

Association Men

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THE STORY OF THE TAFT TUNNEL GANG

By William H. Day

IF you are looking for a really tough field in which to do a piece of Association work, I would suggest that you visit Taft, Montana." Thus spoke a railroad official as I sat in his office in St. Paul about a year ago. Four days later I was in the office of a railroad president in Seattle and was telling him of results secured through Railroad Associations in construction camps on the C. M. &

"half had not been told." The twenty buildings comprising the one street of the town consisted of a post office, eighteen saloons and an undertaker's tent. Drunken men and fallen women were loitering in front of each of these



A SHIFT AT WORK IN THE TUNNEL HEADING, THE BOYS AT THE ASSOCIATION SHANTY, AND THE BEER JOINTS AT TAFT, MONT.

St. P. Railroad in South Dakota. Turning to me, he said, "The neediest railroad construction camp I know of is at Taft, Montana, and I would suggest that you visit it as soon as possible."

As I alighted from the train at Taft and walked around the end of the box car depot and looked down the street, I felt that the

places, and through the open doors and un-screened windows one could see the public gambling games running in nearly every saloon. I met the superintendent of the construction camp and told him of my mission. "I have a high regard for the Young Men's Christian Association," said he, "because of what it has done for my boy in Evanston, but I do not think it would be any use to try to

work it out here. Many of the men are foreigners and all of them are constantly on the move, and that sort of a thing would not appeal to them." As we stood talking we could hear the rattle of the piano in one of the saloons across the track, and, nodding in that direction, he said, "That's what sends men to hell. These men get so restless for amusement that when they come to town and hear that music, they cannot stay away from it." I explained that that was one feature which the Association furnished in their buildings and that the craving which men have for music and social life was one of the first things we provided for. Said he, "There are but three virtuous women in this town and more than eighty fallen women, and what chance does a young man have of keeping decent out here under such conditions?"

I spent the night as a guest at the camp, which is two and one-half miles from the town of Taft and is the point where the railroad is building its long tunnel through the Rocky Mountains. I found, as is usually the case, that the men had no place to spend their time when not working except in crowded bunk houses; that no provision was made for a place to read or write letters, though the physical comfort of the men was provided for better than is usually the case. We talked until late into the night of the work which the Association was doing throughout the world and especially for railroad men, and when I left the camp the next morning the superintendent said to me, "You send us out a secretary and we will take good care of him." A few weeks later the man was on the ground and in a short time a rough building 40 by 60 feet was put up in the camp, equipped with reading and writing tables, checkers, chess, a pool table, phonograph, stereopticon, a folding organ, chairs, benches, etc., the railroad company paying for all this as well as the salary of the secretary. The place was brilliantly lighted with electric current from the company's power house and the men flocked into it—fairly packed the place—reading, writing, playing games, using the phonograph, etc.

The manner in which they always hurried to the building after supper indicated how eager they were for this social center where they could read and write letters in comfort—the number of letters written home increased four-fold in a week.

A construction camp curse is the cashing of the pay-checks at the saloons. The result is that many of the men come back to their work, days after cashing their checks, broken morally, physically and financially. Secretary Morrison induced a bank to furnish money, with which he cashed the checks at the Association building. At once the amount of drunkenness and loss of time from this cause began

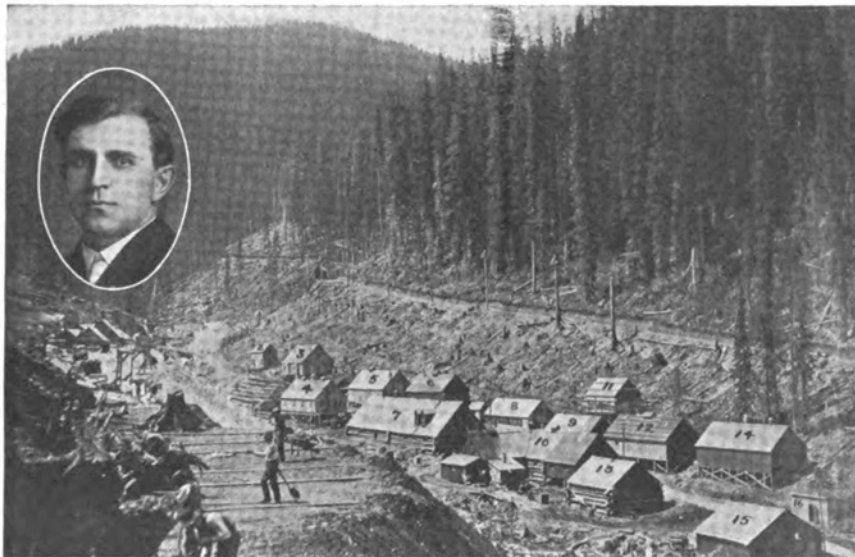
to rapidly decrease until there was practically none.

