

# Straining the Melting Pot: How the Saturday Evening Post Articulated the American Attitude on Immigration in the 1920s

by Kasie Moffett

The discourse found in *The Saturday Evening Post* from the end of World War I until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 illuminates a chapter of American life in which public sentiment concerning immigration to the United States underwent a significant transformation. After the war, Americans began to reject the traditional perception of their nation as a refuge for the oppressed as they became more isolationist and nationalistic. Many began to center their postwar uneasiness on the immigration issue with the realization that they could expect the number of immigrants in the coming years to meet or exceed the record-breaking amount that entered the country in the decades before the war.

The commentary featured in the *Post* during this period reveals a determined effort to encourage this transformation while instilling the following ideas in the minds of their readers: first, that America faced a national emergency as more and more foreign-born residents failed to become fully assimilated; second, this resulted from the “new immigration” of southern and eastern Europeans who began to outnumber Europeans of the “old immigration” from the northern and western regions; third, the physical and mental toll exacted on Europe by the Great War created a morally-defective and politically-radicalized generation of Europeans who were eager to escape to America in droves; and fourth, if the US government did nothing to regulate and restrict this projected surge of immigrants, the country would fall victim to political unrest, a lowered standard of living, and worst of all, the extinction or hybridization of the so-called Nordic race—the theoretical basis of the “real American” population.

This analysis traces the evolution of the American attitude toward immigration from the end of the First World War up to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 and suggests that the *Saturday Evening Post* helped to shape the ideas and provide the arguments that facilitated the transformation.

For most of the nineteenth century, Americans endorsed a loose consensus when it came to immigration laws for their country. With the availability of so much land, the national tradition of welcoming immigrants, and no shortage of more pressing concerns calling for attention, Americans had little reason nor much opportunity to legislate immigration. Moreover, the still precarious balancing act between state and federal

power made the question of who had the authority to regulate immigration a delicate issue.<sup>1</sup> While some anti-immigration movements did surface—the anti-Catholic, xenophobic Know-Nothing Party gained some prominence in the middle of the century—other issues dominated the political discourse, and immigration laws remained a minor issue.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of the century, the federal government assumed more jurisdiction over immigration law, and the largely favorable consensus began to show signs of distress amid an enormous surge of foreigners arriving from eastern and southern Europe. As industrialization developed in European countries to the north and west, fewer workers chose to leave home for America. At the same time, diminishing legal barriers to emigration in southern and eastern Europe, along with lower travel costs thanks to improvements in transportation, made emigration to America more convenient and affordable for Europeans in the South and East. In response to this influx of working-class, often poverty-stricken immigrants into already crowded urban centers, US lawmakers implemented regulation through immigration laws with stricter selection procedures. Congress passed a series of laws in 1875, 1882, 1891, 1903, and 1907; each expanding on a gradually accumulating list of excludable classes, including convicts, paupers, individuals with a physical defect, disease, or disability, and essentially all of the Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the passage of these bills, the legislative and executive branches moved tentatively when it came to any kind of restriction on immigration. Most bills passed back and forth between the House and Senate, growing weaker by degrees as congressmen dissected their provisions. Most failed to make it out congress; for the rare bill that reached the executive branch, its journey often ended with a presidential veto. When the onset of the First World War caused a sharp decline in immigration, the issue took a backseat to the more critical concerns of the war.

Just one month after Germany signed the armistice agreement, the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, George Horace Lorimer, started in on his mission to rouse public sentiment against unrestricted immigration. Through the magazine, which had a circulation of two million by the end of the war, he had an effective instrument for

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<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Hutchinson, *Legislative History of American Immigration Policy, 1798-1965*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Hutchinson, 405-430; America's rapid development into the world's leading producer of manufactured goods by the mid-1980s was thanks in large part to the massive influx of European and Asian immigrants during the Industrial Revolution. However, the concentration of these "New Immigrants" in urban centers led to economic, social, and cultural tension that roused nativist and racist attitudes. Anger, fear, and hatred for new arrivals intensified parallel with legislators' growing focus on tightening immigration laws before World War I. For more on this, see Peter Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society Nativism and Immigration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

reaching mainstream America. By the 1920s, the *Post* grew in prestige and popularity, boasting pieces written by former presidents, premiers, senators, and some of the most famous authors of the time.<sup>4</sup> Lorimer strictly adhered to the magazine's original emphasis on business and related topics that would interest businessmen, but also cultivated an impressive pool of authors who contributed fictional or otherwise amusing pieces for the rest of the family. By targeting business, the *Post* became a prominent voice for the conservative Republicanism of the twenties and readers considered its political discussions to be authoritative.<sup>5</sup> As America entered a decade characterized by Republican rule and a conservative government that gave precedence to policies that favored business, the *Post* reached its pinnacle of cultural influence, which would last until the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

