

CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSION.

A culture truly in transition is Muncie's. For the past twenty years it has undergone changes which have undermined its complacent belief that "things always come out all right in the end". Never before has it been subject to so many new pressures. Reluctance to change, in other words, the inertia of traditional symbols such as the "good old days", "the American way", and "every poor boy can get to be President of A.T. and T." has been forced to cope with realities of the day as seen in the need for change, new pressures on the polity for services, new technical developments. And although people in Muncie would cringe at the thought that they lived by "theories" and were not very practical "down-to-the-earth" individuals, the fact remains that much of their inability to cope with these new stresses and strains is a result of the widening divergence between traditional values, the theories by which they live, and the way they really live.

Insecurity is the word which best describes the reasons for this dilemma. Life has ceased to be simple in Middletown. No longer is the individual sure of his place in the community. He finds himself buffeted by

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forces bigger than himself which he is unable to control. He knows there is something wrong somewhere but he never questions that the fault lies within himself or the people around him. He is certain that "the system is fundamentally right and only the persons wrong; the cures must be changes in personal attitudes, not in the institutions themselves."¹

Events of the past two decades show what will happen to a culture when its own sense of instability and insecurity begin to weigh too heavily upon it. Clutching wildly in the dark for something firm in a world suddenly gone liquid Muncie espoused the Ku Klux Klan. Fortunately, for those who still see democracy as the best principle to guide American government, that Klan proved as nebulous as those who sought its comforting support.

It would, however, be extremely foolish to dismiss the lessons of the Klan as completely irrelevant to the future of American democracy. Two facts become at once evident in this connection. One is that there must be something inherent in the American people, as has been the case with other peoples, that makes them peculiarly susceptible to the type of appeal put forth by the Klan.

¹Middletown In Transition, p. 493.

Secondly, if they accepted such appeals and such an organization at one time why would they not be willing to espouse a similar organization under similar conditions? More recent examples of Dr. Townsend, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin are certainly evidence that the American people are no more immune to the techniques of propaganda than are the Germans or Italians.

"It is not inconceivable that such a society of individuals who feel themselves floundering might go over like a row of cards and vent its pent-up anxiety in a mighty whoop of affirmation, if the right individual came along and gave it the right assurance in symbolic patriotic phrases. The working class, unorganized and devoid of symbols of its own, in 1924 served as a keyboard on which Klan organizers played fortissimo on the keys of patriotism and religion. In 1932 an ex-Klan leader started an abortive brownshirt movement, with meetings replete with the fascist salute and other trimmings. If, when, and as the right strong man emerges - if he can emerge in a country as geographically diffuse as the United States - one wonders if Middletown's response from both business class and working class will not be positive and favorable. For unless there is a sharp rise in working-class solidarity in the interim, this Middletown working class, nurtured on business-class symbols, and despite its rebellious Roosevelt vote in 1936, may be expected to follow patiently and even optimistically any bright flag a middle-class strong man waves."²

This highly conventionalized community pattern is so delicately balanced upon its inflexible institutional

²Middletown In Transition, p. 509.

framework that if the smallest peg is jarred the whole structure shudders. Resting upon such precarious and mechanical security it is little wonder that such a community should harbor vast potentials for irrational action.

George Dale was an index of that potential, a result of dislocations in the rigid pattern which came in the post-war period. If he was a ripple on the surface of that pattern it was only because the surface was troubled underneath. Viewed against the background of Middletown~~as~~ Dale's career only served to emphasize the disturbances in that background picture. George Dale was one of the many indications of unrest in Middletown.

EPILOGUE

The story of Dale's campaign and his term as mayor of Muncie reads much like a dime novel. Muncie never before nor since had seen anything quite like it. His success at the polls was almost as much a surprise to Dale as to the rest of the community. I can only sketch briefly some of the many incidents that were crowded into Dale's term of office and the last years of his life.

His campaign was typical of the reformer's clean-up-the-city plea. But his keen sense of political reality and showmanship enabled him to keep his hand on the pulse of the people, especially those "on the other side of the tracks". The night before the primary election he said to them, "You Democratic terriers on the Southside, I know you and I love you all! Get your paint on tonight and hit the war trail at daylight tomorrow morning.

