

WHERE CIVILIZATION'S TIDE IS AT EBB

Scalloptown, East Greenwich's Most Serious Social Problem

THE FILTHIEST, MOST IMMORAL, least civilized settlement in the State of Rhode Island; this, by verdict of agent C. H. Thurber of the Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, who has more than once been called to visit the scene, is the description that fits the squalid collection of huts and cabins along the waterfront in East Greenwich which goes by the name of Scalloptown.

All efforts to reform it have been dismal failures; attempts to educate its denizens to a better moral and physical standard of living has been met with discouraging indifference. And now the Town of East Greenwich, chafing under the unhappy distinction thus conferred upon it, is again seeking to arouse the authorities to a significant pitch of righteous indignation to wipe out the disgrace.

For years Scalloptown has been a serious problem. A jumble of dilapidated cabins, chiefly

occupied by negroes, lining the shore of Cowesett Bay just back of boat houses, whose activities, when scallops were plentiful, gave the settlement its name. It effectually destroys the beauty that might be found along the waterfront and constitutes a menace to the social welfare of the community.

Nobody pretends to know just how many residents there are in Scalloptown, or even how many families are housed there, if housing it can be called. It would be easier, perhaps, to tell the number of individuals than the number of families, for family lines are not regarded with quite the same deference in Scalloptown as in more enlightened communities.

It may be estimated that the population of the colony averages between 50 and 75, of whom about two-thirds are children. To some extent the population is a floating one, members going and coming as they temporarily elect to

work elsewhere. A few more or less makes small difference to Scalloptown, where life runs easily along and the only grievous sin is a violation of the scriptural injunction to take no thought for the morrow.

For a generation or more conditions have varied little. There was unoccupied land between the bluffs that run along the shore and the high water mark, land which nobody seemed to own or care for. The situation was ideal for the establishment of a squatter colony. Shanties were built or parts of old boat houses utilized. Nobody appeared on the scene to offer objections, and there gradually grew up a settlement entirely distinct from the life of the town above the bluffs and beyond, whose characteristics grew more marked as the years passed and no restrictions were imposed upon it.

The question of the ownership of the land is a curious one, being not the least of the factors which have brought about the continuance of the colony without serious interruption. While deeds are held to portions of the waterfront, where the fishermen pay a nominal rental for the location of their boat houses, sections are apparently ownerless, unless indeed, the squatter claims have become valid by virtue of occupancy long undisputed.

Some two or three years ago, when question of Scalloptown was under consideration, an effort was made by the members of the Town Council to discover the owners of the property. Constable Bennett investigated, but reported that while a few lots along the shore in the vicinity of Scalloptown were held by deed, he could find no record of ownership for the rest. As for rent, it is declared by boatmen along the shore that the denizens of Scalloptown do not know what the word rent means.

Efforts to remedy the situation by appealing to or exercising authority on the owners, therefore failed, and no official action was taken. Recently, however, agitation for a betterment of conditions was renewed, and Agent Thurber of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was summoned to investigate the colony on the basis of morality.

Accompanied by several town officers, Mr. Thurber visited the settlement, going through the

dwellings and studying the situation. His report was that, while conditions were deplorable, there was no evidence that would warrant the Society in interfering, save in individual cases, and that the question rested with the Town Council.

Of the conditions that he found, Mr. Thurber said: "There are, of course, individual homes in Rhode Island which I have been called on to investigate where conditions may have been as bad as or worse than those I found in East Greenwich. But for a settlement of this size, I do know anything worse, from the point of view of physical or moral conditions in Scalloptown. They live no better than animals. The filth is unspeakable and, and apparently family lines are not regarded in the arrangements.

"There is no neglect of the children, however, that would justify me in interfering except in cases where actual immorality is shown. They may have enough to wear and apparently enough to eat, such as it is. And, as for sleeping, so long as they have a place to lie down they are satisfied. In the summer time they often sleep out of doors when the weather is pleasant.

"Of course there are numerous instances which up call for the intervention of the Society or of the officers. We have recently taken two girls from there. One of them is to be sent to the Home for the Feeble-Minded; the other is in a rescue home in this city. As long ago as 2 years the society had a most repulsive case in Scalloptown, as a result of which two men were convicted of immorality, and since then we have taken several children from that place. But beyond that there is little that we can do.

"The conditions are thoroughly bad, but the matter is one for the Town Council to handle. Just why that body does not act nobody seems to be able to tell. The official with whom I visited the settlement the other day seem to feel strongly that something should be done about it, but the final authority rests with the council."

