

Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's Work for a Better Washington

Told by Grace Bicknell

Mrs. Bicknell is the wife of Ernest P. Bicknell, national director of the American Red Cross, who went on the cruiser Tennessee to the relief of stranded Americans in Europe.

(Exclusive service The Survey Press Bureau.)

When Mrs. Wilson came to Washington to take up the new and trying duties of the white house, she was not deceived by the outer beauty of the city, but felt sure that improvements were needed here as elsewhere. When she announced her intention of seeing conditions for herself and of helping in the work of improvement a new hope and inspiration came to the social workers of Washington.

Mrs. Archibald Hopkins was chairman of the Washington section, woman's department, National Civic Federation, and I was chairman of the committee on housing. We had been working on many problems together but our chief interest was and still is in the alleys. For this reason we wished to show these to Mrs. Wilson first, believing that if we could arouse her interest, it might mean their final abolition as places of habitation.

VISITS TO ALLEYS

So we drove through alley after alley, explaining that the death rate was twice as high as on the street, that one out of every two children born in the alleys is illegitimate; that drunkenness and crime are fostered by such seclusion.

Among the alleys visited that day was Goat alley, where two hundred people live entirely shut off from the public view—a law unto themselves. The houses here are mostly frame, and we hope some day that these houses will be torn down, wide openings made through to at least two of the four surrounding streets and a splendid municipal playground given to this congested district.

We went also to Logan's court, one of the most congested, picturesque vice and disease-producing alleys in the city; also one where net profits on rentals have amounted to as high as twenty per cent.

Then on to the famous Willow Tree alley, where between three and four hundred people, negroes and Italians lived within three blocks of the capitol under most shocking conditions. After much discussion and five presidential messages, congress finally appropriated \$78,000 for the condemnation of the property in this alley. When we were there the houses were nearly all torn down leaving a clear space within the block of between four and five acres. Mrs. Wilson immediately thought that it would be an excellent thing for the neighborhood if a municipal washhouse could be located at one corner of this square. She afterward talked of this hope to a number of officials, but her dream is as yet unrealized.

PROVIDING A PLAYGROUND

After all the expense of condemnation had been paid, there remained an unexpected balance of \$17,000. This has since been used for improvement. Willow Tree alley has been converted into a combination playground and park, but it remains enclosed in the same way that the old alley was, and unless most carefully supervised, it may be just as harmful in its influence. It is hoped that later congress

will make an appropriation for buying the property on the four surrounding sides, so that this can be made into a splendid open playground.

On another day Mrs. Wilson visited our group of sanitary houses. We call it our group because our housing committee has charge of the houses and we employ a social worker who collects rents and looks after the tenants according to the Octavia Hill plan. The houses were constructed for the sake of demonstrating that small sanitary houses could be built, rented for a reasonable sum and yet, by good management, be made to pay a fair profit. The 109 two-family houses in this group of from two to four rooms and a bath each, rent from \$7.50 to \$12.50 per month per family, pays five per cent on the investment besides the two per cent allowed for repairs and two per cent as a reserve fund for the purpose of rebuilding.

Mrs. Wilson was charmed with these houses as she had been distressed with those in the alleys, and was delighted to see that the houses were occupied by colored people, the race for whose elevation she had long been working.

WINNING CONGRESSMEN

After Mrs. Wilson joined our crusade, people flocked to our standard and everybody wanted to help in the alleys. It was laughingly said that no one could move in polite society in Washington who could not talk alleys.

We made daily trips through the alleys with congressmen and others always ending at the sanitary houses illustrating by these, how the alley people might be housed if we could get them out on the street. Mrs. Wilson often went with us and when we had some one we were especially anxious to win over to our cause, that one was invited to accompany her.

A committee of fifty on alleys was formed. William C. Woodward, who had gone through the alleys, first as district physician to the poor, then as district coroner, and now as health officer of the District of Columbia, and who knows the demoralizing influence of the alleys perhaps better than anyone else, wrote the bill. It was endorsed by Commissioners Newman and Siddons, and finally sent to congress as the commissioners' bill. It was also simply known as the "Alley bill," and as "Mrs. Wilson's bill."

During her illness and anxiety, Mrs. Wilson did not lose interest in her bill and even though she heard nothing of it. On the very last morning of her life, she said to the president: "I should be happier if I knew the alley bill had passed." Hearing of this, Mr. Tumulty sent word to congress.

A HOUSING LAW AS A MEMORIAL

As Chairman Smith was absent, Senator Pomerene called the members of the senate district committee together. One member objected to the passage of the bill, not for the reason that he did not favor alley legislation, but because he wished the matter dealt with in a still more drastic way; for our bill allowed ten years for the complete evacuation of all alley houses, and gave owners of alley property some possibility of redress. An amendment was therefore added requiring this evacuation by July, 1918.

Unanimous consent was asked of the senate by Senator Pomerene for the consideration of this bill. It was granted. The bill was passed, and

word of its passage was sent to Mrs. Wilson a short time before she lost consciousness.

