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## Let's Talk About Wilmette

With Bystander

Edna Ferber in her novel "So Big" takes a gratuitous crack at Wilmette when she calls it "middle class." She may have meant our people were bourgeois, or neither overly rich nor poor; but the way in which she said it might be taken to mean middle class mentally. That never sat so well with me until a Chicago newspaper reporter remarked that the city papers could always rely on Wilmette getting into print several times every year with "something crazy," and he amplified that by saying, especially if it touched upon anything having to do with local governmental affairs.

What is the significance of such a reputation? Does it mean anything to me as an average citizen and taxpayer? Have I any obligation in the case? Have I any rights in it that need attention?

Some months ago I overheard a conversation of a group of men started by one of their number with the earnestly expressed desire that something might be done constructively to improve the reputation of the village. Several interesting theories as to causes were advanced. One had to do with the changing complexion of the citizenry through the removal of stalwart characters now and then to other north shore suburbs. This in turn was attributed in part to the aging of much of the property improvement and to the latent threat that one of these days we shall be gobbled up in the onward march of metropolitan apartment life. Everyone admitted the desirability of a reputation fitting the actually splendid conditions normal to Wilmette village life, but I heard no one analyze the average Wilmette citizen in his approach to the public affairs of his own village as one of the possible reasons why Edna Ferber's dig may not be entirely unmerited. If the case involves the taxpayer's attitude, then I have certain obligations and I should have certain rights, let us say to endeavor humbly to alter the situation if possible.

### How Inform Myself?

But, after all, how is it possible for me to inform myself, or having done so to give expression to my opinions on public affairs, save in gossip or by drawing the sharp focus of public attention upon me personally, a thing I dislike? Even if I take part in some colloquy, what is accomplished thereby? Finally, have I any rights in the case save to cast my vote at election time for my candidates or for or against some question of public policy? In other words, am I any differently situated in respect to my opinions on how my tax dollar should be spent here at home, where presumably I know every one of my public officials, than how it is spent at Washington, Springfield or in the County building, where machine politicians are doing all my worrying for me without troubling me about it in the least?

Now there are several thousand of me, male and female, here in Wilmette. What is my reaction in the aggregate to my own public business? Well, for one thing I don't go to the polls at election time with any regularity. I can't remember when I went to a Park district election, although some years ago I should have voted on the proposition to issue more than \$200,000 of bonds which I must pay off some time. I am not clear what the bonds were for. I suppose I am in good company in respect to school elections; the plaguey things come on Saturday and I am having a holiday, so I can hardly be blamed for forgetting. I do remember a New Trier High school election a few years back when a few people voted for a bond issue of over \$800,000. I don't

believe I voted then, but I have been doing a lot of criticizing lately because the new high school buildings are not completed and I am not getting the value of my tax money. But I certainly do know all about the elections for Village President and Trustees, for that is when we have a row and get into the city papers, and organize old parties with new names, and somebody gets licked.

### That "Wet" Issue

Yes, I think that expresses my average attitude toward elections, save that occasionally there is matter of public policy to be voted upon, such as a waterworks, and then after a high dive into a sea of confusing oratory, good, bad and indifferent, I come up gasping for breath, shut my eyes in the balloting booth, say to myself, "So and So wore the best looking necktie the night he spoke on this subject, so I'll vote for his side," and let it go at that. And I think my neighbor is so foolish to get worked up on the subject. The Wet issue belongs in Congress, anyway, not in our village board.

But now and then I read something in the paper, or get a circular letter from some organization that starts me thinking for a moment. I noticed the other day in WILMETTE LIFE a line on the editorial page about hastening grade separation, and I thought it had something to do with separating the 7th, 8th and 9th grades into a junior high school, till Sonny told me there might be no school next year, because somebody hadn't paid his taxes. So I am going to find out what that line means.

