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Public vs. Private Ownership of Water Power

By Silas M. Bryan, a student at the University of Nebraska.

In several states, water power is of such a negligible quantity as to hardly warrant a discussion of ownership, but taken as a whole, the power possibilities represent a tremendous interest which demands public attention. There are at least two reasons why public ownership is more desirable than ownership by private corporation; public ownership is necessary for the early development of our water power, and will provide cheaper service.

While it is true that many of the large power plants have been developed by private organizations, it must also be conceded that they have held and prevented development on a still greater number. Nebraska's experience, while not conclusive, furnishes a typical example. In Nebraska the water rights on the four most important projects have been granted for nearly twenty years, yet there has been nothing done toward actual development. It also happens that these projects are largely controlled by private corporations already operating power plants in the state. Such conditions would lead us to infer that the private power plants are holding these power sites in order to maintain their monopoly on power production. It is very true that conditions similar to those of Nebraska may not be found in every state, but it can be safely said that they at least indicate a tendency of the private corporations to stifle cheaper power.

The more important point to consider is the low rate possible under public ownership. The very nature of the public owned plant allows greater philanthropy in the matter of rates, because such a plant does not have to produce sufficiently large dividends to encourage investment, but merely large enough to retire its bonds and pay its running expenses. Its sole purpose is to give the best service at the lowest cost to the consumer. The private corporation, even though it tries to maintain good service at a low rate, must naturally make its rate high enough to produce dividends, and this difference means much to the consumer.

The experience of the Province of Ontario, Canada, furnishes an interesting example of what the public can do in the direction of cheap rates. The fact that Ontario is particularly rich in water power will not, I believe, make a comparison impossible. The first annual report of the hydroelectric commission (1909) shows that the public owned plant made a remarkably large decrease in rates. The cost per one thousand Watt hours for lighting purposes was reduced from fifteen to seven and one-half cents; the annual cost per horse power was reduced from forty dollars to twenty dollars; the annual cost per arc lamp was reduced from sixty-five to forty-five dollars. These statistics show that the public owned plants are saving the consumer from thirty-five to fifty per cent of the power cost.

Not only did they reduce the rates almost fifty per cent, but they operated at a profit sufficiently large to pay for depreciation, retire the bonds, and meet all expenses without taxing the municipalities for their support. The sixth annual report of the commission (1914) shows that the forty-five municipalities served netted a profit totaling \$451,000, and that only three of the forty-five operated at a loss, and this loss only totaled \$3,200. Therefore, the consumers are paying less for their

power, and the plants are sufficiently self-supporting not to need taxes, which might offset the cheaper rates. The Ontario plan is so satisfactory that the municipalities served are constantly increasing. The last report of the commission shows that during the year 1912-13, the number of municipalities served increased from twenty-eight to forty-five, and that scores of others were on the waiting list. So the review of Ontario's experiences has proved that public ownership can be operated on a sound financial basis with a great saving to the consumer.

The argument is often advanced that the private corporation can furnish power at as low a rate as the public owned plant. This may be possible, but such instances are very few, and the assertion is generally made after the private company has lost its opportunity to provide cheap service. If Ontario can achieve such unqualified success in public ownership of water power, there seems no very good reason why a similar plan should not succeed in other localities.

WORK MAKES SELF RESPECT

We are all poor. Misfortune may fell any estate in a day. It is no credit to anybody to be born well off. It is an accident. The rank is generally the "guinea stamp." Wealth may have a poverty of morale that beggars any word to describe. Poverty may have a wealth of honor that astonishes angels. A day's work only stands between any man and

want. No one is entitled to a living who will not work. There is no divine order of loafers. There is no excuse for a so-called "leisure class." The state has two troubles: the pauper who invents a reason for being fed without toil, and the rich idler who claims a right to live from the work of others. For the one class the city is asked to open soup houses and provide winter bed and keep. For the other the police are asked to patrol unused mansions, while the owners, flitting about, attempt to spend a part of an unearned income. Self respect is builded by work of hand or brain. Immunity because of money breeds parasites, a class to be abhorred. Charity to hard luck rounders is misdirected sentiment which is neither just nor religious. Willingness to work is a fair test.—Alexander C. Stephens in the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

Little Left in Life

He came home and found his young wife dissolved in tears. "What do you think has happened?" she cried. "I left the cage open and our canary has flown away." He undertook to give what consolation he might and took the poor distressed lady in his arms. As she nestled against his shoulder, a new access of sobs convulsed her. "Ah, George," she murmured in a choking voice, "now I've only you left."—San Francisco Argonaut.

Shivers

She—The very thought of the furs you have promised me makes me feel warm.
He—And the mere thought of their cost makes cold shivers run down my back.—Boston Transcript.

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