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The American Character

By FRANK D. REEVE

THE ANALYSIS of the character of a nation is a task often undertaken by writers for various reasons: by a foreigner with the curiosity of a visitor in a new land; by the native with an ax to grind or to test his powers of observation and understanding. In the case of our country, the task is a particularly difficult one because it may be questioned whether the "American" has yet been produced out of this melting-pot of nationalities. But since the first settlers landed at Jamestown and Plymouth, sufficient time has elapsed for some traits to develop. Whether these traits are all peculiarly American, or whether they are part and parcel of human character in general, the reader may judge for himself. To the extent that they are American, environment played an important part in their development.

The early colonists eked out an existence in isolated communities along the banks of the streams and bay shores of the Atlantic coast, drawing on the resources of sea and land for a living. Gradually they filled in the back-country, building their settlements from Maine to Georgia and from the ocean to the mountains. Their economy and their culture were gradually influenced and modified on the ever-widening frontier. This was the seed-time of America.

In the nineteenth century the embryonic nation reached a period of rapid development. In those years the immigrant entered an environment pulsating with the spirit of a growing country. He was thrown upon his own resources (usually scanty in a monetary sense, but rich in courage and willingness to work). Spurred on by the abundant opportunities to gain a stake and stimulated by liberty of speech and the right to vote, he entered with zest upon his venture of seeking fortune in the New World.

And what a venture it was! He was engulfed in a wave of humanity rolling from coast to coast, fashioning a new homeland out of a "howling wilderness." The earlier years of the century were marked by localism in thought and interest. But modern inventions furnished strong instruments for unity. The highway and canal, railroad and telegraph, brought communion of the parts with the whole, and out of the conflict of opinions, the friction between clashing interests, East against West, North against South, Puritanism against frontier laxity, the American character was shaped. The product still needs the refining touch of the artist Time, but the outlines are clearly discernible.

The American is an individual *par excellence*, whether acting solely by himself or in a group. The word coöperation is not foreign to him in meaning or practice, but in coöperating with others he does not lose sight of himself. He will coöperate whether it is in the raising of a neighbor's log cabin in the days of the frontier or in the creation of a corporation to erect the highest skyscraper on the land. If he accepts the leadership of another, it is not as neophyte gazing on divinity, nor with any attitude of hero-worship. Rather. American coöperative groups work on a basis of equality, with the individual member laboring under the conviction that he could do the task as well as the one appointed to direct the group action. His work is performed in the spirit that he is doing a single and personal task, directed, of course, toward the common group objective, but marked by the genius of his own touch. The leader is not perched on some high point, remote and distant, but is a person whom he knows, one whom he can talk to and criticize, argue with and even present suggestions to. It is hard for Americans to accept dictators wherever they appear, in government, labor unions, universities, or industrial management.

Nor is the dictator in the American family any more desirable. Children are guided by parental instruction through the formative years, but their individualism crops out early, and at varying ages they drop their dependence

on the elders. The family group seldom remains together in the home town, but scatters over the length and breadth of the county, state, or nation. Sentimental ties remain as a permanent bond, and financial assistance may be prolonged into early adulthood, but the sons and daughters seek their own careers with a minimum of influence from the parents, and a maximum of confidence in their own abilities.

Self-reliance is a corollary to the individualism of the American, and he expresses it in many ways. He is a jack-of-all-trades and will try many things to make a living, or for adventure. He may not always be capable of completing what he undertakes, but that possibility does not deter him from trying. With a fortune awaiting around the corner, he will make the turn, sometimes on "two wheels" in his haste. Whether speculating in western lands or in a suburban lot, buying stocks on margin or investing pennies in a hamburger stand, gambling on a wildcat oil well or the turn of a card in poker, he plunges in, confident of himself. If the fates rule adversely, he calls a certain stoicism to his aid. Even in trivial matters his independent nature asserts itself. A squeaking door hinge does not call for the services of an expert mechanic, it is silenced by a squirt from the home oil can; and it is a simple task to hammer a loose nail, paint the yard fence, change a tire on the automobile, repair the house wiring, or adjust the furnace.

