

HISTORY OF CARING IN EASTCHESTER: *The last 100 years*

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Local amateur historians like myself and professional historians have to adhere to the same standards if we are to be taken seriously. We are both detectives who must base our findings on primary sources that we carefully document. The role of the local historian is more narrowly defined than that of the professional. Our task is to go back to our local past and find out what makes us unique; to uncover the good the bad and the ugly.

When Family & Community Services, Inc. closed its doors last fall I was presented with a rare opportunity to uncover how well-meaning people dealt with the severe problems of economic depression, ethnic and racial tension, substandard housing, and mental health. I would like to share some of my preliminary findings.

From colonial times there had always been a government official known as the overseer of the poor. Their function was to use government money to help those people who could not care of themselves. Often these people were given a dole but were expected to do some work to pay it back. Sometimes local churches would provide charity for their parishioners.

In 1908 hundreds of men, heads of Tuckahoe families, had been thrown out of work by the closing of the marble quarries, the main source of employment in the village. In the nineteenth century Tuckahoe had been called the Marble Capitol of the World. But by 1907 the quarries were worked out. Because of the high rate of unemployment, the situation in Tuckahoe was desperate. Women from Bronxville started the Relief Association of Eastchester, and hence, a century of private social service had begun.

A settlement house called Neighborhood House was established on High Street in Tuckahoe. Classes in sewing and cooking were set up along with courses in Americanization for immigrants. A number of boys were taught carpentry, upholstery, chair caning, and other things that enabled young men. A day nursery was established for working mothers. In severe times jobs were provided and both private and vacant property was donated for the hungry to farm (forerunners of the victory garden of WWII). A thrift shop was opened in Tuckahoe to provide inexpensive clothing and furniture for the destitute. Home visitations by professional social workers were begun and along with a nursing service.

The stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing great depression had a profound and devastating impact upon the entire town of Eastchester. The original Relief Association of Eastchester had become the Eastchester Neighborhood Association. By the second winter of the depression the association had run out of money. The *Tuckahoe Record* reported the Eastchester Neighborhood Association was caring for 1311 individuals: 300 families. It is an understatement to assert that the four fulltime and one part time worker found the caseloads too heavy. As the cold winter of 1934 approached, the situation in Tuckahoe was desperate. An announcement had been made at village hall that there were 500 men out of work. Police squads, a sheriff with tear gas, and firemen with other elaborate preparations assembled to prevent a possible riot by members of a second hunger parade.

How this town survived the depression is a testament to how decent people in a caring

community can rise above what seems to be insurmountable obstacles. The former overseer of the poor, Amie Dusenberry, was appointed the first public welfare officer for the town. The task of investigating every appeal to the public welfare department fell to the staff of the ENA. A full report of the circumstances was sent to the public welfare officer. In an editorial to the *Bronxville Press*, the system was described as, "a most efficient method of dealing with the local unemployment situation and provides the necessary emergency machinery for the town. Amie Dusenberry knew that the unemployed needed more than a handout but a helping hand from the very beginning of the depression. In an interview Amie Dusenberry described where the work of the ENA left off and the Public Welfare began:

If a person is drowning, I hold his head above water, until the ENA comes along, teaches him how to swim and shows him how to be self-sustaining. It would be a simple matter for the Town to give to the needy supplies, etc. but if this was done without the supervision of the ENA, the bread line would continue and grow endlessly. The ENA tries education to make people self-respecting and self-reporting.

The entire town of Eastchester including the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe worked together to make life more livable. The forerunners for the United Way called the Community Welfare fund was set up in Bronxville to raise funds. Taxi drivers were asked to drive children to Playland. Constant appeals were made to send children away free to summer camp for healthy food and recreation. Homeowners were asked to provide work for those who so desperately wanted employment. A Christmas appeal was made to fix broken toys so that children would get something from Santa; a milk drive took place so that children would have fresh milk. Storeowners gave away bread and meat. Private acts of charity and good will were common. People in the town donated plots of ground along with free seed to be used as unemployment gardens or truck farms. Unlike many other communities the depression created stronger ties in a closer community.

Fortunately, unemployment and severe economic deprivation are no longer the town's central concerns. Helping our youth grow up safely is of the highest priority and is an investment in the town's future. **Eastchester Communities That Care (ECTC)**, now partnering with the **Andrus Children's Center**, is continuing the wonderful tradition of social service within Eastchester, Bronxville, and Tuckahoe that began 100 years ago. ECTC is asking all sectors of the community to rally against problems affecting our youth. They are asking all segments of the community to pool their time, energy and resources to fight the scourge of alcohol and substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and school drop out. History tells us that by coming together as a community we can make a difference and improve the lives and futures of our community members. The important question left to be answered is: "**Can the Eastchester community of today rally together like our forefathers to deal with the challenges facing our youth?**"

For more information about how to become involved in Eastchester Communities That Care, please go to www.eastchesterctc.org.