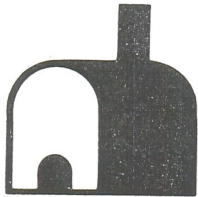


THE EASY CHAIR

Watergate chaser: the all-American tonic



ON NOVEMBER 18 the spokesmen for twenty-two communities will gather in the public rooms of the Town and Country Hotel in San Diego for an unusual competition. During the next two days they will speak in turn to a jury of twelve men and women, and will present thick dossiers of evidence, usually documented with photographs and blueprints. The purpose of each spokesman will be to persuade the jurors that the citizens of his city or small town have done something remarkable—perhaps unique—to make it a better place to live in. Each of them will be hoping that the jury will designate his community as an All-America City: a title more coveted throughout the country than the cynical residents of New York and Los Angeles can easily imagine.

The twenty-two delegations will be the finalists in a competition among some 130 cities; the others already have been eliminated by a screening committee of the National Municipal League, the organization that has sponsored the contest for the past twenty-five years. Chairman of the jury will be Dr. George H. Gallup, the dean of pollsters, who is also chairman of the League's Council and of the American Institute of Public Opinion. After weighing the testimony before them, he and his fellow jurors will confer their award

on ten or eleven of the contestants they deem outstanding. Their judgment will not be based on the doings of any local politician or bureaucrat. What they will look for is the voluntary effort of ordinary citizens to solve the problems of their community. Neither will they look for model cities; a city may have plenty of uncured ills so long as there is evidence that a substantial number of its citizens are working hard and intelligently to find some remedies.

FOR EXAMPLE, one of the winners last year was Albion, Michigan, a small industrial town not far from Battle Creek. About a quarter of its population is black, and it had long been plagued by the racial tensions common to such communities. But when other neighboring towns erupted into rioting, arson, and looting, Albion did not. Its peace was preserved, not by a tough police department or experts on race relations, but primarily by the initiative of Mrs. Barbara Gladney, the wife of a black police sergeant. In 1968 she and her husband got together with a couple of white friends, Paul and Sandy Pimentel, to talk about the lack of

John Fischer, an associate editor of this magazine, has just finished a book, The Almost Good Society, about innovations in local and regional government. It will be published next spring by Harper & Row.

social contact between the races and the resulting misunderstandings and resentments. The four of them decided to invite a few of their black, white, and Chicano friends to informal coffee parties. By 1970 about forty couples were meeting fairly regularly; they ended up by forming The Melting Pot, a social organization that sponsored interracial picnics, dinners, and dances. For students, the most volatile element in the community, they organized rap sessions. In all, more than 1,500 people attended Melting Pot meetings. Since many of these were the more active and concerned members of their neighborhoods, they were able to spot any incipient trouble and damp it down.

Truman Barnes, driver of an Albion school bus, was bothered in 1965 by the town's worst eyesore, an abandoned forty-eight-acre millpond. It had silted up, choked with water weeds and accumulated tons of junk—from tin cans to old tires—along its banks. He persuaded twenty Boy Scouts to help him make a start, a yard at a time, at cleaning up the mess. A year later they had enlisted 100 people, youngsters and adults, in their project. By 1970 it had expanded into a campaign to clean up the Kalamazoo River, which runs through Albion. Some 500 volunteers devoted their weekends to cutting