In addition to making it easy for the men to stay away from Taft, war was declared on the saloons harboring fallen women and operating open gambling in violation of the state law. The county officials were appealed to and furnished evidence of these conditions again and again, but they refused to act. So strenuous was the opposition to their law-breaking on the part of the secretary, that the deputy sheriff (whose salary, it was said, was paid by the saloon keepers) arrested him for carrying concealed weapons, although he had been granted a permit by the sheriff. He was released within a few minutes, his gun handed back, and an apology made by the deputy for having taken such action in order to hold his job.

This bluff did not stop Morrison's activity, he was again arrested and locked up in the calaboose, where he was kept for ten or fifteen minutes and then released, with another apology.

On the following Sunday evening, instead of giving the usual gospel address for the men, Morrison reviewed the history of the town. He told how men had been ruined through this nefarious business; how murders had been committed in Taft (no one will ever know just how many); of his own opposition to the law-breaking which had been going on there during the past year, and finally told of his arrest because he refused to be either bought or scared. As he finished, one of the men, acting as spokesman, said, "Morrison, you give the word and we will go down there and put those places so on the bum that they will never bother you again." "No," said Morrison, "that would not be right, but cut the whole outfit. They are expecting you all down there on Christmas day and are making special preparation for your reception by bringing in additional gamblers, women, etc. We are going to have a good-time here in camp, and I want every man in this room to stay here."

A big Christmas tree was secured and trimmed by the three ladies in the camp, headed by the secretary's wife, and Christmas eve saw the place crowded to the doors with the tunnel builders. After a service of song and story, the secretary gave a simple Christmas talk which took many of the men back to their childhood days. Next day those who were not working spent their time at the building. Christmas passed and scarcely a man went to Taft. So meager were the receipts by the gamblers and saloon men, that one of them remarked "there was not enough money spent to pay for calling a quorum." On the other hand, more than \$8,000 in checks were received by the secretary to be deposited or sent home for these men, many of whom would



THE TUNNEL BUILDERS' CAMP NEAR TAFT, MONTANA. THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION BUILDING (4) AND SECRETARY MORRISON

have spent their entire month's wages in the saloons had it not been for the Association at the camp.

The walking boss who hires the men stated before Christmas that "he would probably have to put on one hundred new men because of those who would be unfit for work the day after." To his great surprise, only three men were in that condition out of the entire two hundred and fifty. The contractor in charge recently wrote to a fellow-contractor that "he would not undertake another large job without requesting that a Young Men's Christian Association be organized in the camp," for though it is his first experiment, he was convinced that the results of this work, aside from its religious influence, helped to make the men steady and contented; that it very largely abolishes drunkenness among the men; that they are encouraged to save their money which would otherwise be spent in the saloons, and that in every way the morale of the men is raised. Instead of men becoming uneasy and moving from camp to camp because of the monotony which affects them, he finds that by giving them a place to spend their evenings in a social way with music and games under the direction of a man who takes a personal interest in each one, that there is less changing among men and that more and better work is accomplished.

Open gambling has now been abolished at Taft; fallen women are no longer permitted to frequent the saloons, and several saloons have closed for lack of business. A splendid testimony

which the men are carrying to other camps of a similar nature has resulted in stirring up interest throughout the West. As a direct result of the work at Taft, an Industrial Association has just been organized in a large construction camp twenty miles from Helena, where the Stone & Webster Engineering Corporation are constructing a million dollar dam on the Missouri River, and inquiries are coming from several similar camps.

When Hicks and Day visited Taft construction camp recently, the men handed them a resolution to be presented to President Earling of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad. It read as follows:

"We, the undersigned, employees at the St. Paul Pass Tunnel (east end) desire to express our deep appreciation for the privileges we have enjoyed through the Railway Young Men's Christian Association building here, and for the help received through the management of this organization."

This was signed by 150 men, including general foremen, shift bosses, engineers, electricians, brakemen, blacksmiths, carpenters, motormen, pumpmen, cranemen muckers, nippers, machinists, grunts, teamsters, cooks, flunkies, car repairers, laborers, etc.

J. W. Cannon, president of eleven cotton mills in North Carolina, and who entrusted the welfare work at his Kannapolis mills to the Young Men's Christian Association, says: "The work we are doing at Kannapolis appeals to us as being along the right line, and of great value to the mill workers. We hope to still further this branch of our work."