

Readers Digest, June 1950:

Some 40.000 people of many nations dedicate their holidays — all work and no pay — to rebuilding war-torn regions

Pick and Shovel Samaritans

Condensed from United Nations World
Blake Clark

Last summer some 40.000 purposeful men and women, instead of "taking" a holiday, gave one. These volunteers, under the banner of Service Civil International and other voluntary service groups, used their holidays to help the people of European towns still suffering from the wounds of the war.

Students and professional and working people of more than 20 nations set up work camps and cleared away rubble, repaired roads, rebuilt bridges. More, they constructed homes, schools, playgrounds, parks. Fit and tanned after six to eight weeks' hard work, they returned to their homes enriched by new friendships, by the heartfelt gratitude of their foreign neighbours, by a vigorous faith in the ability of the individual to influence the world.

At Hühnerfeld, a little coal-mining town in the Saar, not a house had been built in two decades: under Hitler all building materials had gone into bunkers and barracks. Many families crowded five to a room in dilapidated shacks. Here Father Peter Theis, a genial giant with an amateur knowledge of architecture, had led his miners in setting up a self-help association. Each gave what money he could for materials and worked an hour or two after coming up from the mines. Finished houses were assigned according to money and work-hours contributed and the size of the families in need.

Then 53 boys and girls of 13 different nationalities came to Hühnerfeld. They dug foundations, poured concrete, cut beams and hauled timber. They worked a full eight-hour day despite aching muscles and blistered palms. For two months these campers worked on the foundations and ground floors of 13 new houses. They swung picks side by side with the miners, took Sunday dinner in their humble homes, cared for their wives and children when they were sick. "When they left", says Father Theis, "my people wept."

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On July 15, 1949, one third of the people of Prüm in Germany lost their homes when ammunition stored in a large concrete pill-box exploded and covered the hillside with debris. Ten campers immediately offered their service, and when I visited Prüm they had worked eight weeks and supplied about half the unskilled labour necessary to erect houses for the dispossessed. They were busy on the walls of a new place for Johann Hillen, a woodcutter whose home had been entirely buried. Eighteen year old Anne Dethier, from Brussels, was sifting lime. Carola Arnstein, graduate of the University of California, was hoisting concrete blocks to Eric Adams, a Londoner, and to Finnish, Swiss and other workers atop a five-foot wall. Several volunteers planned to stay on through the winter.

"They give courage to us poor people. After a disaster like this," said Hillen, "I don't know what we would have done without them."

All this would gladden the heart of Pierre Ceresole, a Swiss, to whom goes chief credit for the international volunteer work groups. A civil engineer with wide experience in Europe, the United States and Japan, Ceresole in 1920 founded Service Civil International, a non-governmental, nonprofit organisation to promote understanding between peoples. For ten years before he died in 1945 he devoted his entire time to this work. Recruiting brigades from all countries, he led them in urgent jobs of reconstruction which did not compete with local labour. These brigades did relief work among Spanish refugees in France in the late '30's, helped farmers in wartime Britain, and in 1944 were among the first to extend a helping hand to the Greeks.

In the wake of World War II, many young people of all nationalities are seeking a philosophy that combines ideals with action. They find it in the work camps, whose slogan is "Deeds, not words." Last summer 29 different voluntary services and church groups organised 180 camps, Service Civil International being responsible for the largest number. They worked amid the ruins of Hiroshima, cared for the homeless in Greece, built roads and sewers in Algeria and harvested crops for co-operative communities in Israel. This summer they will enter India, and possibly the earthquake-devastated areas of Ecuador.

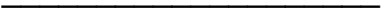
Volunteers usually pay their own expenses to and from the camp and a small amount for board and lodging while there. In war-damaged areas they sleep in tents, do their own housekeeping and cooking. Many Europeans reach camps on the Continent by bicycle, stopping at youth hostels en route. Some hitch-hike, a few walk.

Recruits are warned not to expect a lark. The work is laborious. Dorothea Woods, a honey-haired American girl studying at the Sorbonne for a Ph.D. in comparative literature, was one of 17 volunteers in Lapland who made 15,000 pine shingles by hand. "It was eight hours a day for a month: then we cut it to seven so that we wouldn't drop dead", she said.

Evenings are devoted to reading (books are provided by UNESCO), writing letters, massaging sore muscles, singing, and improvising skits. A spirit of comradeship predominates and romance occasionally flourishes. Campers teach each other folk songs and usually once during the season prepare an international festival of music and folk dances for the villagers.

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Work campers do not deceive themselves that they are solving the great problems of East and West, peace and war. But they are helping melt layers of bitterness encrusting the hearts of many people, attempting to affirm that understanding and mutual aid between peoples are possible. As one boy said, "We live the internationalism we used to talk about."



For further information on work camps write the Reconstruction Department of United Nations Economic and Social Council, 19 Avenue Kléber, Paris, France.