

Neighborhood Council In Action

Dorothy Day

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Summary: The depression era story of helping a poor woman find and move into a new apartment after being evicted by a heartless landlord for failure to pay rent. (DDLW #268).

Early in the morning of August 10, Dorothy Weston, Begonia Jimenez and I went over to Mrs. N.'s house to see about her moving. The Marshal was due to come at ten and put her on the street and she didn't want her belongings exposed to the neighborhood. The Unemployed Council (Communist) is interested in making demonstrations and shows up only when the furniture is on the street, so we were trying to be the first on the scene.

With the assistance of Fred Schilling and Raymond Vallely of East 15th Street, we were ready to move her, and the janitor of the house where she was living recommended a house further down the street where the agent was not, she said, so brutal.

The jainitress in the new house had lived there twenty-one years and while she wrote out a receipt for us, we admired the rubber tree which grew in a pot in her front room and reached all the way to the ceiling.

Mrs. N. makes her living by collecting rags and iron from ash cans and selling them. She used to be a jainitress and received an apartment in return for cleaning and taking care of two houses further down on the east side. But she lost her job, and she is now sixty-two years old and there is no chance of her finding anything else. She is all alone save for a huge cat called Rags who is so old that he is toothless. When she opened the door to our knock, he was lying on one of the pantry shelves, looking down sedately and indifferently at the bustle of moving going on around him. For her meals and his, Mrs. N. collects scraps from the First Avenue market, picking up stale vegetables and scraps of meat and fish heads. She does not like to ply her trade of collecting rags during the day, so she sets out at night, continuing her work often until early in the morning. Just the night before, the jainitress said, she had brought in an iron bed and spring at twelve o'clock, making several trips with them. She had had no bed before, sleeping on a bundle of rags on the floor.

Her possessions consisted of trunks and a couple of large baskets of her belongings, a table and chairs, a kitchen range and some kerosene lamps.

She had, used, of course, neither gas nor electricity, not being able to afford these “public” utilities.

“But then most of the people don’t use gas or electricity around here and never have,” the jainitress told us. “I always use a coal stove in the summer and burn wood in it to cook with. I get wood from the Edison people down by the river. They’re always giving away free wood. They’re awfully good.”

A Home Relief investigator stopped by the stoop for a chat. she heard us talking about gas and electricity. “Yes, most of the people never used gas and electric until the city was paying for it,” she said resentfully. She was stopping to leave a ticket for another woman who had nine dogs. “And how I hate to leave a ticket for a woman with nine dogs,” she lamented. “When so many children need milk! But, goodness! what can you do?”

“She’s not so bad as most,” our friend the jainitress commented as the Home Relief worker went on down the street. “She’s real good-hearted. Now the last one they had was a mean thing in spectacles. She wouldn’t sit down in your house. ‘I don’t like bugs,’ she’d say, and ‘won’t you please dust off that chair and put it in the hall?’”

As we waited for the moving job to be done, the agent passed us by blackly. Over the phone the day before he had said:

“I don’t care if she has gone to the Home Relief. I wouldn’t take their vouchers anyway. They’re no good, you can’t cash them. Now we’ve got to dispossess the people all over again and it’s putting us to a lot of expense.”

We pointed out that it might be better to let them stay temporarily than go to this expense. But the only reply was, “We carried them—let some one else do it for a while.” They had only carried them a month and a half, we pointed out, but a grunt was the only answer.

“He’s a mean one,” the janitor whispered as he passed. “Know what he’s just gone and done? Cut down all the clothes lines on the roof this morning! How are we going to hang our clothes out now?”

By this time the two boys had all but finished the moving job. Mrs. N. had been transferred from one apartment to another with decency and dispatch. For another month at least she can live without a harsh agent forever at the door, bulldozing and threatening her with the streets.