

Friend of the Friendless

In January, 1910, an unusual convention met at Kansas City, Missouri. It was not highly publicized; no fund was raised to secure it; there was no excitement at the meetings. This small convention was made up of men and women who for the preceding ten years had been giving their time and efforts to assist discharged and paroled prisoners. The movement in the Middle West had started at the very beginning of the century, when Reverend and Mrs. E. A. Fredenhagen settled in Topeka, Kansas, and began to apply the principles of Christianity to the problems of men and women released from jails and other penal institutions.

In 1906 Reverend Taylor Bernard and Reverend Charles Parsons began similar work at St. Louis and St. Joseph, Missouri. In 1909, Reverend James Parsons, a brother of Charles Parsons, opened a service agency for discharged prisoners in Minnesota and in October, 1909, Charles Parsons became superintendent of the work in Iowa. At the convention in 1910 a constitution was adopted and the Society for the Friendless became a formal and national organization, with Mr. Fredenhagen as the first national superintendent. By

1912 twelve States had organizations to assist former prisoners and by 1931 eighteen States were represented.

During the 1930's, due partly to the depression and the scarcity of money and partly to the activity of the Federal government in relief work, the number of State organizations of the Society for the Friendless decreased sharply and by 1948 only two States — Wisconsin and Iowa — were keeping up the work. The Wisconsin society has been reorganized by Mrs. Ruth Baker, a daughter of James Parsons, as The Wisconsin Service Association; the Iowa Society for the Friendless is still functioning under the direction of Reverend Charles Parsons, now in his eighty-second year. For many years he was also secretary of the National Prisoners' Aid Association and he is (in 1948) a member of the board of directors of the American Prison Association.

The Iowa Society for the Friendless is and has always been the lengthened shadow of a man — Charles Parsons. He was born near London, England, on December 28, 1865. The family came to the United States when he was about two years old and Charles was graduated from Wheaton College, Illinois, in 1891, and from the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1894. Dr. Graham Taylor, who had been giving lectures on so-

cial work at the Hartford Theological Seminary, came to Chicago to do similar work at the Seminary there. Charles Parsons was a member of Dr. Taylor's first class and engaged in missionary and social work in Chicago and vicinity during his student years.

After his graduation from the Seminary, Reverend Charles Parsons served Presbyterian pastorates in Webster, South Dakota, Menville, Iowa, and Byron, Illinois. While at Webster he was married to Elizabeth King of Aurora, Illinois, and his wife became a most efficient assistant in all his later work. While he was engaged in pastoral work, he was urged to enter the field of crime prevention and in 1906 he resigned his pastorate and moved to St. Joseph, Missouri, to engage in work with prisoners.

During his three years in this area, he visited nearly every jail in the north third of Missouri, gave addresses in the principal churches in the leading towns and cities in northern Missouri and northeastern Kansas, spoke on causes of crime in the high schools, conducted religious services in most of the larger jails, had personal interviews with the inmates of the smaller jails, assisted many newly released prisoners and their families, and talked with hundreds of business, professional, and charitably disposed men and women for the

purpose of enlisting their coöperation in the work of the Society for the Friendless.

In the spring of 1908, he happened to be in the vicinity of Fort Madison, Iowa, and he decided to visit the prison and get acquainted with Warden J. C. Sanders, who was attracting attention by some of the changes he was making in the management of the institution. Sanders expressed the hope that a branch of the Society for the Friendless might be established in Iowa. The State, he commented, was "an uncultivated and needy field".

A few months later Mr. Parsons visited Des Moines and conferred with W. H. Berry, of the Board of Parole, and others regarding the need for prisoners-aid work in the State. As a result of this conference, Charles Parsons became the Iowa superintendent of the Society for the Friendless and took up the work here in 1909. Among those who gave active coöperation and support in the early years, besides Senator Berry, were Wardens J. C. Sanders and Marquis Barr of Fort Madison and Anamosa, W. L. Huser, superintendent of the Training School for Boys, Hattie R. Garrison, superintendent of the Training School for Girls, and Judge G. S. Robinson of the State Board of Control.

The first president of the Iowa Society for the

Friendless was George Cosson, who still holds that position. Edward O'Dea has been vice president almost from the beginning. J. A. McKinney was treasurer from the time of organization until his death in 1919. John L. Bleakly, auditor of State, from 1909 to 1915, was a member of the board of directors until his death in 1920. Judge F. F. Faville has been a member of the board of directors throughout the existence of the Society.

During the early years the headquarters of the Society were at the home of the superintendent on East 12th St., Des Moines. Many released prisoners were sheltered there until they could earn enough to pay for board and lodgings for themselves. Mrs. Parsons acted as matron and mothered the discouraged men and boys. Mr. Parsons has visited the jails and prisons, found work for released prisoners, and given addresses on crime prevention and prison reform. He has often addressed an average of four or five meetings each week. During the first three years, all expenditures, including salaries, amounted to an average of only \$1,800 a year.

In later years the Society has maintained headquarters downtown in Des Moines. In terms of statistics the work of the Iowa Society may be illustrated by the statement of some of Mr. Parsons' activities for 1933:

Prisoners interviewed or investigated	412
Addresses in schools and churches	346
Towns visited	253
Miles traveled	24,380
Men advised or assisted	582
Jobs provided	181
Garments given	1,450
Pairs of shoes given	93
Meals and beds furnished	940
Families assisted	138
Individuals in families	417

The total budget for 1933 amounted to only \$3,324.51. The expenditures were as follows: office salary and expenses, \$763.51; travel and hotels, \$274.16; material relief, \$1,457.16; and other activities, \$825.57. Experienced observers have frequently commented upon the Society's small budget and the work accomplished. This record has been made possible by the financial sacrifice of the staff — a far greater sacrifice than they should be required to make.

