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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

CO-OPERATIVE INDIVIDUALISM

The pioneers of Iowa had an instinct for self-government. They were accustomed to take care of themselves. A man built his own house, cultivated his own land, and played his own fiddle: a woman did her own housekeeping, reared her own children, and designed her own adornments. Whatever the need, the resourcefulness of the people was a match for necessity; whatever the odds, their self-reliance was undaunted. The first concern of every one was to earn a living. But with all this individual striving, churches were organized, schools established, and lyceums instituted in behalf of the community. And when political authority failed in its functions, law and order were maintained as a voluntary civic enterprise.

If, as William Penn asserted, the elementary purposes of government are to punish evil-doers and to cherish those who do good, then the spontaneous organizations of the pioneers were well designed for governmental purposes. Usually their social activities aimed to foster the ideals of

religion and education, but occasionally it was necessary to defend the lives and property of law-abiding citizens against the depredations of thieves. Claim associations and vigilance committees were as indicative of a desire to improve conditions as an evidence of crime on the frontier — as much an expression of civilization as debating clubs and singing schools. Whether these voluntary associations were organized for noble ends or for the negative object of suppressing evil, they exhibited a remarkable capacity for self-government.

Pioneer society in Iowa was distinctly individualistic, but the harsh struggle for livelihood was directed more against the elements of nature than against competing persons. Every man worked for his own advantage, and helped his neighbors. In recent times, the complexity of living conditions has altered the nature of the laborious contest without changing the objective of personal gain. Instead of the forces of nature, the adverse endeavors of neighboring rivals constitute the principal resistance to success. The interests of men conflict. Modern individualists, while retaining the vigorous initiative of the pioneers, have lost their sense of responsibility. And to that extent the ability of the people to govern themselves has declined. In the opinion of President Hoover, the

highest form of self-government is the voluntary coöperation of individuals for the collective welfare of the community. That is the formula of wholesome autonomy. Individualism need not be irresponsible.

J. E. B.