

I Lived in a Slum

Tenant Rights Lost in Ignorance

By **WOODY KLEIN,**

World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Sixth of a series.

Most of New York City's slum dwellers live in ignorance and fear.

During my "life" in the tenement jungles, I talked to scores of tenants who were completely unaware of their basic rights under the housing laws. And because of this ignorance, they are exploited and housed in quarters intolerable for decent human beings.

- They don't know the legal maximum rent for their own apartments.

- They don't know their legal rights when landlords threaten them with eviction.

- In many cases, they don't even know the name

of their landlord and fall prey to all the abuses of absentee ownership of slum buildings.

- They don't know they're entitled to basic services for the rents they pay—heat, gas, electricity, hot water.

- They don't know where to take their complaints: the State Rent Commission on matters affecting rents; the Department of Buildings on matters affecting plumbing, stairways, windows and crumbling plaster; the Health Department for lack of heat and for complaints of rats and roaches.

- They don't know it's a violation of fire laws to have tenement hallways cluttered by old furniture, trash and garbage cans.

- And they don't know they can go into Magistrate's Court to swear out a summons charging their landlords with the neglect of their buildings.

Consequently, many landlords squeeze every pos-

Continued on Page 4.



Tenant Rights Lost in Fear, Ignorance

(Continued From Page One)

able dollar out of their tenants and supply the least possible in services.

Actually, thousands of these timid people live in fear of their landlords. Beaten down by threats of eviction and other reprisals—turning off the heat, turning off the electricity—they suffer in silence. Demoralized, many of them stop tidying up their own rooms, adding to the dilapidation of the buildings.

Some of the slum dwellers, however, fight for their rights. An Italian woman in the Lower East Side told me:

"Sixteen years I've been here, fighting my landlord all the time. I drove two of them away. I drove out three others. They were no good. They never wanted to do anything."

"But there are a lot of people in the neighborhood who are afraid to talk. Their landlords threaten to throw them out on the street if they open their mouths. I know the landlord can't do this without going to court but most of these poor people don't know. That's why they continue to live in such miserable conditions."

Girl Getting Away

The older residents are trapped in the teeming tenements; only the younger people have a chance of escaping. I talked to a pretty 15-year-old Puerto Rican girl who was eager to tell me about life in the slums because she was leaving them.

"Our apartment is terrible," she said. "Just one room about seven feet wide and 12 feet long. There is only one bed. My mother, my 13-year-old brother and I, we all sleep in that same bed."

"But I'm moving out on Saturday. I am getting married. It has to be better. We have found a little apartment on Second St. We will be happy there."

The way she said it, Second St. sounded like Seventh Heaven!

During my life in the slums, I found some buildings which stood out from the others. They were dwellings in which landlords took an active interest. And in turn, the tenants took pride in their own apartments. Even in the worst tenements, there was an occasional clean, tidy apartment.

Many Give Help

I discovered, too, a great army of people working to improve the lot of the poor and the underprivileged—conscientious Welfare Department investigators, settlement house workers, private citizen groups and many individuals. With housing clinics, child care centers, summer camping programs and various forms of guidance, these people do much to lift the morale of the slum dwellers.

One great contribution they have made to exploited ten-

ants has been to carry their housing complaints directly to the city building inspector in the area and demand action. These recorded complaints, incidentally, total 500 a day throughout the city. Actually, this figure doesn't represent a true picture because there are still untold numbers of slum families who don't know how to register their complaints. Consequently, they live with the rats, the broken windows, the rotting floors.

This type of tenant complaint, of course, strikes at the heart of New York City's slum problem. The history of the Department of Buildings is one of a woefully inadequate number of inspectors and graft-taking from landlords to overlook housing violations.

Payoffs Listed

During the campaign earlier this year by the Rev. James A. Guswell, rector of the Church of St. Matthew and St. Timothy, to clean up the slums in the Upper West Side, I talked to a number of apartment superintendents. They gave me written ledgers of repeated payoffs to city building inspectors to ignore blatant violations.

The situation had grown so bad that the crusading clergyman publicly declared that the "immoral, indecent and impossible living conditions in the Upper West Side made it most difficult for him to preach the Christian faith."

"When I was living in the slums last month, I learned the payoffs to building inspectors were still going on. A neighbor, living in one room in the Lower East Side, sounded off to me one afternoon. "This house stink," he said. "Sometimes no water. I don't know what happen. The landlord he never clean. I don't want to live here because of my baby."

I asked him, "Don't the building inspectors ever come up here? Doesn't anybody ever go after the landlord?"

"Sure, the inspectors come," said my Puerto Rican neighbor, "but they don't come upstairs. They never go past the super's apartment. Many time I see the super give inspector five dollars, sometime 10 dollars."

Although I found building inspectors being bribed to close their eyes to the sins of the slums, I discovered one effort by the Department of Buildings to do something, token or otherwise, to enforce the building code in the Upper West Side.

Deputy Building Commissioner Harold Elms, moving over from the district attorney's office, gave notice to the slumlords that they had three weeks to clean up their buildings or face prosecution. Some landlords who were frightened by this warning



Staff Writer Woody Klein talks things over with a tenant on lower East Side. On the third floor of this rooming house, six families use a single sink in the hall—a violation of the multiple dwelling law.

Tomorrow

Staff writer Woody Klein describes the woefully small force of inspectors working in city slums.

began to comply but the long-range effect of this new prescription for slumlords remains to be seen.

-Decrease In U.S.

But anyone who tries to improve New York City's slum community is faced with grim statistics. U.S. Census Bureau surveys have reported that sub-standard or slum housing is slowly diminishing in the nation.

In New York City, however, the slums are steadily increasing. In another two decades, unless the tide is turned, our city may well be a community of Big Business and Big Slums.

Tobacco Tax to Start

Associated Press

ALBANY, June 30.—New York State's tax on cigars, pipe and chewing tobacco and snuff goes into effect tomorrow. It is expected to return \$1 million a year.