

ARE WE ALL GOING CRAZY BECAUSE OF THE CITY'S NOISES?

Doctors Include This Among Causes of Insanity---This City Said to be the Noisiest in the World---Most of the Racket Is Needless and, All of It Is Injurious to Health.

THE American people, if certain medical authorities, as well as others, are to be believed, are the noisiest on the race of the globe, while the added assertion was made by some persons that we are among the most vulgar.

While the old saying about doctors "disagreeing" holds good in the present day, and while there is a lack of agreement on the part of physicians as to the effect which the unnecessary noises in cities have upon the nervous systems of the American people, yet there is general admission by doctors that the altogether unnecessary and outrageous noise and clamor in large centres of population are responsible for many of the nervous diseases to which the American people are subject, while these annoyances, it is declared, have a very injurious effect upon the mental as well as physical system of the American people generally.

So thoroughly is this condition appreciated, especially in New York City, although the same evil conditions exist in other large American cities, that an organization known as the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise has been in existence in New York for some years, striving to do what may be possible to alleviate, if not entirely suppress, the disturbing noises for which, it is asserted, there is no excuse.

Dr. Albert Warren Ferris, President of the New York State Board of Lunacy, who is one of the most noted alienists in the country, and who in his official capacity has jurisdiction over 32,000 insane persons, and Dr. M. S. Gregory, resident alienist at Bellevue and Allied Hospitals, who is in direct charge of the psychopathic department, where more than 5,000 persons afflicted with mental disorders pass under his observation annually, agree that something drastic should be done by suffering communities to rid themselves of causes which are having such an alarming and injurious effect not only on the American people of to-day but on generations yet to come.

Dr. Ferris visited Europe some time ago and was particularly impressed with the contrast with the United States.

"Of course, I view the subject of unnecessary noises in American streets, public conveyances, waterways and elsewhere entirely from a medical standpoint," he said. "We are living now in the age of the greatest luxury this nation has ever seen. Also in an age of great vulgarity."

"In our railroad trains, for instance, we permit youths to pass backward and forward through the cars vociferously attracting attention to the wares they have for sale. Railroad locomotives on land and steam craft on our waterways cause distraction and mental distress by the unnecessary blowing of whistles, and in the case of locomotives the additional ringing of bells to an entirely unnecessary extent.

"Automobiles dash through our streets sounding their horns when there is no reason whatever for their doing so, while the machines are permitted to disturb the public through the failure on the part of chauffeurs to silence the mufflers. Church bells are rung without real need, street car gongs are sounded incessantly without occasion, 'flat' wheels on street cars are permitted to exist by street car companies without any attempt being made to replace them by perfect wheels so as to avoid the screeching, grinding noise so trying to human nerves.

"Hucksters and peddlers by the payment of a license amounting to about one cent per day are given legal authority to roam up and down our thoroughfares, calling and yelling at the top of their voices; milkmen delivering their wares at early hours add to the din by the clattering of empty bottles in exchange for full ones; the collection of garbage adds to the racket; street organs and itinerant bands are permitted to rend the air with their strident sounds.

"The iceman adds to the general disturbance, the elevated railroad creates a roar and rumble overhead, while below the earth's surface the subway rips and tears the atmosphere until one's nerves are more than 'on edge,' as the expression goes.

"We allow our children to play boisterously in public buildings and in streets, to the annoyance of those indoors as well as out. We permit schoolboys to go stamping, shouting, whistling, or jostling their way through public conveyances as if they were in a football field. We even

cherish the idea that the college student is given carte blanche to be noisy, slangy, and vulgar in some cases, although, of course, there are as many well behaved and refined individuals among college men as among any other class, but in the way mentioned we contribute to the cult of the vulgar.

"Before my first visit to Europe I frequently resented, with a great deal of vehemence, the statements frequently made that the American traveling public is a vulgar public. I fiercely denounced those who attacked us on such grounds, and yet, after I had been in two or three foreign countries and had watched citizens of the United States elbowing their way through the crowds, ostentatiously shouting to each other, even in picture galleries, rising in the middle of religious services of the utmost gravity and stamping noisily out of churches and cathedrals, I bowed my head in shame and confessed that we Americans, generally speaking, are, as has been charged, less refined, less sensitive, less considerate of the rights and feelings of others than are Europeans.

"I found in Paris parks little children playing gleefully in a very lively, happy way, yet quietly. Their mothers sat near them mending or knitting. It was a very charming, domestic scene. I found myself wondering why it is that in parks and streets in the United States mobs of children are seen shouting, shrieking, yelling, playing games of different kinds and creating pandemonium.

