Footloose Families

By G. ELEANOR KIMBLE

IT is a good old English idea that the poor should stay at home. Indeed one of the first laws relating to the poor provided that no laboring man should move away from the parish where he was born, and incidentally also that he should never ask for higher wages. The occasion for this Statute of Labourers of 1351 was the Black Death, which had halved the population of England in a single year and made the surviving laborers so much in demand that the upper classes themselves put revolutionary ideas in their heads by offering them a few pennies more than they had before received if they would move to a neighboring parish where there were no workers left to bring in the crops. Historians need not tell us that the poor did not obey this law if they could help it. Serfdom was over, but free independent laborers were free not only to seek work from whom they would but to starve if no work offered.

The wandering unemployed are no new phenomenon. If a man can not find work at home he is not likely to stay there and starve. The Henries and Elizabeth in their Poor Laws, while providing that the aged and impotent poor should be helped in the parishes where they belonged and there only, put even more emphasis on punishing the rogues and valiant beggars, or as we should now say, the unemployed, who wandered about the country. A man, or a woman either, if unemployed, even a disabled person if he was found in a parish where he had not been born, could be "whipped until he was bloody," or he might be branded with an R so all the world would know he was a rogue, or for a third offense he might be declared a felon, which meant that he would be put to death "without benefit of clergy" so that his punishment for not having work would be eternal damnation.

But the stubborn poor continued to wander. In fact, even in the good old days when most law-abiding folk died in the parishes where they had been born without even venturing out to see the world, it seems there were some persons who did not know where they belonged. In 1646 an "Inns of Court gentleman who afterwards became a highway robber" printed a pamphlet called Stanley's Remedy: or, the Way How to Reform Wandering Beggars, Thieves, Highway Robbers and Pickpockets, in which he pointed out that while "the statute commands that the vagrants should repair to the places where they were born, or last dwelled: there are thousands of these people, that the place of birth is utterly unknown and they had never any abiding place in their lives or ever remained in service; but were and are vagrants by descent." The Webbs in their book on the Old Poor Law have pointed out that under the English settlement laws passed between 1381 and 1641 "the entire body of the manual wage-earners of the kingdom, together with their families, were, so to speak, legally immobilized in the parishes to which they 'belonged'."

Since the early colonists in America had all left their old homes to seek new fortunes elsewhere, they might have been expected to have more advanced ideas, but as Robert W. Kelso so well shows us in Public Poor Relief in Massachusetts, 1620-1920, the old laws were copied in the new world. The colonies and later the new states merely varied these laws so that nearly every state has a somewhat different law granting the right of settlement, that is the right to receive public aid if in need, only to persons who have lived ten years in the state as in Rhode Island, seven years as in New Hampshire, or five, four, three or one year in other states. Within a state it may be necessary to have lived three months within a county or town before public relief can be given.

IN Old England each person who knew his place of birth had some settlement for there was one law for the country, but in America, by moving out of a state where the recognized settlement is one year into a state where three or more years are required, one becomes, if dependent, like the man without a country—quite without the right to public help anywhere. If he manages to be self-supporting for thirteen months in the second state and then desperately needs help he can appeal in vain to the authorities in the new state who still count him as a stranger, while in the state where he lived earlier he has lost all rights by being away too long.

The legal residence of minors also complicates matters. Thus officials in a western state in 1931 refused to allow a man with a wife and child to be returned to it after he had become dependent in another state where he had been only a few days because five years earlier his mother had moved to a third state and since he was under twenty-one it was ruled that his residence followed that of his mother. It was granted that he had not seen her in that time, in fact he had been born in the first state and had never been out of it before, and he had certainly been residing there and considered as an adult during the last year for he had spent most of that time in the state penitentiary.

A boy of nineteen became stranded in Wisconsin. He had been wandering about the country for two years but before that he had always lived in Michigan. That state would not claim him because (*Continued on page* 161)

Homeless men are familiar enough whether they be hoboes at the bottom or the seasonally unemployed at the top of the transient scale. But last year and this the highways are filled with flivver-families which have no homes—pathetic wanderers seeking work, having no legal residence where they may claim public relief, sick, sore, hopeless. Have we nothing better to offer them than guards at state lines enforcing modern equivalents of Edward the Third's Statute of Labourers?

