

A VISIT WITH ARTHUR ALTMAYER

Arthur Altmeyer, former Commissioner for Social Security, is interviewed at DHEW headquarters in Washington by OASIS writer Frank Boches.



THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, Arthur J. Altmeyer—a man many have called “Mr. Social Security”—left the Administration after helping to build many a “cornerstone” in the social security structure. Today, at a vigorous and hearty age 75 and with his everpresent enthusiasm for social welfare ideals, Mr. Altmeyer carries on a range of activities far beyond that of many men his junior.

The former Chairman of the Social Security Board and later Commissioner for Social Security now lives in the Nation's Capital. He has just finished writing a book, recently became chairman of the board of trustees for a new labor-sponsored pension plan for employees of small companies, and also serves as chief appeals officer for the national retirement fund of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

As if this schedule isn't far reaching enough, the busy Mr. Altmeyer also finds time to teach, lecture, travel abroad ; advise labor groups, foreign governments, and others; consult, read many periodicals and books, and correspond or meet with his legion of friends and associates who share his zeal and loyalty for social welfare advancements.

Nor does the Altmeyer schedule of activities end here. The man who forsook a law career in favor of the social welfare movement also plays golf when the weather accommodates and usually scores in the low

80's. And for many years, he has been a member of the Program Committee of the Unitarian-Universalist Service Committee which serves the Church nationwide.

Mrs. Altmeyer, also, is active these days, her husband reports, especially as a participant in social welfare and community projects and programs. Of course, she also sees to it that her on-the-go husband's bustling schedule has no conflicting dates.

Of the daily regimen he leads these days, the man who served in 1934-35 as chairman of the Technical Board which advised the Committee on Economic Security appointed by President Roosevelt to develop a social welfare program, has this to say :

“I enjoy the variety of undertakings which keeps me pretty busy. I especially like the flexibility of activities . . . not the same things day in and day out. I never know what I'll be doing the next month and I thoroughly enjoy this.

From the time he left SSA in 1953 until 2 years ago, Mr. Altmeyer lived in Madison, Wis, where, many years earlier, he received his bachelor's, master's, doctor of philosophy, and honorary doctor of laws degrees and a Phi Beta Kappa key at the University of Wisconsin.

In moving back to Washington, Mr. Altmeyer said he was prompted by its proximity to New York City where his ILGWU duties take place. As a native of

the Badger State and a product of what has been termed the "Wisconsin Idea," Mr. Altmeyer has, of course, a fondness for his State but he readily concedes that he is just as comfortable in the Nation's Capital where he and his wife have scores of friends.

Since leaving the Federal service in 1953, Mr. Altmeyer has served as an advisor, on a continuing basis for several years, to the Governments of Iran and Turkey and also to trade associations in Peru and Colombia. In addition, he has been a consultant on social security matters for the United Nations.

For a number of years up through 1965, this SSA pioneer was chairman of the board of trustees for the retirement fund of the Coat and Suit Industry. This was one of the first jointly administered funds involving industrywide unions and employers' associations. As chairman, the former Commissioner was cast in the role of neutral member.

In assuming the post of chief appeals officer for the ILGWU National Retirement Fund this past year, Mr. Altmeyer became associated with a program covering 435,000 employees and other branches of the industry beyond coats and suits. Presently this Retirement Fund has reserves of approximately \$250 million.

The chief appeals officer acts whenever a deadlock develops among the board of trustees as to whether an individual qualifies for a pension. Mr. Altmeyer's decisions and his clarification of rules are binding. He does not handle grievances or other disputes.

The widely respected former SSA head is especially enthusiastic about his new affiliation with the labor-sponsored pension plan for some 1,100 employees of 14 companies. Previously, many small firms were unable to establish practical pension plans on their own. Now, Mr. Altmeyer explains, as a result of this plan developed by the AFL-CIO's industrial union department, pension funds will be pooled to spread the risks and reduce administrative costs.

When books are written about the New Deal era, the history of health insurance in the United States, the Truman years, social security, etc., Arthur Altmeyer is often asked for advice, sought out for recollections, or requested to read the galley proofs. In fact, when the well-known historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote his "The Coming of the New Deal," he had this former Chairman of the Technical Board to the President's Committee on Economic Security review Chapter 18-"The Birth of Social Security."

Mr. Altmeyer himself recently completed a book entitled, "The Formative Years of Social Security" which was written to coincide with the presentation of his official papers to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. As a student of history as well as one who

has made history, the former social security head has been interviewed by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University in conjunction with SSA's Historical Program.

Over the years, this key figure met and advised Presidents and other high-level Government officials. At the same time, he always found strength in meeting with and listening to the ideas and comments of his fellow SSA workers.

Many pioneers-either retired or perhaps still helping build the program-will be interested in what a person they have known and respected is thinking these days. And for the second generation employees, the following comments by "Mr. Social Security," on a variety of subjects, may be especially appropriate:

-PERSONAL: "I was one of the luckiest persons in the world to be caught up in the New Deal, particularly social security . . . this was a big break for me . . . tremendous good fortune. . . ."

-AMBITIONS: "My main ambition is to see medicare successfully launched as I'm sure it will be. I want to see the ship really sail onward." (Mr. Altmeyer proudly noted that he was signed up for both parts of the health insurance program.)

-PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE: "A person must have articles of faith. I have three: faith in the individual, his dignity, his worth, his potentiality, and his ability to improve himself and the world of which he is a part; faith in democratic Government which sometimes seems painfully slow in arriving at a decision; and faith in using our democratic Government to the maximum extent to promote social welfare.

"It is an artificial outlook that undertakes to establish an antithesis between individual and social action. The individual cannot survive happily without the use of Government and Government cannot survive unless the individual has a full opportunity to achieve his maximum potential."

-THE SECOND GENERATION : "Incoming youngsters should be given the full treatment as to the philosophy, goals, and problems of social security. The whole field is so challenging and satisfying . . . if any individual shows the slightest interest, he should explore the field for himself. . . . There are so many skills and tasks, so much room for everybody . . . with mechanization, even the physical scientist has a place. For a man who is seeking individual success and is also interested in promoting the welfare of his fellow man, there is no conflict at all. You can't say that of all professions."