Lorimer's first mention of the immigration emergency appears in the editorial section of the December 28, 1918 issue and is typical of the magazine's fixation on the threat of Bolshevism in the early postwar years. This preoccupation is representative of the Red Scare that affected the entire nation after the 1917 Russian Revolution. In the column, Lorimer introduces the basis of the *Post* argument for immigration restriction: the idea that most domestic problems in America only exist because they were imported from Europe. These initial attacks on the European influence dealt mainly with political disturbances, defined by Lorimer as "class distinctions and monarchical traditions [and] bogus Socialism," conditions that he argues were "utterly foreign to America until indiscriminate immigration planted them in a few plague spots in our great cities." In his conclusion, he determines that American worries are due to carelessness in who is allowed to enter the country. In the more colorful language that is often employed by Lorimer, he explains the situation with a metaphor: "Under our laws we send rotten food to the dump because it is a menace to health. Rotten men, who are poisoning America with rotten propaganda, belong there too."<sup>7</sup>

A couple of months later he offers his assessment of Bolsheviks in America, calling them "all unnaturalized foreigners [who] do not want honest leaders or honest laws." What they did want, according to Lorimer, was the "chance to loot."<sup>8</sup> This suggestion of a threat to property would certainly create unease among his business-minded audience, and the point is reinforced by another piece in the same issue. Part of a series

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1972): 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> John William Tebbel, *George Horace Lorimer and The Saturday Evening Post* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948): 175.

<sup>6</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity: 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958): 103.

<sup>7</sup> George Horace Lorimer, "Only the Stump of the Dragon Was Left," *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 26 (December 28, 1918): 20

<sup>8</sup> Lorimer, "A Plague of Panaceas," *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 32 (February 8, 1919): 20.

dealing with the economic reconstruction of Europe, this article by Isaac F. Marcossou reveals what happens to a country when Bolshevism, “the avowed enemy of credit, capital and order” goes unimpeded. Portending the disastrous effect this would have on the United States “unless we rear a bulkhead against the tides of discredited humanity that will soon beat upon our shores,” he ends on the vague yet ominous remark, “they lurk wherever men labor and desire to be prosperous.”<sup>9</sup>

This sudden agitation over the immigration problem materialized abruptly at the start of 1919 in a patent expression of postwar anxiety and uncertainty over what to expect when the wartime immigration deceleration resumed its earlier dimensions. Thanks to a steady supply of war-related articles throughout the conflict, *Post* readers were fully aware of the physical destruction, political upheaval, and social disorder occurring in Europe. In the “Comment on the Week” segment of a February 1919 issue, the unnamed editorial contributor introduces the primary catalyst for the anti-immigration stance. Acknowledging that “just now there is no immigration worth mentioning,” like many others, this author worries that conditions in Europe will initiate a surge of immigration to the United States, guessing that the “situation over there...may well, ere long, make a great many people want to come to America. Some of them, fleeing from Bolshevik oppression at home, we can welcome. Others, interested in extending Bolshevik oppression abroad, we do not want on any terms and should not admit.”<sup>10</sup>

Also appearing in a February 1919 issue is an article entitled “Stop Immigration for Ten Years.” The author, William Roscoe Thayer, expands on Europe’s dire condition and foretells the negative impact this will have on the type of European emigrants one might expect to see in the near future. “Europe is to-day in a turmoil over Bolshevism” he writes, “having overspread and throttled Russia it menaces Central Europe...The social insurgents have gone into all countries, and under different names they stand as a magazine of explosives which a match may touch off.” With this in mind, he questions whether it is wise to allow immigrants to flow in unchecked, which would surely “bring us the social rebels of Europe in larger and larger numbers”<sup>11</sup> Emerson Hough adds his judgment on Europe’s condition, and claims certain knowledge that the people of Europe, “worn out and impoverished by war” are yearning to come to America. “No doubt” he adds, “many millions of Turks, Armenians, Czecho-Slovaks, Jugo-Slavs, Italians, Scandinavians, and others also, would not mind taking a shot at life in America, the land of easy opportunity and of general welcome, whether to the vigorous

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<sup>9</sup> Isaac F. Marcossou, “Switzerland, the Economic Buffer State,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 32 (February 8, 1919): 56.