Self-confidence in the use of his hands has its counterpart in the wagging of the tongue. The American is more interested in talking than in listening; so conversation tends to become one-sided. In case rival opinions penetrate the ear-drum, they are not necessarily accepted. He has confidence in his own opinions, and does not change them lightly. This confidence, at times, shades into intolerance; not the stern, unbending kind of provincial New England, destroyed by the westward movement, but a rather mild one, more an indifference or even a slight contempt, sometimes amused, at opinions contrary to his own beliefs. Occasionally it may crop out in unfortunate group action in the field of politics

or religion, but such manifestations of character are rare rather than the norm.

The individualism and confident self-reliance of the American finds its chief restraint in law. Yet he is impatient with such restraint. Outwardly acknowledging authority, yielding to the theory that this is a government of laws and not of men, nevertheless, he does not approach the law in the spirit of awe any more than he does the leaders in group undertakings. The law to him is something personal, something to be judged on its merits and accorded only the respect that it deserves in his opinion. He obeys the law in the light of his own common sense; it is not a serious matter if his judgment errs a trifle and the law is transgressed without injury to anyone. The speed limit may be thirty miles an hour, but forty is all right because the street is clear of traffic and the policeman is not in sight. If arrested for speeding, the culprit affords amusement for the benefit of passersby rather than an object lesson in the evil of law-breaking; the observer is not shocked by the transgressor, but holds him a foolish person for getting caught. So the problem for the American is to draw the line between the advisability of staying just within the law, particularly in regard to the more serious violations, and the desire to overstep it within the bounds of reason.

Reluctant though he is to submit to legal restraint, law is looked upon as the great key to social progress and individual welfare. Consequently, legislative mills—national, state, and local—grind out endless statutes and ordinances framed to modify the conduct and practices of society in part or in whole. These laws in turn meet the supreme court of common sense and are modified to fit conduct. Many laws, in the end, serve only to amuse the antiquarian, like the rule requiring two trains, meeting at a crossing, to stop and wait until the other one passes before resuming their trip.

With faith in the efficacy of law, but reluctance to submit to it, the American is impatient with other artificial

lines laid out to guide his actions. Many decades of moving westward along natural routes, seeking the easiest and most direct way through forest and mountain, have left their impress upon his character. A winding pathway across a shady campus is a consumer of time, so the "please" sign is disregarded as the bends are shortened by walking on the grass. The highway that is governed in its directions by the right angles of the farmer's homestead is unnatural and illogical, it must give way to a new road cutting across the field. And curves that cannot be taken at high speed must be straightened out so that the thrill and utility of the high-powered automobile may be enjoyed to the full. Environment shapes his character, but environment in turn must be shaped.

The American is an activist. "In deeds . . . he takes delight." They may be important or trivial matters, but they engage his attention, stimulate him, hurry him onward to their completion. He moves fast, he likes speed, horizontal or vertical, for short or long distances. By subway and elevator, train and airship, he goes about his daily routine. Aids are invented and constantly improved to expedite his movements. The pony-express was superseded by the railway mail, only to be supplanted by the air-mail. The slow freight train has been challenged by the high speed truck; and the streamlined passenger train competes with the automobile for the privilege of serving the hurrying American. The typewriter, the dictaphone, telegraph, and telephone, the automat and corner lunch, all cater to his love of speed. He moves fast, he talks fast, and he eats fast.

His pleasures are influenced by the desire to do something that requires physical exertion, or affords an outlet for excess animal spirits. He uses his hands in producing something that is useful or ornamental, and he dissipates excess energy in dancing or drinking. He may cultivate a garden with much enthusiasm, or have a workshop tucked away in the basement of the house which makes possible the application of hand power to hammer and saw, plane and bit,

creating some object for the home and satisfying his activist urge. Sports, of course, are a basic factor in the routine of the American, and he devotes much time to them as participant, observer, or critic. In drinking, the quick reaction from hard liquor is preferable to the slow tonic from sipping choice wine.

The love of change is a corollary to his activism. The early lure of the West, the region of the setting sun, the "just beyond," has left in its wake the desire to travel. Whether a trip to the old country, a Sunday drive to the mountains, or a vacation jaunt across country, new sights must be viewed; a change of scenery is always welcome. Foreign lands and strange places lure him. "See America first" does not turn the tourist from Europe to his own country, it merely increases the total number of travelers. And the inventive genius of the American creates the means to promote satisfaction for this urge. The low-priced automobile and the super-highway are the outlet for the pioneer restlessness that led him to abandon his farm and seek a new one in greener pastures.

