

A New Deal For Tokyo's Ragpickers



IN A cold windy day about ten years ago a small group of ragpickers started building makeshift huts in an abandoned riverside park in northeast Tokyo. Now the group of junk collectors, spurred by an extraordinary community spirit, hopes to move

to its own version of a model town.

The present site, with about 300 inhabitants, is widely known here as Ants' Town, a name derived from the industrious habits of the inhabitants. Social workers praise the increasingly stable social security system developed in private by the hard-working community of professional scavengers.

Motamu Ozawa, gray-haired leader of the community, said recently: "We are slowly but steadily walking the way leading to our eventual aim of security from the cradle to the grave."

The group, which started with nothing, now holds common property valued at more than \$55,000. By paying small daily contributions, the members get modest wedding, funeral and medical services free.

Living quarters, though far below the public standard, are rent free. Aged members who are unable to make a living

are supported by the group. Ants' Town's most recent acquisition is a graveyard for the community's members.

The ragpickers roam the streets of Tokyo long before dawn. They collect anything they can find—waste paper, broken glass, rags or bits of metal. Almost anything helps toward making up their individual daily income of about 200 yen (56 cents).

Later, they make house-to-house calls or visit small factories to buy old newspapers, empty bottles or tin cans. In the afternoon the material is sorted and sold to dealers.

An efficient division of labor has been perfected in this small community. When the ragpickers go out to work, one member stays behind to clean all the living quarters. Another prepares the bathhouse for those who come back tired and dirty to this traditional comfort.

THE ragpickers' busy schedule gives them little time for their children, who until the winter had an ideal companion and leader. The late Miss Reiko Kitahara, who was born into high social position, had for eight years devoted her life to the town's neglected youngsters.

Giving up her status as the daughter of a college professor, the young Roman Catholic



woman nursed the sick children of Ants' Town and taught the girls how to mend clothes. Once she organized an excursion to the mountains for the youngsters, when she learned that they had never seen such rural sights.

Miss Kitahara died last January at the age of 28 in a hut of the town where she had lived for years. At the requiem high mass, the ragpickers and their children paid a tearful last tribute to the "Madonna of Ants'

Town," as they called her.

About 10 per cent of the town's residents, impressed by Miss Kitahara's example, have become Catholics, including the leader, Mr. Ozawa. Mr. Ozawa hopes to see all the members converted to Catholicism before the group has reached the total membership of 1,000 expected in 1963.

In planning their expansion, the town leaders feel a new site is necessary since present location is part of a public park, with only makeshift buildings of broken boards and scrap metal.

A group of engineering students at Waseda University has designed, without charge, new buildings that the community hopes can be completed within five years. The Tokyo government has granted the ragpicker group the right to buy about five acres of waterfront land at a reasonable price.

The blueprint of the new town shows apartments, a dining hall, a nursery and a bath house. Yards large enough for recreation, and space for 1,000 chickens and twenty pigs also are provided.

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On Fishing

"Fishing is simplicity itself," explains Hamilton Clay, Jr. "All you have to do is get there yesterday when the fish were biting." One disciple of Izaak Walton picked the wrong day for sure. He was discovered by the father of a seven-year old boy, pole discarded, hopping on one foot, caressing the other and howling with anguish.

"What happened?" demanded the father.

"I guess it's my fault," said the seven year old. "This man told me he hadn't had a bite all morning — so I bit him."