That Cost of Living

By MARY ROSS

As a topic of popular (and sometimes unpopular) conversation, the cost of living holds its own against all comers. When pay-checks are shrinking, are the bills dwindling in proportion? Tea-table and smoking-car commentators seem to divide into two camps—the optimists who enjoy broadcasting the news of some extraordinary cheapness they have recently encountered, and the pessimists who feel that all in all, at the end of the year, even though the family income held up its end through 1931, its buying power showed little discernible improvement.

In terms of averages, the optimists are supported by the weighted indices prepared by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and the National Industrial Conference Board. Between June 1930 and June 1931 the Bureau found that there had been a drop of a little less than 10 per cent in the living costs of a workingman's family. This varied in different cities from as much as 12.7 per cent for Detroit to 5.6 per cent in Kansas City, the only place studied where the decrease was less than 8 per cent. In a just-published report, The Cost of Living in 1931, the National Industrial Conference Board finds that while in 1930 the average cost of living for wage-earning families was only 3.8 per cent below that for 1929, in 1931 as a whole it averaged 9.9 per cent lower than in 1930. Such figures, of course, must be read in the light of available facts on incomes of this group of families. The Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that while living costs were declining by less than 10 per cent, manufacturers' payrolls decreased by 25.7 per cent. This decrease in payrolls reflects not only wage-cuts, but also the unemployment of many workers who found themselves with little or no income with which to enjoy the increased purchasing power of the dollar. Between December 1925 and June 1931 wage-earning families enjoyed a decline in all of 15.5 per cent in the cost of living, the Bureau computes, while manufacturers' payrolls fell off by 38.5 percent.

From the point of view of an individual family, indices such as these are only a slight comfort. It is of merely academic interest to know that rents in general went down 5.1 per cent between June 1930 and June 1931 if one is tied up with a long-term lease based on earlier levels, or is making payments on a house contracted for in boom days, or finds that one can take advantage of lower rents only by assuming moving costs, purchase of new rugs and curtains to fit other rooms, and so on, which would wipe out the first couple of years' saving at one crack. What is true for the country as a whole is true in varying degrees, perhaps hardly at all, under the special conditions of various actual communities. Moreover these indices, based on the cost of living for a workingman's family—a scant minimum to support a hypothetical standard of "health and decency"—do not include many items which may seem necessities to families of other economic classes or indeed to individual families of the class whose expenditures they aim to measure.

Facts on the actual expenditures of families at different income levels are conspicuously lacking. In two articles later republished as a pamphlet (The Need for a New Survey of Family Budgets and Buying Habits, Metropolitan Life Insurance Press, 1931) Louis I. Dublin, statistician, and William A. Berridge, economist of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, point out that changes in buying habits—such as the widening use of radios and automobiles, for example, or the shift from cotton stockings to silk—make it likely that many of the accepted indices of living costs do not measure what people actually buy. This chance of error is greatly increased as one considers incomes where there is some leeway for choice in expenditures, incomes above the level at which the primary needs of shelter, food and clothing take practically all there is.

For professional families probably no study made in this country has been as thorough and consistent as that carried on by the Heller Committee for Research in Social Economics of the University of California. This is based not on an effort to show how families of this sort ***might*** or ***should*** spend their money, but—after inquiry as to the ways of actual families—on an estimate of the way professional families in that part of the country ***do*** spend it, influenced by "custom, conventions, fashion and, in even greater degree than by any rationale of spending, the temptations of the shops."

SINCE 1927 annual estimates have been made of the kinds and quantities and cost of things such a family buys in the San Francisco Bay region. The family chosen as representative consists of a husband and wife, "nearer forty than thirty," a boy of eleven and a girl of five. Some spending habits in that region are influenced by conditions which are not applicable to other parts of the country. The famous climate, for example, reduces the winter fuel bill and the ice bill or its equivalent; makes it unnecessary to have special clothing for summer and winter, and makes equally unnecessary the family trip away from home in hot seasons. Real estate conditions have made it difficult to rent a modern house, while easy terms of purchase put home ownership within reach of families with moderate incomes. Domestic helpers are scarce; wages of full-time helpers are high and part-time service is more generally used. Good roads and open winters have made the custom of owning an automobile so universal that it has come to be considered among the necessaries.

At the outset the Committee defined the distinctive features of the standard of living which they were trying to measure as:

ownership of a modern house in a "good" neighborhood; food that is designedly nourishing but which includes certain expenditures due to elaboration of menu and of service; the husband's lunches taken away from home; some help in the administration of the household, but no full-time resident service; a contribution to the Community Chest more or less fixed because the Community Chest now represents a quasi-tax; an automobile, a vacation, occasional patronage of com-