"Some years ago an article appeared in a New York magazine entitled 'The City Beautiful.' Suggestions were made as to the demolition of certain houses, clearing the way for the creation of small parks, substituting refined and proper architecture for the random types that disfigure the streets and avenues of many of our American cities, ornamenting our public buildings in a proper manner, and with such suggestive touches as might educate the citizen and wayfarer.

"But did any one in those days raise his voice or use his pen toward the mitigation of noise and the production of a city comfortable or habitable? I remember that as long ago as 1881 an effort was made by a few people in New York, at the suggestion of several physicians, to obtain the cessation of the ringing of church bells six or eight times each Sunday. Whatever may have been necessary many years ago in the matter of the ringing of church bells for the purpose of summoning churchgoers to their devotions who happened to live some distance from the religious edifices, it is no longer necessary in these days.

"Our places of business do not have bells on them to notify us when it is time to go to our offices. Our railroad stations do not have bells on the roofs to tell us when trains start, and, correspondingly, there is not the slightest actual need for church bells to warn us when services are to be held. Every churchgoer well knows the hours at which services take place.

"The unnecessary ringing of church bells in New York City has, to my personal knowledge, seriously affected persons who were ill and who lived in the neighborhood of the churches in question. A determined effort was made by myself and other physicians to see if the bells could not be quieted, but the effort was useless.

"There was determined opposition, both in the courts and in the community, with the final result that we physicians found ourselves in decided bad odor for some time with many people for having made an attempt to secure quiet and to give poor, suffering sick persons a chance to sleep in the early morning after fighting during the entire night with the demon insomnia. When the time came in which they might have got refreshing sleep they were not able to do so because of the quite unnecessary ringing of these bells.

"The injury to nervous and sick people

resulting from unnecessary noises, and especially annoying and exciting noises, cannot be measured in the form of damages, but every physician recognizes and deplores the fact that following these noises there is a reduction in ordinary resistive force. There is a nerve waste; there is a lowering of tone, and there is a susceptibility to alcoholic stimulant and a desire for it. There is a debilitating and racking influence resulting from this din of a large city added to the rapidity and the haste of the action of the streets.

"It certainly seems to me that no one has a personal right to create or maintain noise that is not necessary, while necessary noises should be minimized.

"No one has a right to create or maintain unnecessary noise. It should be made a misdemeanor for him to do so. The offender should be arrested. This, in some

cases, might be sufficient punishment. At least the offender should receive a severe lecture from the Judge and be paroled in a way, no sentence being passed upon him at first, although he might well be regarded as a suspicious person and classed with malefactors of great wealth and all such people.

"This subject brings to my mind a message which is always uppermost with me—that of insanity. A movement was started in the city some time ago for the prevention of insanity. It is a large subject, but one almost as large is the care of insane people that are produced in New York City year after year.

"Twenty years ago the population of New York State was 6,500,000, and we then had 16,006 known insane persons. We now have 3,116,279 persons in the State and 32,650 insane persons. That is, while

the population has increased 46.7 per cent., the number of known insane has increased 103.9 per cent.

"There are all sorts of agencies at work in the production of this increasing insanity. Of course, the greatest is alcohol, but a certain proportion is due to what medical men term 'stress and strain.' One of the special agencies going to make 'stress and strain' is unnecessary and repeated noise.

"You may ride in railroad trains, street cars, the elevated road, or the subway and not notice that it is affecting you injuriously, but the constant vibration and annoyance, the frequent adjustment and resulting change of position is wearing. In the end it shows, it tells.

"It is so with noises in the streets and elsewhere. Some of us do not notice them; we become immune to them, but

there is a tremendous majority of our people who are damaged by them every day of their lives, yet hardly a hand or a voice is raised to aid or protect them except by members of the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise and others whose desire it is to take cudgels for the defenseless, and whose aim to protect the city and its people is uppermost in their minds."

Dr. Gregory, in his wide experience with persons suffering from mental diseases, is convinced that the unnecessary noises of cities are without doubt greatly conducive to nervousness, while in many cases these noises are the exciting causes of insanity.

"The many unnecessary noises of New York, as well other cities, are most injurious to persons not in good health," he said. "In the case of the insane noises aggravate their condition, while also, if a person is predisposed to insanity, noises may be one of the contributing features to bring it upon him. Noise intensifies their nervousness.

"In the case of the more seriously insane many patients who hear the frequent and continuous blowing of whistles by craft on the East River, near which Bellevue Hospital is situated, imagine that these noises mean that they are about to be killed or that they are to die in some other form, while in the case of insane patients who actually are dying, their condition is made much worse by the blowing of steam whistles and other noises.

"In hospitals generally many patients suffering from typhoid, meningitis, or other serious illnesses often become annoyed by the least noise or disturbance. To these restful sleep is of paramount importance, and frequently the disturbances of street noises may cause a relapse or turn the scale against them. In the cases of many delirious patients one hour's rest or sleep may mean life. You may imagine the disappointment of doctors and nurses who have struggled to bring about the much desired quiet and sleep when suddenly all their efforts are frustrated as a result of disturbing steam whistles or equally aggravating causes."