After more than thirty years of experience, Mr. Parsons feels that "the most perplexing cases" to deal with are those connected with child support. In many instances the court orders that specified sums of money be paid at certain times by the delinquent parent, usually the father, for the support of dependent children. Often such men are irre-

sponsible and bitter. "This side of the work . . . reveals to what depths of hatefulness some people can descend."

Another problem of the Society for the Friendless is presented by frequent calls from transient men of all ages. In many cases, Mr. Parsons admits, these men prove to be unreliable. Some are boys around twenty years of age who have drifted about for two or three years. Many have been in jail for investigation, though they may not have been convicted of any serious violation of the law. An effort is made to find out the real reason why they are adrift and return them to their relatives if there are any. The most pathetic appeals come from middle-aged transients, most of whom are poorly clad and dirty from sleeping in box cars, barns, deserted buildings or cheap shelters or flop houses which are often infested with vermin. They are often in poor health, homeless wanderers who have drifted about so long that they have no residential rights anywhere and no family ties.

Another problem is presented by men who are released from jail in sub-zero weather clad in lightweight summer clothing without underwear, socks, or overcoats. One case illustrates this need. A Negro was released from a county jail after serving a sentence of eight months. "His clothing", reported Mr. Parsons, "consisted of a partial suit

of underwear in shreds, a ragged shirt with sleeves torn out at the shoulders, a thin summer coat, no trousers, no socks, shoes with soles worn off and a pair of overalls full of holes as large as the palm of a man's hand. The county had given him a ticket for a \$2.00 pair of shoes and left him to freeze in the wintry blast without friends, relatives, shelter or food". The Society provided him with clothing and arranged food and shelter for two days, after which he was able to care for himself.

In one of his reports, Mr. Parsons commented that to a superficial observer the year's work might seem to be "just another year of tussle with human wrecks drifting about upon the sea of life". He added: "The year has brought to our office the poor, the ignorant, the illiterate, the despised, the mentally weak, the very young, the old and decrepit, the unfortunate, the homeless, the slave to evil habits and passions; but it has also brought the strong mentally and physically — those who have been high in financial and social life as well as men of education and training. Recent months have brought to our office for assistance a graduate of Columbia University who had just completed a sentence in the Wisconsin penitentiary; a graduate of the University of Arizona, a parolee from Leavenworth Federal Prison; a graduate of

the University of Nebraska, and a number of others from various educational institutions in other parts of the country."

In his 1938 report Mr. Parsons described the problem of released prisoners. There were 407 convicts on parole from the State's penal institutions. These were given supervision and assistance by the State through the Board of Parole. During the year 566 prisoners were released from the same institutions on expiration of sentences. Each of these discharged prisoners was given a suit of clothes and a small sum of money but no supervision was provided. For the same year some 3,000 prisoners were released from the county jails of Iowa. Neither official supervision nor assistance in adjusting to their new freedom was provided for these prisoners.

The primary purpose of the Society for the Friendless is rehabilitation, not relief, but a hungry, poorly-clad, homeless, penniless man must have food, shelter, and clothing before he can become self-supporting, and hundreds of these men have been fed, housed, and clothed by the Iowa Society for the Friendless. Careful selection must be made to determine which cases are hopeful and which are merely drifters, although relief is given to all applicants or they are directed to other relief agencies for help.

In the course of his regular work, Mr. Parsons has occasion to visit the county jails frequently. "I very much doubt", he says, "if a more senseless, idiotic method could be devised for handling the men and women who are committed to these jails. . . . It is a shame and a disgrace to a civilized community to tolerate such a farce to say nothing about supporting it with the people's money." In his thirtieth annual report he wrote: "The indictment I bring against the county jail is not new. It does not originate with me. This situation has been deplored, condemned and denounced. Nothing has been done about it. . . .

"Almost a generation ago we had a number of men in official positions with sufficient vision to see this problem in its true light and importance. . . . As a result of their vision and influence a tract of land was purchased [at Clive near Des Moines] for the establishment of a custodial farm for the housing and employment of misdemeanants. That was a move in the right direction. This legislation was never completed. The farm was never equipped and operated as a custodial institution for county jail prisoners. . . .

"Other states have caught the vision and established work farms for county jail prisoners. . . . These farms are saving money for the state, and at the same time making better men morally, physi-

cally and spiritually out of the community's wreckage."

In the meantime the none-too-well supported Society for the Friendless, the only private organization in Iowa working with discharged and paroled prisoners, provides help for the released prisoners to the best of its ability and turns a spotlight on the darkness which tends to obscure the jails and prisons. A privately-financed organization may not have money to do the work adequately, but it is free to criticize, to report the result of inspections, and to recommend changes in the laws.

Charles Parsons, now an old man, has been for many years in charge of the work of salvaging broken lives. The Iowa Society for the Friendless has provided the means. He has visited the prisoners, he has given many of them relief, hope, jobs, self-respect, yet, curiously enough, he is not listed in any county history of Polk County nor in *Who's Who in Iowa*. Perhaps his record, as well as his treasures, will be found only in Heaven.

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