Some of my neighbors go to meetings, but I don't know what good it does them, I don't know whether the school boards and the park board have public meetings or not, at least I don't know when and where they meet and what they do when they do meet. As for the schools, why, Mr. Harper and Mr. Gaffney run them, anyway, that is if there is money to run them with. And if I want to use the parks I have to buy a bathing ticket. But I do know there is action in the Village hall because one of my friends who has more CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS than he has IT took me to a meeting a year or so ago where a lot of men from Michigan avenue got up on their hind legs and shook their first at poor Mr. Stoddard and dared him to touch a hair of their parkway. They reminded me of Barbara Fritchie, only they didn't have any American flag to save. My Civic Friend tells me the issue in question is in a pigeon-hole, resting after having done yeoman service in one long-to-be-remembered political campaign. Now, if all those arguments against the Village Plan accomplished nothing but to get Mr. Dubb's party elected because they were going to throw it out instanter, and no change has been made yet, why should I get all worked up about it?

### Here's the Picture!

Recently I have seen a lot of information regarding tax matters in both the city and the local press, but really it has mostly run off my back. I am not much at analyzing income accounts and balance sheets. Some of the men on the trains express opinions now and then to the effect that taxes are going down or up or not quite far enough. It is a good deal like getting an annual report of a company of which you are a stockholder. If the stock goes up the report was good, if not, why not so good, or it was discounted anyway. So I shall just have to wait for my next tax bill, if, as and when I get it. So there you have my picture.

But suppose I were to change my habits and study a little about my home

town, vote intelligently and conscientiously at every election; isn't there more to a village reputation than that? As I think about Wilmette I should imagine there is.

I could make up a couple of axioms about official life that would run something like this: (a) an opposition party or a sharply critical newspaper is almost necessary for good administration in any democratic government; and (b) one can't do a good job of managing anything while playing to the galleries. Which I shall try to explain.

There are no specifically organized parties in Wilmette. For one reason, if a party by one identical name were to put candidates in the field twice in succession, primaries would have to be held. Rather, the groups active politically in the village cluster about certain personalities, much as they do in Latin-America. The Ins have somewhat the better of it usually, until an explosion like a miniature revolution takes place and a new personality with his satellites graces the stage for the time. Meanwhile, the Ins have been struck out, but practically out for good. Whatever they knew of civic management has been lost to the village. They form no opposition party to heckle the new Ins. The latter have to take their good time about learning what their jobs are. No one hinders them, but also no one helps.

Now, the foregoing applies to the Village Government proper, and not to the park district or the several school districts, which almost never are made the subject of controversial election contests. In this respect these latter boards are in an enviable position (as measured by my second axiom) for they have no gallery to play to, they can work out their plans without too large an audience and usually can carry out a long-term, consistent program without having it thrown out or maltreated by a succeeding and antagonistic administration. Boards when they meet have work to do; they are not public forums. Probably the best work is done when they have no audiences. But unfortunately there are controversies brought right into the Village council chamber at times, and often enough in the past they have been welcomed. I should imagine this is not so good, and still without organized party opposition to keep the majority on their toes and without a sharply critical press there is almost no way of differing on public questions save by direct action, for no one would dream of parliamentary parties in a group of seven men.

The alternative is word-of-mouth gossip. So-and-so says such and such, often too loosely in respect to facts. Occasionally recourse is had to the Public Forum in this paper, but many times such contributions show lack of knowledge of both sides of a situation. There are a few other types of forum, such as now and then a mass meeting, but the issue has to be pretty hot before such a meeting develops. The women's organizations have civic departments, as do some of the churches, but matters of direct and vital local importance are eschewed scrupulously if there is a remote chance of their being controversial; such are called "politics."

### Expressing a Hope

Which reminds me that in big and vicious and profitable politics the successful are those who are organized and are always attentive to small things. Thus they are never unprepared when the big thing develops. With the ordinary taxpayer like me, unless there is an organized means of keeping me informed constantly, I am being taken unawares repeatedly. A case in point is, what am I going to do about my children's education this coming school year when there is every

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