So far however, the Council has shown small inclination to take up this task of civic housecleaning, which a solution of the problem would require. That political influences are involved is popularly assumed in the town. Whether the fact that Scalloptown and its environs furnish votes that come in town meetings and that are generally credited with

being available on easy terms may be counted as a factor in the long tolerance that has been exercised is a question for which direct answer is not forthcoming.

Whatever may be counted the cause, the Council in its official action has yet shown small indication that it will choose to exercise its authority of condemning the buildings of Scalloptown as unfit places for human habitation, which seems to be the only direct method of reaching the colony through legal means, unless the sentiment of the town is so strongly expressed that the issue cannot be avoided.

The only real effort that has ever been made to improve the situation by educating people in Scalloptown to better ways of living was begun in three or four years ago by members of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, and, though this has been continued without interruption, the results have not been conspicuous for their success. Scalloptown itself shows no material gain and the workers of the mission have found little to encourage them.

The work centres in St. Luke's cottage, a small dwelling house on the bluff back of Scalloptown proper. Here classes are held for the mothers and for the boys and girls. Sewing, cooking and other housekeeping arts are taught, and effort is made to inculcate ideas of cleanliness as a factor in civilization. Rev. William Worthington, rector of St. Luke's has given much personal attention to the work and to the problems of Scalloptown. Concerning the results, however, he is not entirely optimistic.

"It is hard to tell just what the results have been," he said. "The surroundings are poor and what we do for the children is undone when they get home. There cannot be much benefit from such work, perhaps, unless the surroundings of the people are changed.

"The people themselves in many respects to be pitied rather than blamed. They have many excellent qualities, and in all their dealings with us they have never gone back on us. But their training and surroundings are all against any improvement.

"As to the movement to wipe out the settlement, there must, of course, be some place provided for these people to live. What they need is a better environment, with tenants or cottages

in which they will have some incentive to be cleaner.

"I do not know how many people there are in Scalloptown. I have tried to find out the number of children and as nearly as I have been able to estimate, there are about 50 of them. The number of adults I could not say."

Outsiders who have been brought into touch with the situation and have seen the work that was being done at St. Luke's cottage have been more or less open in their skepticism. Said one East Greenwich man whose duties have made him familiar with the life and habits of the colony:

"Such work as that makes them worse instead of better. They do not want to be improved; they're perfectly contented as they are. Of course they appear to welcome any such work for what they get out of it. But it is absurd to think it will do them any good."

In connection with this criticism that the Scalloptowners favor mission work for what they get out of it this should be added the statement of Mr. Worthington that nothing is given away at the cottage, in that there is nothing therefore no artificial inducement to attract those whom the mission seeks to reach.

Instead of improving under the gentle influence of such educational work, however, is the verdict of East Greenwich that Scalloptown has grown worse, if anything, though its characteristics have were so firmly fixed years ago that it is declared by many that no change for the worse would be possible.

Occasionally Scalloptown comes to public attention through the arrest there of one of its residents for theft or other offense. For the most part, however, its affairs are not made prominent. All that Scalloptown asks is to be let alone to live its own life and to pick up a precarious living, nobody knows exactly how. Its own quarrels are settled within its own boundaries, and if one of its first citizens should chose to carve another of its first citizens with a secondhand razor, the etiquette of Scalloptown is to leave the principles to adjudicate their own differences without an appeal to the forces of the law.

There are rumors current of other residents of East Greenwich who, venturing into Charlottetown after dark in search of adventure,

have found it in the shape of knockout drops or the business end of a club, only to discover on coming to consciousness that money and watch were missing. But while such rumors are often accompanied by sufficient detail to give them more or less credence, they never find their way to official attention, since the individual who has sought adventure in Scalloptown is not yearning for publicity, whatever may have been the outcome.

The habits of life of the residents of the community themselves, therefore, arouse only the most indefinite interest on the part of the average resident of East Greenwich. While most of the dwellers in Scalloptown proper are negroes, some white women live there, the population coming and going with little attention.

Public concern is centred in the practical cutting off of a large section of waterfront from opportunities for recreation which the natural

beauty of the location would otherwise give it. The project for a boulevard running along the water front under the bluffs has been proposed, and the Kent Improvement Association, including prominent citizens of East Greenwich and Warwick has advocated this plan, which would call for the tearing down of the buildings that now constitute the heart of Scalloptown.

This, however, is a project that would involve heavy expenditure, and is not regarded with unqualified favor even by some of those who recognize in Scalloptown the chief immediate problem of local government of East Greenwich.

NOTE: Imagine, if you will, that the little colony of Scalloptown had access to a lawyer who could convert their (Adverse Possession) Squatter's Rights to actual ownership? Methinks the waterfront would be a lot different today.



Scalloptown residential district. Above the hill lies the other part of East Greenwich.