"You stood by me last spring when my name appeared on the ballot and when the same gang was fighting me....I have fought for you and have stood by you in all your labor troubles and have never been found skulking in the rear when a voice was needed to champion your cause.

Stand by me now, as you have done before and you will have a real friend in the mayor's office...."

The fight was, as usual, carried on through the medium of the Post-Democrat. To this was added the first intensive radio campaign ever made by a mayoralty candidate in Muncie. Fortunately, Dale was able to speak as effectively as he wrote.

When he won the Democratic nomination the local papers were slightly surprised. They suggested that they only through some accident would Dale ever be elected. The accident happened¹ and the Press was generous enough to ask that the people at least give Dale a chance to make good as mayor.² This paper also tried to calm the more apprehensive;

"Those who fear that the mayor-elect is a radical whose deeds and utterances might be harmful to the community, should know that in most cases there is a vast difference between a candidate for an office and a holder of an office. The candidate is without responsibility but the one in office has many responsibilities. Usually these responsibilities have a sobering influence and those considered most erratic before election often become most conservative and most careful afterwards...."³

¹See Middletown in Transition, p. 322-3; "Ordinarily the machinery controlling Middletown's office of mayor, like the rest of its governmental machinery, operates behind the scenes, with only a chronic rumble of minor protest in the open. But the mechanisms of control come somewhat more into the open in an occasional brawling civic scene when the controls have slipped momentarily and maverick candidate rides into power. This last had happened in the fall of 1929...."

²Muncie Morning Star and Muncie Evening Press, November 6, 1929.

³Muncie Evening Press, November 6, 1929.

Keener observers, knowing George Dale as they did, had few illusions about his ever changing into a "conservative" just because he was in office. Remarked the editor of the Press in his daily column, Comment;

"the worst thing that ever happened to George Dale in his long and tempestuous career, if I may be permitted the opinion, is that he was elected. In an office and clothed with responsibility he will be as much out of water as a frog in a tree.

"With his temperament, he can get nowhere in particular without fighting somebody and now he will have to fight himself or nothing. James Whitcomb Riley wrote fantastically of 'the squidgicum-squees, 'at swallows themselves', but Dale cannot do that. He probably would find himself as indigestible as his enemies."⁴

Events of the next five years proved this opinion hardly wrong.

And so with the "common man" behind him and with only the meagre tolerance of the "nice people" he entered office.

"His administration showed a quixotic disregard for 'playing ball', 'making deals', and political 'face saving'. As an independent, lone-dog candidate unpopular with the businessmen, he entered office lacking the possibility of calling upon local men of ability to help him."⁵

⁴Muncie Evening Press, November 9, 1929.

⁵Middletown in Transition, p. 325.

Said Mayor Dale as he sat down at his new desk and rapped it with his gavel immediately following his inauguration; "I like to do this....I've had a judge do this to me frequently."⁶ His first official act was to fire the police force and appoint a new one. Simultaneously he announced tha Muncie would be "cleaned-up".⁷ That Dale attempted to carry out his campaign promise throughout his term as mayor was a fact so astonishing as to be incomprehensible to Muncie.

From the first day he took office it was evident that his administration lay in no bed of roses. He lost control of the city council from the start and only the pressure of immediate necessities ever got the mayor and council together again during the next five years.

His first major encounter was with the police judge who had been elected on the same ticket with the new mayor. The two men intensely disliked each other and the judge had announced publicly before the election that he was running only to embarrass Dale. When swept into office together the feud was carried into the administration of the city's affairs. The judge refused to sentence

⁶Muncie Evening Press, January 6, 1920.

⁷Ibid., and Muncie Morning Star, Jan 6, 7, and following numbers.

the many liquor violators brought in by the zealous new police force.⁸ The affair dragged on for months spotted here and there with ridiculous incidents which, when the fight eventually ended in a draw, could have resulted only in a serious loss of prestige for both men - especially Dale.

The city was surprised at first by the intensity with which it was being "cleaned up." Dale acted as if he was trying to make a New Atlantis out of Sodom. Muncie was not so sure it was so bad as Dale said or that it wished to be so good as he desired. Dale began to lose the spirit of the people from the first.

