

Civic Improvement

By R. D. CRAWFORD

IN the old days of Athens, the term "civic improvement" might have meant a new statue in the public square, a new stadium or an academy. In Rome, perhaps it would suggest an aqueduct, a sewer or a triumphal arch. In the Middle Ages, it would be associated with the strengthening of a city wall, the building of an additional tower or perhaps a road for the conveyance of military engines. Coming down to more recent times, say from the middle of the nineteenth century on this continent at least, it almost invariably is associated with the construction of water and sewerage systems, the widening, paving and lighting of streets, tending to improved conditions respecting health, transportation and safety. In some of the larger centres aestheticism found expression in a public park or square, but in our own day with almost all of our towns and even many of our villages well watered, sewered, paved and lighted, improvement follows other channels in its efforts to make our communities more healthful, convenient, safe and pleasant for the inhabitants and the visitors attracted to us from other countries by the natural beauties and charm of our province. So it is that now the aesthetic is beginning to predominate and we find movements everywhere to preserve and if possible, enhance that gift of beauty which nature has so generously showered upon us in Nova Scotia.

The general idea taking root today is that instead of concentrating all effort on a park or a square, splendid institutions in their way, more attention should be given to the general appearances, and that the whole community should strive to present those pleasing vistas and

pictures we formerly associated only with parks or gardens. It is in this field today that ample scope is found for public spirited citizens to serve in a most worthwhile way the towns and villages in which their lot is cast.

The first essential in any plan having this ideal for its objective, is to see that the general layout of streets, lanes, sidewalks and bridges are as nearly right as can be achieved, that public dumps, advertising signs, dilapidated buildings and other eyesores are removed. Then an appeal may be made to the general public to beautify their private properties. In connection with the removal of these obnoxious features, some of course will necessitate the expenditure of a considerable amount of money and it may be for the time being, the removal of the dilapidated buildings will have to go by the board, although today in many towns and cities there is sufficient legislation to compel the owners to remove these nuisances without any cost to the community. The removal of obnoxious advertising signs has been pretty well taken care of by recent legislation which empowers the Highways Department to control all signs within a certain distance from the highways outside the limits of the incorporated towns. Legislation is now being sought empowering the towns to control advertising within their limits in a similar manner. Legislation is also being sought to permit the Highways Department to regulate the erection of buildings along the highways, having for its object the prevention of the construction of unsightly buildings and buildings so close to the highways so as to spoil the natural beauty of the countryside and make the highways unsafe for travel. These steps it is hoped, will be of inestimable value in preserving our heritage in this respect.

Along many otherwise beautiful residen-

EDITOR'S NOTE: R. D. Crawford is Town Clerk of Amherst, Nova Scotia. He spoke on this subject at the Course for municipal officers and officials held by the Institute of Public Affairs at New Glasgow, August 26, 1938.

tial streets, one frequently notes great gullies that are supposed to be drainage ditches. At the sides will be uneven and ill-kept sidewalks and the dust from the rough and unpaved roadway may be allowed to blow at will over the landscape causing unnecessary and exasperating annoyance and discouragement to the householder. The modern trend in street construction is to eliminate all unevenness of surface, to build the contour of the street and sidewalk in close conformity to the surrounding properties and to one another. This is particularly noticeable in the newer developed areas of the more progressive cities of the continent. If you examine closely the difference between some most pleasing part of the city and some ugly part, it will often be found that the improvement has been achieved mainly by smoothing out the rough spots and a simple arrangement of planting that is restful and pleasing to the eye and creates an impression of beauty (in effect, streamlining). Of course it is not to be assumed that the beauty of a rugged hillside, towering cliff or a picturesque ravine should be brought to the general level as this would result only in monotony and loss of interest, but very frequently these same hillsides and ravines may be deftly improved by the hand of an expert so that in addition to retaining all their natural beauty, a better approach may be provided or a better vista opened up. The best results are achieved when nature is copied in such a subtle way that the hand of man is effectually concealed.

The means by which these improvements may be effected will vary in different localities. In some The Horticultural Society may take the lead, in others it may be The Civic Improvement League, The Women's Institute, a committee of The Board of Trade or one of the many service clubs, but the most effective method of procedure will be the same in all. First, the interest of the public in a general improvement program should be aroused

by calling attention to the advantages of the improvements sought, and then the co-operation of the local authorities should be secured to deal effectively with the removal of objectionable features such as weeds, dumps, advertising signs, dilapidated buildings, etc. Then when a start has been made in this direction, strong appeals should be made to the property owners to repair and paint their buildings and dress up the surrounding grounds. In this respect suitable suggestions should be made as to the best means of carrying out an improvement plan such as an harmonious development of all properties on a street or in a given section, the making and care of lawns, the eliminating of unsightly crossways from the street to private driveways, proper grouping and arrangement in the planting of trees, shrubs, flowers, etc. These and many other suggestions should be worked out during the winter months to be ready for a grand spring campaign, which with the cooperation of the local government, the press, which may always be counted upon to boost such worthwhile endeavours, and the public, could be made an assured success. Over a period of years almost any drab community could make some claim to distinction for its attractiveness that would more than repay all the effort put forth.

Improvements such as outlined above, not only have an appeal to the finer senses but actually justify themselves from an economic standpoint. Outstanding in this respect of course, is the advantage to the tourist traffic which today is assuming such large proportions in the Maritimes and can only be sustained and increased as we maintain and enhance the attractions of our province both in urban and rural districts. Space does not permit a detailed reference to the other economic advantages but I know that aside from all that, no effort will pay greater dividends in health, happiness and contentment than a well planned and well directed program of Civic Improvement.