For those who cannot travel, a modification of the immediate environment is an outlet for the love of change. An open field is an invitation to start a new sub-division for homes; the old dwelling must give way to changing styles in architecture and construction. Seldom does the third generation live in the family mansion. On the contrary, the house often has a brief life and loses its original identity in the task of serving the needs of the transient, or is razed to make way for a filling station. The appearance of the business section of town is constantly tampered with. New store fronts appear as though they were the result of a fairy wand weaving gently in the night while the owner slumbers. Awaken and behold the change. Main Street is different than it was yesterday. And with the change in the store front the stock is rearranged, and the latest scheme in interior decoration adopted.

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The love of change is a manifestation of the zest of living and desire to sample it in all ways possible. The necessity to be doing something different leads to the new fads that constantly invade the horizon of his environment. New games, new sports, new dress; from Mah Jong to Monopoly, badminton to skiing, the hobble skirt to Empress Eugenie hats, the American samples the current modes as fast as they come and is always ready for more. The speed of change varies with individuals. Some will adopt new inventions more readily than others. A certain conservatism acts as a check to prevent a too bewildering transformation in habits or environment, but once a change is started, difficulty is found in resisting the movement.

Standardization is the charge often hurled at the American, but it is not standardization in the sense of slavish imitation. Many minds can produce a great variety of interesting and new things, and Americans utilize the results of the inventive skill of the many. Although there may be thousands of new cars, and they may be found in the possession of a million people throughout the length and breadth of the land, they are of many models; the task of wearing them out is entrusted to numerous owners through the agency of the second-hand car dealer. New Easter bonnets are almost a necessity, but seldom does the watcher see two hats exactly alike. There are many modifications of architectural style to choose from in home building; interior furnishings run the gamut of infinite variety; Main Street seldom has two store fronts exactly alike. Standardization? No.

In personal adornment he is like a chameleon. His exterior appearance changes with the seasons, the seasonal changes lengthen into periods, and the periods make possible a history of costumes. Feminine dress presents a bewildering variety and rapidity of change. The photographic power of the mind is unable to retain a memory of their progress. Nor are men ultra-conservative. The changes in style are not so obvious as for women, but the close observer

can detect a slightly different slant to the shirt collar, a lengthened crease in the trouser legs, and three buttons on the sleeve where the style the season before demanded only two.

Self confident and active, the American is ambitious to attain success in life, usually material success; but it is not a purely selfish motive, the mere desire to get rich. It is a complex intention. The erection of a business building on Main Street represents wealth, of course, but it may also represent pride in achievement. To the ordinary observer it may be just another structure, but to the owner it is the first brick building, or the tallest building, or the newest style building in town. It illustrates his ability in rising from poverty to wealth, in changing his social status from Tin Can Alley to Park Avenue, or making the transformation from a European peasant to an American Babbitt; it is the realization of an ideal in tangible form; namely material success.

American parents are ambitious for their children. There is no fatalism that a child must follow in his parents' footsteps, if the path has been unproductive. Parents are alert to provide advantages for the life voyage of their offspring. If the parents fall short of their own life goal, the next generation must succeed. American parents fall prey to every itinerant book-seller with his attractive bound volumes which he claims may hold the open sesame for children. High schools are supported as the *sine qua non* in preparation for adulthood, and the neighboring college is the ultimate step to the desired end. So the Americans pour into the halls of learning seeking the power for economic success, and for knowledge in the cultural sense.

The American is not adjusted to the college, the institution is adjusted to him. His materialistic desires find outlets in practical courses that will lay the foundation for making a living, the attainment of economic security by adequate compensation in some honored profession. And after the necessary attention has been paid to school books, his

nature asserts itself in normal ways. The student follows sports with eagerness. New organizations are promoted, new societies formed, and campus politics are indulged in; the lure of the ballroom, the gathering in the coffee-shop, give vent to his activism. College life is simply a miniature of what is to follow and the character of the student has already received its fundamental markings of adulthood.

The activism of the American evolves into emotionalism. He is subject to the influence of mob spirit whether at a lynching bee or a college sport, and oral or printed propaganda is potent in influencing his thinking. He loves excitement. A successful pass in football brings the crowd to their feet in one spontaneous outburst of cheering. In baseball, a home run is much more satisfying than a squeeze play, while an error in umpiring leads to an outburst of passion that may bring the unlucky official a shower of bottles and miscellaneous junk from the grandstand. A gangster picture and the western thriller in the movies both satisfy the longing to be doing or to see others doing things that are exciting. If the price of the cinema is not at hand, a parade down the street will serve the purpose, and the American crowds the curbing to see the show in detail. The ring of the fire bells, the piercing shrill of the police siren, immediately arouses him and he rushes forth to see the happening, careful not to violate the law to more than a reasonable extent by following the fire engine too closely.