Unfortunately for himself and the city Dale was inadequate at the gentle art of compromise. In his sincere belief that he was always right, or if he was not right, at least his belief in taking a stand and remaining there, he alienated his own appointees and officials from the start. Trouble with his health commissioner, his board of safety, his police, his council, and almost every other city official at one time or other undermined his own power and prevented him from seeing to a successful conclusion many of the projects which he wanted and which would have been for the best interests of the city.

⁸Middletown in Transition, p. 324; Douglas, W. A. S., op. cit., p. 484-5; Muncie Evening Press and Muncie Morning Star, January 29, 1930 and following numbers.

Touching one of the sorest spots in the city government - road paving contracts - he canceled many that had been made by the previous administration and ordered new ones let. Furthermore he seriously embarrassed companies selling fair apparatus by requiring them to quote legitimate prices for their products and not to provide for the usual graft expected by most city governments. By paying off the city's bonded indebtedness before it was due he angered local banking interests so that when he wanted to issue more bonds he could find no home market for them. He was forced to sell them personally in Chicago.

Little wonder then that the army of enemies he was creating would be out to "get" him. They made his public life as difficult as possible. Finally came the first real attack. He and several of his police officers were indicted by a federal grand jury for violation of the 18th Amendment. The indictment was based on "the eloquently righteous charge that the mayor had caused a gallon of whicky to be transported to the State Democratic Convention".⁹ Dale swore he was framed. Some time later he was found guilty fined \$1,000 and sentenced to eighteen

⁹Middletown in Transition, p. 326; Both Muncie dailies and New York Times, March 6, 1933 and following numbers in all these papers for details of the trials.

months in prison.¹⁰ The case was appealed to the United States Supreme Court. The local papers advised that he resign. They had forgotten to whom they were making such suggestion.

Momentarily stalled in the attempt to get rid of Dale, the city council tried to vote his office vacant, and elect one of their own body mayor. Dale laughed at them, remained on the job and continued his hectic administration. While his case was still on appeal he was pardoned unconditionally by President Roosevelt.¹¹ "The pardon took specific notice of perjury by witnesses against the mayor during the trial."¹²

Hardly was this case settled when the mayor found himself and several others of his official family under new indictments for conspiring to "coerce" city employees in to making "voluntary contributions" for a "defense fund" to enable Dale to carry his late liquor charge to the the Supreme Court.¹³ Undoubtedly connected with this crime, if it was a crime, Dale was merely using a commonly accepted form of political financing which never before nor

¹⁰Muncie Evening Press, June 3, 1932; New York Times, June 4, 1932.

¹¹Muncie Evening Press, December 14, 1933; New York Times, December 15, 1933.

¹²Middletown In Transition, p. 326.

¹³Ibid., p. 327; Muncie Evening Press, January 31, 1933 and following numbers.

since has been questioned in Indiana. The idea behind the "defense fund" was the same that instituted former Governor Paul McNutt's now famous "2% Club" which collects that amount from the salary of every state employee for the party war chest. The present city administration of Dr. Bunch has its own private little "Welfare Organization" which is reported to be very "effective".¹⁴ In July, 1933, the indictments were quashed by a federal court.¹⁵ There was one more way to "get" George Dale and that was to prevent his reelection. Here his enemies were successful.

Even the stoutest heart must bow to time. George Dale privately admitted for the first time in his life that he was "getting tired". His age began to tell upon him. His health was broken by the terrific strain of the past few years. But once more he took up his pen and began his last fight, a short one this time, for he was beaten by Dr. Bunch in the primaries. The carefully laid out plans of his opponents backed by the money of business interests who wanted a return to "normalcy" plus the general disgust of the people with the constant turmoil of their politics all contributed to his defeat. Middletown repudiated the leader she never really understood and who was unable to understand her.

¹⁴ Middletown In Transition, p. 327; Muncie Evening Press, January 31, 1933 and following numbers.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Muncie Evening Press, July 24, 1933.

Dale lived a year or so longer. For the last time he was the reformer, the outsider looking in and analysing the evils of the city's politics but for the most part he was forgotten by the city to which he had given low taxes, real parks, public projects, efficient administration, little graft. But when he died in March, 1936, Muncie already had had a year of the "old guard" in the political saddle. Enough time had elapsed for the community to look back upon his administration and wonder whether it had really understood what Dale had been trying to do. Middletown had approached the ideal of "good government".

