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Where We Live" by Grace Cook - a feature concerning Agnes
Smedley.

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Out Where We Live

By GRACE COOK

"MISS SMEDLEY doesn't seem to think much of marriage," said Cynthia, looking up from the book she was trying to devour before going back to school.

"No," I agreed wryly, "she doesn't."

Agnes came out to China the year Cynthia was born. I remember very well her biting scorn for mere wives. I was trying hard just then to learn to be one, after the headier job of roaming on my own. It came hard to be sneered at for one's struggle, as one was in Agnes' then new book.

Then as now, though, more in the book than in person. Earl Leaf, reviewing "Battle Hymn of China" for this paper last week, accuses Agnes of mellowing, since now she actually likes certain individual missionaries and Kuomintang officials. But I have known Agnes longer—anyway, longer ago—than Earl has, and I can testify that even in the 1920s Agnes could be gentle with individual wives, though wives as a class she seems to despise most of all.

"For women," she says in this new book, "marriage is at best an economic investment; at its worst, a relic of human slavery." But it is harder for a warm heart to hate people, persons puddling along the best they can in whatever ruts, than to hate words, like "marriage."

"STILL, I don't see," Cynthia went on, after a thoughtful pause while I did this mental flashback, "what she's going to put in its place."

Ah, there's the rub.

"Neither do I," I said.

Neither does Agnes.

"I have heard of no society which has solved this problem," is her own comment.

But: "They wanted to know why I wasn't married," she says of Chinese village women. "This gave an opportunity to explain the emancipation of women, and to point out that they must . . . share the same rights and responsibilities as men in the fight against the Japanese.

"The women were tremendously interested . . . We watched them walk away . . . talking excitedly."

You bet they were. What's more, I can tell you what they were talking about. They were asking, "But what can we do with the children? And if we women are all fighting and nursing and making propaganda, who will have babies to carry on?"

We mothers are simple souls. Our stake is in the future. We question a "social consciousness" which makes no provision for society to survive.

FOR AGNES' selfless passion, her tireless work, her splendid ability, I have great admiration. But she must know we're not all smart enough to be Agneses, and if we were, would it really be a good idea? One "St. Agnes" around an army camp is an inspiration; but would Chu Teh hand out spirited stallions to all the American club-women Agnes lectures to and scorns, if they left their children to flock to the Red Army?

I am not belittling Agnes's work. I am, maybe, suggesting that she should not belittle mine. But what I am really thinking of is my daughter. She and I have known a lot of wandering correspondents in our time, all the way from frank hedonists out for excitement to sincere crusaders like Agnes, and none of them fit in very well with raising families. One of the halfway-betweens said to me in 1937, exhilarated by the Shanghai war, "I can stand anything but monotony."

THIS, TO fifteen-years-old as to her ex-newspaper mother, sounds marvelous. But we both know it won't fit with formulas, vitamins, school hours, measles. Maybe some of those clubwomen you despise, Agnes (after all they did come to hear you), are trying harder than you know to fit a social consciousness into their children's schedules.

What shall I tell Cynthia, Agnes? We need leaders like you, but where is your working pattern for us ordinary women? You resent your own neglected childhood; you have great tenderness for children. Shall the state rear them? But even bearing them involves that sex relationship to which you "have never been able to reconcile" yourself. What shall we put in

place of marriage to populate the world? Or shan't we? And if not, why bother to save the world at all?

It's 10 years since you took pictures of Cynthia in our garden, Agnes. She's 15 now, she thinks you're wonderful, and she needs to know.