Emotional, a lover of excitement, he falls an easy prey to those who exploit this characteristic. The politician speaks in sonorous phrases, appealing not to the auditors' reason, but to his heart. "Two chickens in every pot" will catch the attention quicker than the technicalities of the tariff. Two chickens might appeal to the stomach too, but their possible existence is not tested by reason, the phrase is too emotionally satisfying. The big-time promoter presents his show on an elaborate scale, with fanfare and ballyhoo, and with some attraction that is new, or exotic, or even vulgar; it must be something different, like Jumbo the elephant, the

Rockettes, uniform in size and dancing with precision, or the fan dancer moving in the gloom of subdued lighting.

The emotions are recognized as an aid to business. Modern advertising appeals to love, pride, greed, courage, adventure, and it is constantly seeking adjectives to express something bigger than colossal or better than best. This method for making a profit at the expense of the consumer is supplemented by taking advantage of his gullibility, a practice summed up in the slogan, "there is one born every minute," a cynicism that reveals a blemish on our character in the form of shrewdness and unscrupulousness, confirmed in the principle, "Let the buyer beware." Consequently, the way of business has been marked by callousness toward the welfare of the many, and the tricks of the promoter have often defrauded the individual. But the forces of good rally to the conflict with evil, and the goal of a better country and a better life affords a constant stimulus to group action for improvement, either through the agency of government or by hundreds of humbler organizations.

The American has been criticized as a joiner. Societies and clubs are manufactured for every conceivable pattern of thought and action. Rare, indeed, is the citizen who does not belong to at least three or four organized groups. The motives for organization are many: religious, social, economic, philanthropic, political, and professional, but they all serve as an outlet for the desire for fellowship, for group action, to accomplish something, to follow an ideal. The Masons, Odd Fellows, and Knights of Columbus; the Democratic Club, the Republican Club; the A. H. A., the B. O. P., Phi Beta Kappa, and Xyz; Rotary, Kiwanis, "Lions, Tigers, and Owls"; the quilting society, the bridge club, and the Ten Dons—there are hundreds of groups, large and small.

The American is a charitable person, as witness the numerous agencies and group activities for relieving the distress of the unfortunate. But it is not a charity that runs away with reason. He gives but not to the point where it

hurts. The Golden Rule and the Biblical injunction that he has heard of casting bread upon the water, must not be followed too literally because there is the conflicting and more realistic rule of life, that self-preservation is the first law of nature. Consequently, his own well-being must be safe-guarded, a point-of-view that is perfectly logical in the light of his environment, that of a society operating on the principle of rugged individualism, where the race for wealth and security is won by the brave and the strong, sometimes by the unscrupulous, and the devil take the hindmost. However, the American struggles to rise above this primitive conception of life. He gives, though according to his means and judgment. A jar of fruit to his neighbor, coffee and doughnut money to the panhandler, a coin dropped into the Salvation Army kettle, all testify to his innate desire to make this world a more cheerful place in which to live.

The charitable tendency is only a manifestation of a broader feeling of sympathy and humanitarianism that crops out in many ways. A feeling for the underdog, the unfortunate, the suffering, leads the American to many activities that afford an outlet to this general emotion. The killing of Chinese and Spanish by death-dealing missiles from the air arouses the same feeling of horror as the suffering of Cubans in concentration camps; and the exaggerated miseries of poor Uncle Tom opened the tear ducts of Americans to the point of danger that those natural agencies of sympathy might have become lost to future generations. But tears are not the only manifestation of the desire to help the unfortunate; Uncle Tom's brethren were smuggled to Canada, arms were sent to the Cubans, ambulance corps and volunteers to Spain, and relief funds to China. And if the horrors of war prevent the taking of that extreme step to aid other peoples, at least a popular boycott of goods of an aggressor nation will find some support.