Little wonder then that both the Star and Press carried such positive editorial obituaries as these:

"George D. Dale was a zealot, and while zealots only occasionally have their way because zeal does not necessarily conform to reason and to orderly processes, they serve a high social purpose. When they are wrong, they emphasize the wrongness of their position; when they are right the cause which they foster, although immediately defeated, eventually triumphs... Had Dale awaited considered judgment before speaking or action he might have gained more for himself and the causes he espoused, he would have saved himself much grief and others - both friends and foes - much distress, but at the cost of the destruction of his own picturesqueness, and, there is much reason to believe, at the additional cost of cheating himself out of a good deal of fun, for he joyed in the fight for the fight's sake.

"His serious error in public life and as an editor was his inability to win others to his purposes by persuasion and his willingness to embroil himself in a controversy when the use of peaceful methods might have accomplished more.

"But the very fact that he was no "pussy-footer" won the reluctant but generally secret admiration of those who decried his methods and even denounced his motives....If you are an average citizen, you probably opposed many of the things for which George Dale stood, and because he had the special faculty of exciting prejudices against himself and his works by his utter lack of diplomacy, you may have declared in your exasperation at times, that he was never right about anything. And there you would have been wrong, for he was right about many things. As we look back coolly upon his administration as mayor of Muncie since he left that office, we are able to say among other favorable things that it was devoid of extravagance at a time when extravagance was common among public officers; that the city's affairs generally were cared for with efficiency....And whether you were a partisan of George Dale or an enemy, you give him credit today, at a time when it will do him no good whatever, for courage - a courage that was reckless at times, but nevertheless, courage in a day when too many men and women are prone to say, 'On the one hand, but, again, on the other'."

"The newspapers of the country owe something to George Dale for his taking up the cudgel in behalf of the well-established principals, then under attack, the truth is a sufficient defense when libel is alleged. He helped to make newspaper history by his firm demand that this principle continue to be recognized.

"It was unfortunate for George Dale that he was unable to separate persons from causes. It was a weakness of character that probably brought him more distress than those he attacked

for, although he professed imperviousness to assaults upon himself which his attitude naturally provoked, actually he was sensitive to criticism, as are so many who profess that their spear knows no brother. His supposed callousness was a mere shell."¹⁶

"Whatever you may have thought of George Dale, some color has been taken out of his community by his passing; some spice is gone from the confection of many ingredients we call "society"."¹⁷

"...no Mayor of Muncie ever put the vivid color into public affairs as George Dale did."¹⁸

"For Dale it will be the end; but for his work, into which he breathed much of his stormy manysided personality, it will be only another event in the annals of time....He became a national figure in the eyes of all who stood for tolerance toward all persons, regardless of race, of color, of religion....He was a master of satire and of irony and, armed with these two weapons, he ridiculed and belabored those against whom he was opposed....He had the courage of his convictions and he fought for a cause he believed was right regardless of whose toes he stepped on, to the distress of himself and his family....It was 'thirty' for George Dale and there will never be another who can take the place that he filled in this world."¹⁹

But no one could ever know what went on in Dale's mind better than himself. Last year the following letter written by Dale was found by a friend and published in the Muncie Star because

¹⁶Muncie Evening Press, March 27, 1936.

¹⁷Ibid., March 28, 1936.

¹⁸Ibid., March 30, 1936.

¹⁹Muncie Morning Star, March 28, 1936

it seemed to express Dale to the environment in which he lived much better than he had been able to during his lifetime. Many who had never quite fathomed him could now feel that they had missed a dash of sparkle in Middletown.

"E....:

I was a hell of a good mayor. I flushed their sewers, gathered their dead dogs and cats, collected their garbage and ashes, put their bootleggers in jail, and let the bankers and chamber of commerce run loose.

But honestly, I would rather be mayor of Lincoln (Ind.) or Grassy Point (N.Y.) than mayor of Muncie. The sewers in those places are less complicated, there is no city planning commission to worry the mayor about filling station sites and there's a stove to spit at in the wintertime. The simple life isn't so simple after all.

I hanker for the homely virtues of a Lincoln or a Grassy Point, where society adjusts itself admirably without even a constable for a referee and whose humble environments incubate great newspapermen and great statesmen."

George R. Dale.²⁰

²⁰ Muncie Morning Star, October 17, 1937.