



Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
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Welfare: Eastchester Style, 1933

By the year 1933 the people of Tuckahoe, Eastchester, and Bronxville along with the rest of the country had hit rock bottom. The social safety net of private charities and local government proved totally inadequate in handling the deprivation caused by the depression. Shantytowns were present in every city. Scores of hobos wandered the country using the railroads in search of work. Private charities had dwindled to providing for 6 percent of the needy, leaving some 30 million people to public welfare. Unfortunately local governments could not handle the burden.

The Town of Eastchester has always made provision for people who were down on their luck; has always been a caring community. In 1665 the 10 farm-families that founded the town from nearby Fairfield, Conn. stated in the Eastchester Covenant, the first town laws, that there was an agreement to “keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty.” From colonial times up to 1931 there was an overseer of the poor whose duty it was to make sure that the town took care of the destitute, sick, and unemployed. For most of Eastchester’s history an effort was made to find employment and provide food and shelter for those who were destitute.

Amie Dusenberry was Eastchester’s last overseer of the poor. Amie was a direct descendant of Alexander Masterton, the Scottish immigrant who is credited with developing the marble industry in Tuckahoe. Amie was a founding member of the Bronxville League for Service and dedicated her entire life to helping people not as fortunate as herself. She never married. In 1931 she was invited by Gov. Franklin Roosevelt to become part



A social worker from The Eastchester Neighborhood Association helping a family.

of a commission being appointed for general relief work in New York State. *The Tuckahoe Record* correctly speculated that she would decline the appointment, to devote all of her time to taking care of the needy people in the Town of Eastchester.

In a candid article written for *The Tuckahoe Record* on Dec. 19, 1935, Amie explained how her job had changed. In 1925 working alone in her office Amie Dusenberry had a caseload of 10 families with a budget of \$1,000 of which \$554.25 went to the 10 families. The rest of her time and public money was allocated to giving advice and support to over a 1,000 families known as ‘pick and shovel people’ who came in to talk to her or the supervisor regarding work, their families, and helping to make the town “an

attractive and pleasant place to live in.”

From the start of the depression Amie Dusenberry worked closely with the Eastchester Neighborhood Association, the private charity that had been helping people in the town since 1909. From 1930 to 1934 the Eastchester Neighborhood Association (ENA) assumed responsibility for making the investigations and recommendations to Amie Dusenberry, who assumed the title of Public Welfare Officer on who was eligible for public and private relief and how much. By 1934 that the number of families on relief had reached 700, 230 people!

In an interview given to *The Bronxville Press*, the work of Marion Perkins, executive secretary of the ENA, is described:

“Seated at her desk, one suffocating afternoon in June-with no electric fan to temper the waves of heat that came though the Western windows-Miss Perkins patiently listened to case workers, talked over the phone with a psychiatrist concerning a difficult mental case, advised her helpers how to get rid of mice, how to dispose of a gift of baby blankets, how to make use of a donation of too stale bread, and in between times answered questions as to her training that resulted in such calm resourcefulness, such

quick decisions.

By March of 1933 the caseworkers of the ENA were overwhelmed. By May 1934 the federal government had stepped in and provided much needed relief in welfare and jobs.

But Amie Dusenberry in *The Bronxville Press* urged residents of the town to continue to support the private relief funds:

“We have about 2,000 who have sunk beneath their difficulties and are now content to let others provide for them, and are without imitative to stand on their own feet. Without the Neighborhood Association, our public relief, would wreck as many lives as it would save. Unless we stand back of this organization, and enable this organization, and enable them to do this job, it will come back at us.”

Walter Lippman, the nationally syndicated columnist, put the same thought in different words:

“Now all the money that the government can provide will not take care of all of them. All the public relief can do is to make sure that human beings do not starve or freeze... He who has any money at all must tax himself in order to support the extra money which in every large American community has fallen upon private welfare agencies.”

“Setting the record straight”

Bob Creamer, a president of the Eastchester Historical Society and senior editor of *Sport Illustrated*, mentioned that I had misunderstood a story he told me that I had quoted in the paper in the article, “Divisions in the Town: Circa 1930.” The quote in the article referred to him “remembering rock fights between the Irish on the hill (Waverly) and the Italians in the village.” The story that I got wrong was not seen by him but by his father-in-law, “who was born in Tuckahoe in 1890.” And ‘the story’ happened not in the 1930’s but in 1903 or 1904, when his father-in-law was a young teenager. And it was not a dispute between the Irish and Italians but between kids, Irish and otherwise, who lived in and around Waverly and the kids, Irish, German and others who lived in “the village” near the railroad station.” Bob went on further to mention that regular pitched battles between kids from different areas of town might have happened in 1903 but they didn’t happen in Tuckahoe and Eastchester in the 1930’s.

Bob Creamer makes an important point. Time and time again in interviewing people who grew up in Tuckahoe I am told about the closeness between the many different nationalities and ethnic groups. People in the town really cared about each other and the term melting pot while not applicable to many areas of the United States truly applied to the Village of Tuckahoe in the 1930’s and thereafter.