

Hooverville

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Tours a town of shacks and learns of their desperate straits. Interviews town residents. Says Christ suffers with them and asks God to have pity on them and us "who permit such things to be." (DDLW #941).

****The rain poured down. Underneath was mud, ankle deep, and the long lane that cut between the rows of shacks reflected the grey clouds in its pools. It was not cold, thank God, but the damp sank into your bones,

We had just come from the Worker's Alliance headquarters, where they have a big hall and offices, and where Byrd Kelso, the director, had provided us with a guide. The guide himself lived in Hooverville in one of the shacks. I had seen him before, I was sure, at one of the Workers' Alliance meetings in New York or Washington.

Our guide got us in touch with George Parish, the mayor of the "town," who talked as though he took to heart the responsibilities of his position. From the fact that he talked of a Korean whom he had just buried as an "Foshist," and because he told me how he had earned his living by selling the Daily Worker, I took him to be a Communist. Probably the only Communist mayor in the country.

Personnel

The village, he said proudly, was registered at Washington. There were 650 shacks and they were trying not to put up any more. If some one died or moved out, they occasionally allowed some one else to move in. If they could find any heirs they tried to sell it for \$25 or so for the benefit of those heirs.

"But that Korean I just buried," he ruminated. And I had a vision of him digging a grave and disposing of the body from the way he talked. "The house he lived in was very unhealthy". I looked around at the motley collection of houses. They all looked pretty unhealthy to me. "You see it stands in the water, down in a little hollow, so we are just going to use it as a tool shed."

We prowled along between the puddles, down to the waterfront and looked out at the boats. The tide was low and a few outhouses stood crazily on stilts above the rocks. There was one faucet for the village to get water. Ford Tuohy, John Givins, Andrew Prouty were my companions. John had been used to sleeping in trenches, to going hungry. He had refused cat meat once over in Spain and later he had wished he hadn't. His face has a constant look of compassion, no bitterness, but a deep understanding of human misery.

“We’ve got fifteen Swedish fisherman,” the mayor went on. “We have a boat builder too. There are quite a few carpenters, and one Mexican barber. Also a few speakeasies.”

Religion Is Out

The place used to be the old Todd Shipyard and now it is under the jurisdiction of the Port Commissioner. His intervention had kept the place going time and again when they wanted to tear the shacks down. Six hundred and fifty homes. Some of the children went to school from there.

There are other shack towns in Seattle, and within the city limits. We passed another over by the railroad tracks. That also stood with its feet in water, wisps of smoke curling out of the crazy chimneys. There is another by the garbage dumps, near to the food supply as it were.

“Any church down here?” I asked the Mayor.

“Nobody wants a church down here,” he said coldly, “There’s one lady who has mission services in her house and she feeds the bums.” (An aristocracy even in Hooverville!) “But when a preacher came down on Christmas to talk to the men, they drove him out.”

But Christ is there, I thought sadly, there in the mud, in the shacks with His poor. With them he is trying to find a place to lay His head. With them, He hungers and with them He suffers fatigue of body and soul.

“Behold, Oh God, our Redeemer, and look upon the face of Thy Christ,” there in the dumps, among the creatures who still are men. Have pity on them, and on us, who permit such things to be. DD