This substitute bill has already been protested by both the chamber of commerce and the board of trade, although both organizations are in favor of the original bill. They claim that the substitute contemplates the absolute confiscation of about \$2,000,000 worth of property. In spite of this opposition, however, it was reported from the district committee of the house and on August 24, was debated upon the floor of the house. On the next district day, September 14, this substitute alley bill passed the house. If it is signed by the president, we shall hope to have supplementary legislation enacted providing for the enforcement of the law in a manner which will be fair to both the tenant and owner of alley property.

Mrs. Wilson's activities also extended in many other directions. She visited the associated charities very soon after coming to Washington, became a contributing member, often attended the weekly conferences at the central office and was later elected a member of the board. She visited all the settlements, the president accompanying her to some of the exhibitions at Neighborhood house. She also aided in securing laundry for the colored settlement; was interested in the work for the blind, was honorary chairman of the District of Columbia branch of the Needlework Guild of America, and was active in the Southern Industrial educational association for the improvement of the poor mountain whites.

Because of her personality and loving service, the city of Washington will ever hold Mrs. Wilson in grateful memory, and congress can pay her no more delicate tribute than by enacting into law, as a memorial to the wife of the president, the bill in which she was so vitally interested.

MR. ROOSEVELT ON THE WAR

At a meeting of the progressive party of the state of New York held in New York City on Wednesday of last week, Mr. Roosevelt made the following eloquent statement of the spirit of patriotism and co-operation which should actuate all Americans at this time. It will have the approval, we are sure, of all good citizens, irrespective of party, creed, or race:

"I regret that of recent years the policies which I and those like me believed to be essential for the welfare, the honor, and the greatness of the American people have not been more faithfully carried out. But all that is past now and neither here nor there in this crisis. At the moment the United States, as one of the great nations of the world, faces a crisis which has already involved in war almost all the other great nations of the world. Friends, we have our troubles here, but let us be thankful beyond measure that we are citizens of this republic, and that our burdens, though they may be heavy, are far lighter than those that must be borne by the men and women who live in other and less fortunate countries.

"I, for one, will act, and I am sure I am stating your feelings when I say that the men and women of the progressive party will act, throughout this crisis primarily as American citizens, and will work hand in hand with any public servant, and with any and all private citizens who, in good faith and disinterestedly, do all that is possible to see that the United States comes through this crisis unharmed, and so conducts herself as to conserve the honor and the interest of her own citizens and, so far as justice for all the nations of mankind.—The Outlook.

MR. ROOSEVELT AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST IN 1916

Following is a special dispatch to the New York Herald:

Baltimore, Md., Thursday.—At the conference in New York on Wednesday, after Mr. Bonaparte and the other Maryland leaders had spoken on the situation in Maryland, Mr. Roosevelt said he could best deal with the questions of party policy in Maryland and indicate most clearly his views regarding the course appropriate for the progressive party there, by reading some extracts from a letter he had written to a gentleman in Maryland who had promised to support him for the republican nomination in 1916. This letter was written in the month of August. He said he had written substantially to the same effect to gentlemen in Kentucky and New Mexico who had expressed similar intentions.

Colonel Roosevelt then quoted from his letter as follows:

"I am very sorry to say that I do not think anything whatever can be done through the republican party as now organized; in any event, as far as I am concerned. The result here in New York has shown that it is utterly useless for me to endeavor to get any republican of prominence to come out in such a way as to make it possible for there to be co-operation between the republicans and progressives on any terms which I would consider.

"In all big states the republican party is more reactionary, more completely under the control of the bosses, than it was two years ago. There is literally nothing whatever to be done with it while it continues as it is now; it at present is as far as the poles from the vital principles of Abraham Lincoln republicanism, and I am sorry to say that actual experience has convinced me that any effort to make a combination between the progressives and the decent republicans for good government has resulted only in these decent republicans being forced into subservience to the machine, and the machine gleefully and screamingly announced that the progressives have surrendered to the republicans, so that the situation becomes worse and not better.

"There are certain states where the republican candidates have declared that they are for me in 1916, and a few where they, with more or less directness, announced themselves in favor of the progressive policies. As regards the announcement for myself, I do not regard it as amounting to anything, because it is of no earthly consequence to indorse me unless the principles for which I stand are indorsed.

"Under these circumstances I am sorry to say that I do not believe it would be right in the contests this fall for the progressives to support the republicans in any state, no matter what the republicans in these states may say, because in a great majority of the states the republicans have come out with the utmost cynicism against the progressives and in favor of all the worst practices of the Bourbons two years ago, and where this is the case, victory for republicans in any state, even though nominally achieved under the banner of some man who says he is for me, would in its sum total result in advantages to the utterly Bourbon and reactionary machines.

"If the republicans of Maryland, Kentucky and New Mexico declare for me, but at the same time keep in the republican organization instead of becoming progressive, they are absolutely powerless before the republicans of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and the great majority of other states where they are bitterly and to the last gasp