<sup>10</sup> “Comment on the Week: Immigration,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 32 (February 8, 1919): 75.

<sup>11</sup> William Roscoe Thayer, “Stop Immigration for Ten Years,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 34 (February 22, 1919): 22.

and useful or to the dead-broke and undesirable.”<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Roberts shares this sense of certainty about the future of European emigration, claiming that “the people of every country in Europe are yammering and howling to be allowed to come to America.” He warns that “the desire of these people to come to America in great numbers will be as keen for many years to come. The smartest and the most cunning and frequently the most resourceful among them are the Bolshevik agitators.”<sup>13</sup>

In a telling indication of America’s changing attitude toward immigration, Hough reflects on the mood of ten years earlier when “such an article as the recent one in this periodical suggesting that we bar immigration for ten years would have been met with iciness.” In his estimation, such an overtly anti-immigration sentiment “would have been received with a fury of execration from every self-seeking politician and every self-seeking foreigner within and without our gates.”<sup>14</sup>

As the initial panic over revolutionary ideas and agitators from Europe subsided, *Post* writers continued their vilification of central and southern Europeans, focusing instead on how the racial and cultural background of “new immigrants” meant most of them would never become truly “Americanized.” In dozens of instances the various authors question the idea of America as a “mythical melting pot.”<sup>15</sup> Lorimer is the first to cast doubt on this idea in February 1919, surmising that “the melting pot will end up as a garbage pail” if a new flood of foreigners arrives before the country has a chance to sort out the “mass of undigested aliens” already here.<sup>16</sup> Other writers latched on to the concept and the melting pot earned a recurring role as the star in their metaphorical commentary. For example, many writers contend that the melting pot is full of “indigestible lumps,” these lumps being unassimilated aliens in their separate communities which are “in need of straining.”<sup>17</sup> Some envision the melting pot becoming overwhelmed by the sheer number of new immigrants and boiling over until conditions in the United States become “the replica of conditions in Europe.”<sup>18</sup>

Alternatively, other contributors predict that allowing the pot to boil over with foreigners of all “distinctions of race, creed, or color” will sweep the nation toward “a racial abyss” eventually ending in the extinction of “the type of native American of

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<sup>12</sup> Emerson Hough, “A Fool’s Paradise,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 44 (May 3, 1919): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth L. Roberts, “Guests from Italy,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 8 (August 21, 1920): 130.

<sup>14</sup> Hough, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Lorimer, “The Great American Myth,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 45 (May 7, 1921): 20.

<sup>16</sup> Lorimer, “Courage and Common Sense,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 33 (February 15, 1919): 20.

<sup>17</sup> “On Being a Bourgeois,” *Saturday Evening Post* 191, no. 47 (May 24, 1919): 53; Roberts, “The Rising Irish Tide,” *Saturday Evening Post* 192, no. 33 (February 14, 1920): 3.

<sup>18</sup> Alonzo Englebert Taylor, “Views of a Layman on Bolshevism,” *Saturday Evening Post* 192, no. 23 (December 6, 1919): 4.

Colonial descent”; in other words, “self-extermination.”<sup>19</sup> In November 1921, Lorimer confidently forecasts that “the day is dawning when the Myth of the Melting Pot will be relegated to the limbo of forgotten fallacies.”<sup>20</sup>

It appears that this anticipated day came in January 1923, when famous promoter of pseudo-scientific racial theories and frequent contributor to the *Post*, Lothrop Stoddard, announced “the shibboleth of the melting pot is today pretty well discredited.”<sup>21</sup> Stoddard’s theory basically argues that there are three racial types existing in Europe that have remained distinct from one another for thousands of years and that the physical and intellectual differences between these races can explain all of history.

The theories promoted by Lothrop Stoddard and writers who adhered to the same pseudoscience that touted the inherent superiority of the white, Caucasian, or Nordic race infiltrated the arguments presented in essentially every article covering immigration restriction during the period. The pieces written by Kenneth L. Roberts surpassed all others both in quantity and in expressions of racial hostility.

