

The Social Service Fair In El Paso, Texas

By ALICE P. BARRY, B.A.

A LITTLE GAYETY—perhaps even a touch of the amateur carnival—cannot hurt social work. This has been the experience of El Paso, Tex., with four annual social service fairs—in 1950, 1951, 1952, and 1953.

The sheriff of El Paso for some time had been seeking opportunities for coordinating the work of the community's law enforcement agencies and welfare groups. In preceding years, he had invited the Central Council of Social Agencies to display exhibits at annual meetings of police officers' and sheriffs' associations. Out of these grew the idea and realization of the El Paso Social Service Fair where each health and social service agency annually brings to the public a vivid picture of its individual activities.

Planning the Fair

Taking into consideration most communities' general disinterest in welfare activities, it was proposed to hold the first social service fair out-of-doors in the central plaza, where the individual exhibits would be accessible to everyone. It seemed unwise to use a hotel or hall. The plaza is a park, crisscrossed by walks, the size of a city block, and in the very heart of El Paso.

By an overwhelming majority vote, the fair

Mrs. Barry has been executive secretary of the Central Council of Social Agencies, El Paso, Tex., and executive secretary of the El Paso Social Service Exchange since 1943. Chosen First Lady of El Paso in 1946, she has been a spirited leader in many of the community's social service organizations.

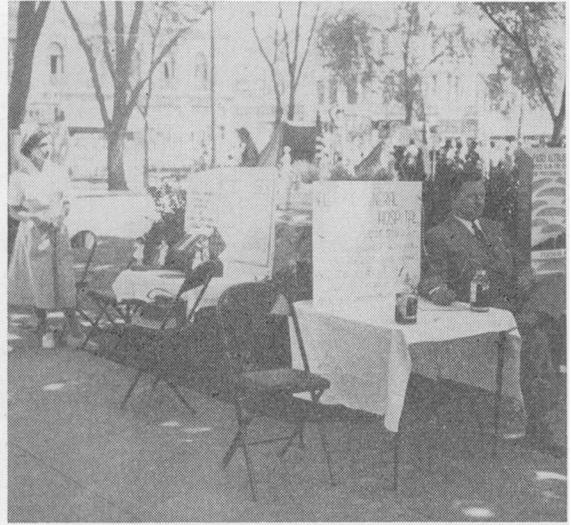
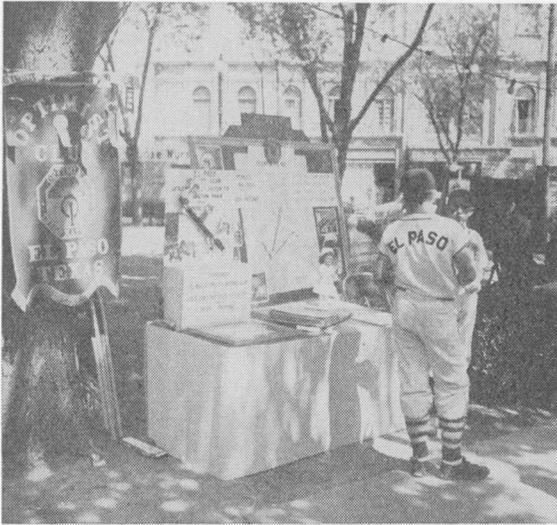
was launched at an organizational meeting of social service agency representatives held in April 1950. A chairman and a program committee were chosen. Arrangements were made later with the city for using the plaza and for the assistance of the city park department. The Central Council of Social Agencies sponsors the event. All its members, and many other groups with social service functions, such as the Providence Memorial Hospital, the Altrusa Club, and the San Juan Civic Recreation Center, participate in the fair.

The first fair was held the last Saturday in August, before the opening of school, when many shoppers might be expected to be on the streets. The day proved to be too early in the season, however, and the next fairs were held on the second Saturday in September.

To avoid damage to the grass and to spare local merchants the expense of donating lumber, the individual displays are placed upon card tables supplied by each participating agency. If backstops are needed, supporting poles are tied to table legs, and board or canvas is stretched between the poles. Screens also are set up where desired.

Every July, the council mails to its member agencies and the other participating groups a form request for exhibit information; this elicits the name of the agency, the type of exhibit, the need for electricity, the amount of space required in terms of 1, 2, 3, or 4 card tables, and the name of the person who will represent the agency at the fair. It has proved essential for each agency to have in charge of the exhibit a well-informed person who can answer questions about the agency's activities. Board members frequently perform this service.

The week before the fair, a post card is sent to every agency, identifying the exact location of the exhibit space. At a meeting shortly before the fair, the participants receive their last-minute instructions and locate their exhibit space on a blackboard diagram. This meeting stimulates enthusiasm and also helps to anticipate needs.



