

# VILLAGE VIEW

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According to experts in education, the years during which children attend elementary schools are among the most impressionable of their lives. At this same stage in their development, many youngsters go to Sunday Schools. In such a class, fifty years ago more or less, I first heard the oft-told tale of the Good Samaritan, a Bible story about an unfortunate wayfarer who, after having been set upon by thieves and left in cruel circumstances, was given no aid by others who passed until a compassionate Samaritan happened along and rescued the beleaguered victim.

This anecdote from the New Testament book of Luke, perhaps more than any other religious teaching, struck in me a responsive chord. Why this one was memorable rather than some of the other parables, I can't say; perhaps a psychologist would feel I identified with the man who had been so illy-used. In any event, the rescuer made for himself a name that endures longer than the city of his birth. The ancient section of Palestine known as Samaria has long since disappeared beneath the shifting sands and blowing dusts of the Middle East. The story survives, though, and the name, Samaritan, is reserved for whoever proffers a helping hand to a stranger in trouble.

Twenty-five years ago when this little settlement at the edge of the Indian River on Florida's east coast boasted a population of around 3,000, the nearest hospital was ten miles away. The only way to carry an injured or sick person to the medical facility was to send for the hearse belonging to the single funeral home in the area. If not otherwise occupied, the vehicle doubled as an ambulance.

Because the arrangement was less than ideal, a local doctor, who had happened upon a used VW van bearing a "For Sale" sign, approached four or five businessmen for help; together they borrowed the necessary money to purchase and outfit the van as an ambulance. Then the doctor organized a class in First Aid to train volunteers in emergency procedures. Eight people responded. They called themselves the Samaritans.

Over the years both the community and the Samaritans have grown. With the area's population now topping 21,000, there are 78 active and associate Samaritans. Costs have risen

as the quality of service has improved; the area's size has expanded to 16 square miles. Since 1970, the annual budget has increased from a little over \$2,000 to \$56,500 in 1982. There were 76 calls for help in 1957. The Samaritans now make more than 1200 emergency runs a year, and last year they transported 350 other patients to non-emergency medical appointments.

In their squad building, the Samaritans house three fully-equipped ambulances operated by state-licensed drivers and manned by Emergency Medical Technicians with exactly the same training as any paid rescue squad. In addition, their loan closet makes available to area residents and guests free use of wheel chairs, crutches, walkers, and similar items.

The Samaritans serve their community without charge and are supported entirely by public donations. No drive to raise funds has ever been necessary. No taxes are levied for the acquisition, maintenance, or repair of supplies and equipment. Not a single member receives a cent in salary. These volunteers are rewarded only by the knowledge they have helped other people.

When Europeans first came to these shores, they left behind organized societies with well-developed systems of government; the earliest colonists found similar, although more fragmented systems, among the natives living here. Wherever mankind is found on this planet, individuals band together to achieve mutual goals. In the colonies of the New World, people joined forces to fell trees and build shelters, to maintain livestock and harvest crops, to establish boundaries and lay out roads. They looked to their neighbors for assistance when danger threatened.

As our numbers increased through immigration and procreation, we spread across the continent. Society became ever more complex, vocations grew specialized, and people came to depend for needed services upon individuals practicing particular trades.

Barbers, who once provided medical and dental attention as well as shaves and haircuts, restricted themselves to tonorial care once colleges turned out adequate numbers of doctors. And when a dentist hung out his shingle, doctors stopped pulling their patients' aching teeth.

Early in the 20th century, electricians and plumbers took their places among carpenters and painters. As settlements became towns, towns became small cities, and small cities grew to large ones, the constable and marshal gave way to police forces, and volunteer firemen were replaced by paid fire department personnel. Only in the smallest of communities do volunteers still supply fire protection to their neighbors, and today, even volunteer firemen are paid when they respond to emergencies.

Freedom from responsibility for our neighbors' safety in emergencies has deprived our society of bonds once essential to survival. Today, rather than responding, Americans feel

little inclination to help one another; instead such responsibility is delegated to departments and organizations created to relieve any concern we might otherwise feel.

As a result, we become calloused to sufferings of our fellowmen. And we bemoan, at the same time, the sparsity of heroes to hold up as examples of bravery and selflessness.

Society's changed attitudes greatly reduce our involvement with one another and leave individuals without community supports natural to human development. Just as it's easy for each of us to turn our backs upon troubled strangers, it's easy for strangers to turn away when we need help. The change affects us all, for people require more than impersonal attention and financial assistance when disasters strike. We need the moral support of concerned and caring neighbors and friends. Volunteers, whether spontaneous or organized, strengthen the fabric of community life.

This unincorporated, relatively quiescent, Florida community, stretching in a loosely-organized fashion along the Indian River, grows busy with an influx of northerners in winter months. Traffic thickens and accidents are not infrequent as strangers negotiate its narrow rural roads. The area's best-integrated group is the Samaritans. Its members come from all age and income levels; retired men and women, housewives, and students from the nearby college participate; people belong who have lived here all their lives; people join who came in more recent years.

The Samaritans supply an irreplaceable element of healthy community life; they link family to family and neighbor to neighbor. In the New England town where I grew up, that element once flourished but now is lacking. Here in Florida, the Samaritans evoke the same emotions as did the storied good man of Samaria.