For more than six years the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise in New York, at the head of which is Mrs. Isaac L. Rice, has carried on a campaign for the stopping, if not the mitigation, of public noises for which there is no need or excuse. While much has been accomplished, yet the volume of unnecessary noise is almost beyond expression. Many persons who are foremost in this public-spirited missionary work find that their efforts are to a large extent hampered by reason of the fact that public sentiment refuses to thoroughly arouse itself and join with the workers referred to in bringing about an amelioration of the existing evil conditions.

On every hand a disposition is found to place the responsibility for the nuisance on the shoulders of some other persons or concerns. For instance, when an attempt was made some time ago to lessen the continual torment of resounding whistles which came from tugs and steam craft of almost every type on the North and East Rivers or in New York Harbor obstacles were found on every hand.

That tugs coming to wharves to take scows up or down the river would begin whistling two miles or more away in order to awaken sleepy watchmen on the dock, or that boats sent forth their screaming calls, often for fifteen minutes at a time, in order to summon their crews from saloons near the water front, or that pilots on river steamers exchanged greetings with rivermen on other boats by means of steam whistles, or that they gave salutes in honor of servant girls in apartment houses or elsewhere along the New York water front seemed to be a matter of indifference to officials.

The Department of Health was applied to for relief. It sent the campaigners from the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise to the Dock Commissioners, who sent them to the Wardens of the Port, who sent them to the United States Local Steamboat Inspectors, who

sent them to the office of the Collector of the Port, who referred them to the Law Division, which passed them along to the Police Department, which switched them right back again to the Department of Health, until at last it was decided that "nothing can be done" because the rivers and bay were Federal waterways.

The campaign was then transferred to Washington. Application for relief was made direct to the Federal Government, first to the Department of the Treasury, then to the Department of Commerce and Labor, and then to the Board of Supervising Inspectors of Steam Vessels. After all this, it was decided that there was no law under which the Federal Government could act. A bill was introduced and passed in Congress, however, soon afterward, which gave the Supervising Inspectors of Steam Vessels the right to regulate the whistling done by watercraft under their jurisdiction.

As a result of this, a large percentage of unnecessary blowing of whistles on the waterways in New York City has been stopped. Of course, it is not expected, nor is it possible, that whistle blowing on vessels can be made to cease entirely, but the great effort necessary to bring about a mitigation of this nuisance shows the difficulties which lie in the way of suppressing others.

The trouble here lies in the fact that it is extremely difficult to arouse public sentiment. American communities are noted for their willingness to submit to public annoyances and inconveniences which in Europe would not be permitted to exist for a moment. For this supineness and indisposition to assert their rights the American public pays the penalty in the direction indicated. Just so long, say prominent members of the society, as the public shows a willingness to submit to the trampling on of their rights by individuals or concerns, just so long will these conditions continue.

Spasmodic efforts to correct this state of affairs have been made from time to time. For a number of years, at intervals, orders have been issued by street car companies to motor-men when passing churches in New York during hours of service, and at all times when passing hospitals, to run slowly and not ring the gongs when unnecessary. Such orders were obeyed for awhile, but in a few days the old conditions returned, and things were as bad as before.

Police Commissioners have been appealed to from time to time to aid in the suppressing of unnecessary noise, and promises of co-operation made, while at the same time attention was directed to the inadequate size of the force.

The Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers has placed itself on record as approving of the object of the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise and promising to do what it could in the City of New York to assist the movement, but its influence does not extend over thousands of heedless and careless chauffeurs, public and private, who traverse the thoroughfares.

One of the officials of the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise explained the situation clearly yesterday when he said:

"It is not long since that smoke was regarded as an evidence of industry and activity, an error that is all but banished. There are those who still cruelly think noise to be even more incontrovertible evidence of enterprise and prosperity. Instead of being any longer a visual warrant of industrial thrift, smoke is now regarded as evidence of waste, sloth, neglect, and economic sin. Noise is no less a waste of industrial energy. Within ten years the noisy city should be under a ban with the smoky city.

"We do not seek to prevent all movement of which noise is an accompaniment, for that would be useless and ridiculous, and not to be thought of in this age of commercial progress and rivalry, but only to still sounds which waste energy without effecting anything but the needless disturbance of workers. Mere screaming, like senseless talking, prevents rather than promotes achievement. Men who accomplish results are silent, and talk is a substitute for action.

"The unpreventable noises will afford sufficient evidence that a city is wide awake without the help of those which spring from wantonness, carelessness, or indifference to the welfare of others."



Dr. Albert Warren Ferris, New York State Commissioner of Lunacy.