

### TOWN MEETING OF AIR DISPLAYS FUNDAMENTAL ROOTS OF DEMOCRACY

(By Robert M. Hallatt)

(Editor's note: Mr. Denny is the nephew of Mrs. J. A. Forben of Farmville who, incidentally, will spend Christmas in New York with Mr. Denny and his mother, Mrs. Carrie Denny.)

"How should we meet the threat of the new communism? Hear Dorothy Thompson, Senator Glenn H. Taylor, Maj. George Fielding Elliot, and Arthur Gasth! Hear both sides on Town Meeting! Town Meeting tonight! Everybody listen. . ."

With the clang of the "Town Crier's" bell another "America's Town Meeting of the Air" goes out along the airwaves each Tuesday evening. The program provides a provocative combination of education and entertainment that has

made it a "must" in American homes.

Many a "dull" national and international subject would scarcely know itself after a few minutes in the hands of the "Town-Meeting" debaters. For "Town Meeting" is couched in dramatic terms, cast with principals whose opinions are not necessarily those of the sponsor, the viable audience, or the invisible listener—and certainly not of their opponents of the evening. Hence the film and steel of the occasion. Hence the sparks. The result is not static: It's "Town Meeting" tonight.

With this program and other activities, the Town Hall, Inc., of New York is turning in one of the most significant adult education jobs in the country.

George V. Denny, Jr., President of Town Hall, who originated the radio-cast "Town Meeting," has not run out of ideas yet. His present plans include enlargement of Town Hall to provide classrooms as an attractive, progressive adult education center. His pet project at the moment, however, is establishment of Town Halls in all sections of the country under the direction of the New Work organization.

As he explained in his large, airy thirty-third Street office, Town Hall will charter similar groups in all parts of the country. Certificates will be issued to these discussion groups and regular information service rendered. Annual dues will be in relation to the size of the organization.

On his swing around the country last summer with the radio-cast "Town Meeting," Mr. Denny discussed the idea with people in all parts of the country and many indicated their enthusiasm for the plan.

In Mr. Denny's opinion, the Town-Meeting concept was never more important than at the present time.

He believes that discussions of current problems need not be dull and uninteresting. Millions of people, week after week, during the past 12 years have voluntarily exposed their minds to such discussions by listening to "America's Town Meeting of the Air"—withstanding the competition offered by some of the best entertainment programs he stressed.

Town Hall was the outgrowth of an 1894 campaign by six prominent New York City women for the right to vote. When defeated that year, these women joined to form the League of Political Education as a forum for discussion of public issues. They also intended to impress the males of the town that women were capable of weighing and considering national and international problems of the day and, therefore, by implication, capable of voting. The name of the organization was changed to "Town Hall" in 1937.

It grew steadily as an organization. Mr. Denny joined the organization as Assistant Director in 1930. His state fairs, showmanship, drama, and radio-vocational put Town Hall on the map as a national institution.

A neighbor who refused to listen to President Roosevelt's fireside chats stirred Mr. Denny. He felt that if many others refused to hear the opposite side of a political controversy, the great principle of free speech and free discussion in the United States—and even the democratic form of government itself—was endangered.

Mr. Denny reasoned that the intelligence of early American community life with town-meetings for discussion of public affairs was gone. In a

complex industrial civilization, a man might shut himself up and read only the newspapers he approved. Later only to those friends who believed as he did, close his mind to all opposite thought. Mr. Denny felt that the democratic way of thinking and solving problems must be recaptured.

The result: "America's Town Meeting of the Air." It began as a series of six experimental programs in 1935. After the first, on the subject "Which Way America—Fascism, Communism, Socialism, or Democracy?" 3,000 letters poured in. The response was a surprise because the program had received little publicity and Americans were supposed to be politically indifferent.

Letters are still pouring in at Town Hall at the rate of over 100,000 a year. People all over the United States and also in Canada conduct their own "Town Meeting" by letter following the program. Letters range from the crackpot to the well-reasoned. From them Town Hall gets many ideas for questions to be discussed at future broadcasts. All letters are answered.

Describing some of the problems Town Hall runs into, Mr. Denny laughingly pointed out that getting interesting panels for each Tuesday night's discussion is not without its complications. Sometimes as many as 40 people have to be contacted to get four speakers for a single broadcast, he said. Town Hall spends \$10,000 a year alone for telephone and telegraph charges in the effort to get top-notch participants.

The Town Hall President said only two types of persons refuse to appear on Town Hall—(1) the "omniscient" and (2) those who are "afraid" to face the question period.

The lectures bring to the Town Hall platform prominent thinkers in all fields of human interest—international events, industry, labor, social affairs, etc. Among those participating in the current season's programs are: William C. Bullitt, Clifton Fadiman, Walter Reuther, Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde, Robert A. Taft, Harold L. Ickes, Dorothy Thompson, and Chester Bowles.

The short courses offer a series of "classes" on a single topic by prominent speakers, over a period ranging from eight to 20 weeks. This is the field into which Town Hall hopes to expand when it has sufficient funds to enlarge its building.

The concert department of Town Hall has become the mecca of aspiring young musicians the world over. Many now celebrated artists appeared publicly for the first time at Town Hall. Last season 107 musicians made their initial New York appearances on the Town Hall stage.

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