Exhibits at the El Paso Social Service Fair.

At no cost to the council, the city park department strings colored lights across the plaza so that the exhibits are well lighted and colorful during the evening. All electrical connections and wiring are installed by a licensed commercial firm, paid by the council. The park department provides a platform and a public address system, and the program committee provides a piano. On request, the city police department cooperates by keeping a street on one side of the plaza free for unloading and loading exhibits and by placing a police officer on duty in the area. An information booth is set up at the small central pond.

The hours for the first two fairs were from 9:00 a. m. to 9:00 p. m. In the third year, the fair closed at 8:00 p. m., and in 1953, at 7:30 p. m., because experience had shown that too few people came during the later hours.

The Day's Events

The fair is formally opened at 10:00 a. m. by the council's president with a short ceremony at which the mayor, the county judge, and the superintendent of parks speak briefly.

Three groups of Boy Scouts are assigned to morning, afternoon, and evening shifts (8-12 noon, noon to 4 p. m., and 4-8 p. m.) to guide the visitors, run errands, and help in setting up and closing exhibits. Each boy has a map of the ground which he turns over to his relief when he goes off duty.

As in other fairs, the exhibits are supplemented by entertainment. A continuous program illustrating each agency's function, especially group work activities, runs throughout the day. Most of the talent comes from the participating agencies.

At the most recent fair, for example, day nursery children did a folk dance, and another nursery group sang rhythm songs. The children's home put on a play. YMCA boys put on boxing and tumbling matches. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YWCA girls, the city recreation department, and the settlement houses furnished other entertainment. The most dramatic act was put on by fencing teams from the Catholic Community Center.

Volunteer announcers from three local radio stations introduce the acts; one directs the morning program; another, the afternoon program, and a third, the evening program. Each is assisted by a script which outlines the acts of each agency and gives the facts about the agency, the performers, and the performance. Music from a record player with a good amplifying system, operated between the acts, helps to draw shoppers to the fair.

Type of Exhibits

Agencies have learned to display picturesque presentations of their work rather than to rely on cards, albums, and the type of poster which fails to excite interest. An agency does not

have to go to any more expense than it chooses. With most, it is the ingenuity of the exhibit which draws attention. The Lighthouse for the Blind exhibit always has a crowd, watching the blind workers cane chairs, stitch aprons at the sewing machine, and weave rugs on the hand loom.

The health department booth shows some of its clinic, sanitation, and laboratory services. Public health nurses are at the booth.

At the first fair, there were 40 exhibits from public and private agencies, including the welfare, health, and other community public agencies and the several clubs carrying on welfare projects, such as the Optimists, the Lions, and the 20-30 Club. The second year, there were 58 exhibits. There were 62 in 1952, and 62 again in 1953.

The El Paso Tuberculosis Association brings its mobile X-ray unit into the plaza, and each year the unit has taken an average of 250 chest X-rays of people who probably would not otherwise have been checked. In 1953, the El Paso County Medical Society Auxiliary fitted up a trailercoach for its nurse-recruitment program, and it obtained several applicants. These and

similar projects are advertised over the public address system at program breaks. Community Chest organizations display the "red feather" on their tables.

Several local agencies with national affiliations, such as the local office of the Veterans Administration, the El Paso Heart Association, and the El Paso Planned Parenthood Center, have used exhibits supplied by their national headquarters.

By vote of council members, the only sales permitted at the fair are the orders taken for products of the Lighthouse for the Blind and the soft drinks sold at the booth set up by the city concessionaire. The concession donates 15 percent of the gross sales from the soft drinks toward fair expenses. The total cost of the fair to the council has been about \$125 annually.

The fair has proved to be a tourist attraction, also. Attendance in 1953 was estimated at 6,000 to 7,000. The annual event, which is not an excessive burden for anyone, stimulates public understanding and sympathy and sustains the enthusiasm of the agencies for their larger purposes.

Use of Microcard Reader

The Robert A. Taft Sanitary Engineering Center library uses the microcard reader to save space and money. The device utilizes standard 3" x 5" cards as microcards. Each card contains an average of 50 to 60 pages of a publication. One hundred microcards take 1 inch of space and contain the equivalent of 1 foot of books.

The microcard, when inserted into the reader, is magnified 26 times or slightly more than its original size. The reader is not much larger than a typewriter and weighs 21 pounds.

One microcard copy of a 500-page volume, 8 cards, costs about \$11.20. It has been estimated that 800 volumes of a periodical, bound and stored for 50 years, incurs a cost of \$425. The same periodical purchased on microcards could be stored for 50 years for \$127.

For interlibrary loan purposes, microcards are much easier and cheaper to pack and mail than books. In addition, a book is not in danger of being lost or damaged when microcards are sent in its place.