

Kansas' Latest Challenge—"Fitter Families"

By FRANK M. CHASE

HUMAN beings came into their own in Kansas this fall. They were scored and judged at the state fair! There were classes for children, for adults and for whole families. Medals and certificates were awarded, as well as a special silver trophy for the best family. Thorough mental and physical examinations were required of every entrant. The family history also was taken, while the purpose of the contest was summed up in the slogan: "Fitter Families for Future Firesides."

Eugenics? Exactly; for years the butt of the paragon's wit and seldom taken seriously outside forbidding scientific works. Yet under the auspices of this contest more than a hundred Kansas citizens took a good, square look at themselves as present or future fathers and mothers. While breeders at the ringside a few rods away were appraising each cow or horse in terms of its progeny, these men and women seriously took stock of their qualifications for parenthood.

There is a challenge to all the world in this contest. It is, in fact, the latest challenge from Kansas. It means that the people of this progressive state no longer are content to breed only better animals. They are setting out to raise better citizens; to apply to the human race, some of the principles of heredity which have worked wonders in live stock improvement.

The story of the first eugenics contest is one of a big vision, of the friendship of two middle western women of their steadfast devotion to an idea; of accomplishment. Its beginning dates back to 1910, when at a little county fair in Iowa the superintendent of the art department happened to notice a great many babies who, she thought, were not getting all the attention to which they were entitled. On the spot it occurred to her that the babies might be shown and judged with as much profit to the community as arises from the exhibition of calves and colts. As a result of her idea the first baby health contest in America was held at the Iowa State Fair the following year.

How Mary T. Watts fought for the privilege of holding this contest, her ultimate triumph, and how the baby scoring plan has since grown into the present extensive better babies movement, is in itself an interesting story. But that is the task of another day. Assisting in that first baby contest was Dr. Florence Brown Sherbon, who shared with Mrs. Watts the idea which finally resulted in the eugenics contest. Themselves mothers, both saw the great possibilities in the baby health work, and as it rapidly spread over the nation their conception of it grew. Their vision came to include much more than the present welfare of children; they hoped to see established some means of directing public attention to the mental and physical well-being of every member of the family.

For several years the two women, separated by their respective duties, did not come together. Neither, however, lost sight of the idea. At Lawrence, Kansas, in the spring of 1919, the conversation turned to their favorite topic, eugenics. In view of the success of the baby health contests, they agreed that some competitive plan was likewise suitable for arousing popular interest in the subject. They further agreed that the time was ripe for the eugenics contest, and that the first to have a good opportunity to hold one should do so.

"We ought to have a slogan," said Doctor Sherbon. "How would something about 'fit families' do?"

"Make it 'fittest families,'" suggested the impulsive Mrs. Watts, who does nearly everything in the superlative.

"Fitter families," compromised the more conservative physician, and the remainder of the slogan came quite naturally.

A little later Doctor Sherbon came to Topeka as head of the child hygiene division of the Kansas State Board of Health. Thinking that an interesting exhibit might be based upon her excellent work in this capacity, the Kansas Free Fair Association offered her a building to use as she wished. Here was Doctor Sherbon's opportunity. She explained the eugenics contest idea to the secretary of the fair. He heartily favored the plan and in due time "Department S—Eugenics," with Doctor Sherbon in charge, took its place in the premium list. Assisting Doctor Sherbon was her old friend and collaborator, Mrs. Watts.

Physicians and specialists of high standing gave their time and services to this work with no recompense save their expenses. In some cases their services could not be obtained for private practice. Assisting with the mental examinations, for instance, was James C. de Voss, professor of psychology and director of the bureau of educational measurements at the Kansas State Normal School. The physical measurements were in charge of Dr. James Naismith, head of the department of physical education at the University of Kansas, assisted by Dr. Martha Bacon, director of physical education for girls at the same institution. There was also a competent eye, ear, nose and throat specialist, a psychiatrist and a dentist. The women and children were examined by women physicians, among whom was Dr. Florence McKay, a specialist with the Federal Children's Bureau. In all, the staff assembled for the eugenics contest included eighteen physicians and assistants.

