combined, or that before the Federal Government began borrowing for relief and recovery their debts exceeded the national debt?

Now, the functions performed by these myriad units are, with very few exceptions, essential to the welfare of their respective communities and to the maintenance of the American standard of living. It is not what they do but the economy of their performance that constitutes the real issue before the country.

Professor Anderson would cut their number from 175,418 to 17,850, or by nine-tenths. He would have no separate school districts in the country whatsoever. The local schools should be administered, he believes, by the several counties, cities, larger towns and larger villages, under State supervision.

#### Comprehensive Program

He would abolish also practically all other special districts, dividing their functions among city, town, county and village governments. In most of the Middle Western and several Middle Atlantic States he would wipe out all townships as governing units and transfer their main functions to the county in each case. The New England town system he would leave intact except for "a great deal of consolidation among the least populous and more rural towns." For the rest of the country, "in rural areas, and in areas partly urban and partly rural," he would make the county "the main unit for performing services of State-wide import, including education, and also for providing the rural local services," but he would considerably reduce the number of counties.

His program is the first comprehensive one of the kind to be presented to the country. And, as already noted, it is based on facts. Let those who will suggest something better.

W. M. H.