The American is an idealist in the realm of political thought. His fundamental theory is democracy or faith in the ability of the average individual to participate in the

management of public affairs. He clings to this faith with the stubbornness of a bulldog. He is convinced that the privileges of voting, freedom of speech, and holding office are essential for achieving the ultimate of human happiness in this world. There is much in his surroundings to bring disillusionment, but this ideal survives. Graft and dishonesty may be revealed in low and high place, but democracy remains the basis of government. Business usually may occupy too much of his time to permit the seeking of office, but the privilege, if not exercised, must still be maintained. The plague of economic problems may increase with the passing of the frontier, but a Democracy can solve them as well as government organized in some other fashion. In fact, this ideal has so taken hold of his mind that he is not above wishing, in a passive but hopeful manner, that its blessings be extended over the world. But if all the world does not want it, or will not accept it, at least a fair chance must be provided for existence and growth where congenial climate and soil have been found. And no rude gardener is to confuse it with a ranker growth and prune it out with weeds and dead shrubs. No indeed; if necessary the American will fight to make the world safe for Democracy.

In the every-day conduct of the American the idealistic behavior is not so easily detected; his material interests, on the contrary, are more apparent. He is engaged primarily in the pursuit of a living and the simpler pleasures of life. The amount of his wage or salary is never far from his thoughts, and he envisages the numerous things that might add to his joy if the wherewithal were at hand to purchase them. His standard of living progresses with his income. A radio is added to the household equipment at the earliest opportunity, and an automobile, of not too ancient model, is considered to be almost a necessity. With these assets he can spend Sunday afternoon in the open and the evenings at home listening to Amos and Andy, Talking Drums, swing music, and many other appeals to the popular taste. A soul here and there soars into the higher realms of opera and

symphony, but the majority favor the latest hit tune from Hollywood, just as they prefer a realistic landscape painting to a picture done in the technique of the abstractionist.

The excitement of popular music with its simple melodies harmonizes better than classical music with the activism of the American. He prefers to be up and doing to sitting and thinking. When the orchestra starts to play his feet begin to tap and he seeks an outlet on the dance floor for the primitive urge to keep time with music by body movements. At a concert, the sentimental numbers have the widest appeal, and if they have a touch of humor in their theme, so much the better; he applauds vigorously, and the air vibrates with a feeling of youth in it, of elementary nature finding an outlet for its exuberance, of good humor and the zest of living. And why should he not appreciate the simpler music? Understanding only develops with much effort, and his daily thoughts are too much occupied with the news of the market place and the prospects of a game of golf or a round of bridge at the first moment of leisure for him to devote much time to cultivate the finer aspects of life. But the signs of the times indicate a changing taste for the better; the American will become, more and more, interested in art, music, and literature.

The characteristic that enables the American to survive "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" is a sense of humor. The cartoonist and the wit relieve the tediousness of life and apply their art equally to the highest and the lowest individual in society, to the complex and the simple, the controversial and the accepted. They spare neither age, sex, nor subject, and the latest joke rapidly travels the length and breadth of the land by air, wire, and "grapevine," enjoyed by everyone. Exaggeration and coarseness, the subtle and refined, find innumerable descriptions in the humorous conversations of every day. The Elephant and the Donkey trumpet and bray at election time, the WPA laborer generates no sweat, and in a moment of carelessness Bocaccio slyly turns the tongue to the subject of Anthony and Cleo-

patra or the farmer's daughter. If sentimentalism is subdued and tears kept from the eyes, if excitement is suppressed by Puritan soberness, everyone succumbs to a joke. No state-fostered campaign for Power through Joy is necessary to keep an American good humored, or good natured either.

Until more generations have crossed the stage, the American will remain essentially a son of Nature rather than a daughter of Muse. He is a bustling bundle of energy, motivated largely by material considerations, but tempered with sentimentalism. He has latent qualities that will make possible the gradual rise to more spiritual levels. With the receding influence of the frontier and the increasing refinement of a settled society, he will delve more into books and less into the earth. Material objectives will become secondary and the fortunes of his neighbors will be more his concern.

Fragmentary

By MAXENE PEARCE

. . . little hurts and smaller petty aches
think of each of them and laugh
silly little things—but—yet
we want to cry,
to tiptoe and to pray—
only being small enough
only being quiet enough
that no one would want to hurt us,
but they do.

Shut your eyes—tight, tight,
think of nothing, nothing
soft in the chair where you are safe.

Life won't let you ever be safe,
incessantly driving you on—
carefully open your eyes,
methodically light a cigarette.