Entrants came for their examinations by appointment. On entering the building their family history was taken. They then passed through a series of

booths, in which the staff specialists made their respective examinations. In one booth, for instance, the person was measured in every conceivable manner to determine his physical development. In another he was subjected to all sorts of questions and tests to determine the status of his mental and nervous systems. In another he wrestled with the army intelligence tests, usually leaving some of his conceit in this booth. In still another he left some of his blood for the Wassermann test, and so on until everything mortal about him was thoroughly invoiced. About three hours were required for examining one person.

Probably a more comprehensive and constructive health examination than that given in this contest was never offered. The immediate value of the information dispensed as a by-product of the contest was well illustrated by the case of one rural family. A child of this family was considerably underweight. In the course of the examination the father received some tactful suggestions as to food which would aid in restoring the youngster to his proper quota of flesh. As usual, the prescription called for goodly allowances of milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables. The father was both pleased and a bit ashamed. "I'm glad we came," he said, promising that his boy would get the kind of a diet that he needed. "We have been living right on a

about the contest which drew many persons to it. In a number of cases the husband or wife, unsuccessful in interesting the remainder of the family, took the examinations alone. Almost invariably, however, the enthusiasm so generated resulted in the rest of the family being on hand for the examinations the next day; they wanted to have the family health record complete.

This they could have, for at the close of the contest the results of the various examinations were assembled in a written report, a copy of which was given to each individual or family. Although the contest was in no way a clinic for sick persons and no one obviously ill was admitted, advice as to what individuals should do to bring themselves up to perfect condition, as in the case of the under-nourished farm boy, was given.

In the class of persons examined was further proof of the soundness of the eugenics idea. They were representative of the best citizenry of the state, lending their approval and encouragement to the plan by their presence. The false pride which often attends matters medical also was absent. Among those taking the examinations were well-to-do families of high social position. Included in the list were the families of a prominent district court judge, of a lawyer, a Y. M. C. A. secretary and of numerous farmers. Several young women who were engaged to be married and one or two single men also passed through the eugenics "mill."

A farm family won the sweepstakes of the eugenics contest, the silver trophy given by Governor Henry J. Allen. This was to be awarded the family receiving the highest grades for all its members; but, as three families tied for the highest score, the cup went to the one having the most members. This was the family of Ford Robinette, in which are three children. The other two families each consisted of a father, mother and one child.

Robinette operates a large farm in Shawnee County, which has been the family home for fourteen years. Before their marriage both parents taught school. Lois, the eldest of the children, is eighteen and a sophomore in college. Mamie, fifteen, and Ivan, twelve, are in high school. The entire Robinette family is fond of outdoor life, the children especially enjoying to ride horseback. None of them ever has suffered from serious illness.

"We entered our family in the eugenics contest," said Mrs. Robinette, "only to show our approval of the 'fitter families' idea. We had no particular ambition to win the trophy."

In all, eighty-seven adults and fifty-three children were examined. Of these, one hundred and one were the members of twenty-five different families, all of which competed for the governor's trophy. Forty-five of the one hundred and one individuals were parents, one was a grandmother, fifty were children, while five persons received no score because of failure to complete the examinations.

The entrants were scored A, B, C or below; A indicating a grade of from 90 to 100, B from 80 to 90 and C from 70 to 80. It is gratifying to note that among the twenty-five families there were no scores below B. Forty persons received this grade, while fifty-six were in the "A" class. Every Grade A entrant received a medal given by United States Senator Arthur Capper and a "Certificate A" from the Kansas State Board of Health. Grade B entrants each received a board of health "Certificate B."

"The governor's trophy or one of the Capper medals is worth more than any sweepstakes of the live stock showing, or a Kansas oil well," says Doctor Sherbon; "for health is wealth and a sound mind in a sound body is the most priceless of human possessions."

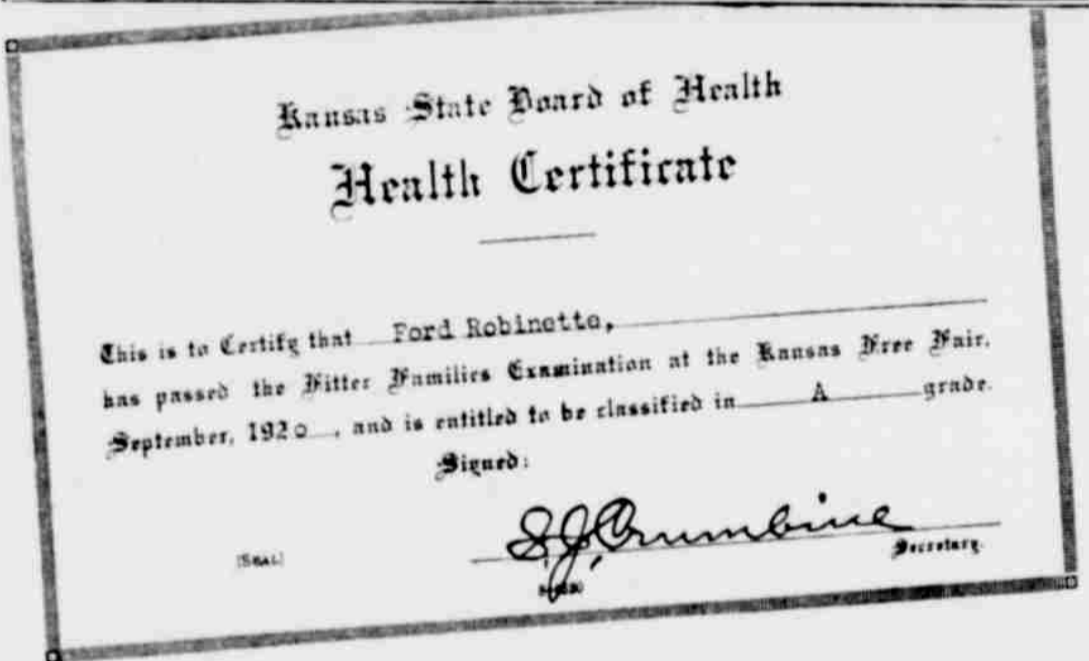
"I am most enthusiastic about this work," said Doctor McKay, who found her admiration for it increasing with each day's tasks, strenuous as they were. "I was impressed particularly by the amazing willingness with which the entrants put up with inconvenience and often tedious waits in order to complete their examinations."

"There are wonderful possibilities in the eugenics contest idea," said Dr. W. R. B. Robertson, of the University of Kansas. "The records gathered in such contests will provide an excellent basis for studying the laws of inheritance in human beings."

An interesting comparison between the improvement of animals and of human beings was made by Mrs. Watts. "Farmers started in to improve their live stock by better housing and more careful feeding," she said, "but they still raised scrubs. It was not until they discovered that heredity was a factor in stock improvement that any great change in the grade of live stock took place."

"Infant mortality is still appalling. Our institutions for the insane and the feeble-minded are full of overflowing. Taxes for the support of these institutions, including the penitentiaries which take care of our social derelicts, have weighted down heavily the normal members of the community. What is the trouble? We are studying balanced rations, sunlight, fresh air, better schools and recreation; but still the number of unfortunates increases. We must go further; we must place more emphasis upon the factor of heredity."

The eugenics contest is a step in this direction. Who can say to what length it shall attain in bettering the nation's best asset, its citizens?



The family of Ford Robinette, Shawnee County, Kansas, winners of the trophy in the first eugenics contest. Left to right: Mrs. Robinette; Lois 18; Mr. Robinette; Mamie 15; Ivan 12. Duplicate of Ford Robinette's Grade A health certificate.

farm all these years without ever knowing how valuable were the foods we had at home."

While planning the contest Doctor Sherbon looked for only a few entrants. The number of persons examined was to her a secondary consideration; she felt that the contest would be entirely justified if it no more than started an interest in eugenics. Her big objectives were two: to work out a set of standards for the normal family and to develop the technique of such contests. No one was more surprised than she, therefore, when there were more applicants than the staff could handle. Mrs. Watts' megaphone was decidedly unnecessary. The contest lasted a full week, but after the first day or two there were no breathing spells for the doctors, indeed, scarcely time for luncheon. Preference was given the family entries, though before the contest closed they too were being turned away. As indicating a growing consciousness of the importance of being well born, such interest was gratifying indeed.

Though in the main the younger families were most interested in the contest, its appeal was not to them alone. Several families with well-grown children entered. In one family three generations were represented. Sometimes it was the older members of the household who urged participation in the contest. "Go ahead and take the examinations, Maggie," one elderly woman admonished her daughter, who had children of her own. "They didn't have such things in my day, or you bet I should have been into them."

There was, in fact, a certain irresistible psychology