Lorimer assigned Roberts to tour Europe with specific instructions to focus on how postwar conditions might affect immigration to the United States. In his first piece dispatched from Europe in February 1920, Roberts confirms his and Lorimer’s mission, writing “what our immigration will be during the next few years is problematical; and it is partly for the purpose of delving into this hazy problem that I am wandering through the highways and byways of Europe.”<sup>22</sup> From then, Roberts became a prolific contributor to the immigration debate in the *Post*; Barely a month went by without the magazine featuring at least one of his articles during the early 1920s.

Even more than Lorimer, Roberts is responsible for educating the readers in the fundamentals of the *Post*’s argument for immigration restriction. He supplies his audience with compelling and often entertaining accounts and descriptions of Europe and its potential emigrants, all the while maintaining a candidly negative angle. The central themes of his argument remain constant—if reading all of his articles in succession, he grows quite redundant—underscoring his ultimate purpose to bring more Americans onto the *Post*’s side of the debate. The following excerpt is typical of his writings and succinctly captures the essence of the overall argument:

“The new immigration is far worse than the old. The Slavs and the Latins, who comprise the new immigration, are for the most part illiterate and unskilled, with a low standard of living and a standard of morality that could walk under a Sheraton highboy without disarranging its hair.

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<sup>19</sup> Lorimer, “The Great American Myth,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 45 (May 7, 1921): 20; Lorimer, “Self-Extermination,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 47 (May 21, 1921): 20.

<sup>20</sup> Lorimer, “Ellis Island Sob Stuff,” *Saturday Evening Post* 194, no. 22 (November 26, 1921): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, “Lo, The Poor American,” *Saturday Evening Post* 195, no. 28 (January 6, 1923): 58.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, “The Rising Irish Tide,” *Saturday Evening Post* 192, no. 33 (February 14, 1920): 3.

The old immigration belonged to the same racial stock as the native Americans, and could be easily assimilated; whereas the new immigration belongs to a different racial stock, and does not mix with the native Americans. The new immigrants live by themselves in cities, prefer to retain the manners and customs of the countries from which they came, and have no idea of living permanently in America and of becoming American citizens."<sup>23</sup>

Roberts peddles all kinds of disastrous consequences that would result if the government allowed immigration from central and southern Europe to continue unrestricted. In his gloomy prognostications America would suffer from an increase in the numbers of the criminal class, an overcrowded labor market, a decrease in wages, political turbulence among the working class, the spread of anarchistic and Bolshevistic ideas, an outbreak of contagious diseases, the failure of public schools, and a lowered standard of living for everyone.<sup>24</sup> Because the connection isn't immediately clear, Roberts had to devote a lot of effort to explaining how unrestricted immigration would lower the standard of living. The following passage from an article called "The Goal of the Central Europeans," published in November 6, 1920, demonstrates the elaborate calculation involved in his reasoning and is representative of the explanation he provides in most of his pieces:

Their standards of living in their home countries were as low as any standard of living could possibly be. If it had been any lower it would have ceased to be a standard, and would have become a hole or socket. The immigrants brought many of these standards with them, and clung to them determinedly in America. No matter how meager their wages might be they lived on them handily and saved money, which they sent back home...great numbers of men, accustomed all their lives to living on starvation rations, come to America and take jobs at low wages and then, in their determination to save money, crowd into wretched quarters and live in squalor and darkness on a fraction of the money that an American workman must spend in order to live decently. Such a proceeding lowers the standard of living in America."<sup>25</sup>

The standard of living issue surfaced as one of the planks in the Republican platform of 1920. The platform states that the standard of living for a nation is one of "its most precious possessions, and the preservation and elevation of those standards is the first duty of our Government." In order to ensure that the American standard of

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<sup>23</sup> Roberts, "Guests from Italy," 10.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, "The Rising Irish Tide," *Saturday Evening Post* 192, no. 33 (February 14, 1920): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts, "What Central Europeans Want," *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 19 (August 21, 1920): 12.

living remained high, Republicans vowed to limit the number of foreigners allowed into the country at any one time, so as not to “exceed that which can be assimilated with reasonable rapidity” and, as an additional safeguard, “to favor immigrants whose standards are similar to ours.”<sup>26</sup> While the Republican Party composed this platform several months after the *Post* first mentioned standard of living as an immigration issue, this does not prove that the magazine was an influence. However, it does show that the *Post* reflected the mindset of a significant portion of Americans and as Roberts continued to explain the problem in his articles—going into much more detail later—the *Post* provided Americans with the connection between standard of living and immigration that is missing from the Republican’s platform message.

Of all the unwelcome outcomes that *Post* writers imagined unrestricted immigration would bring, the threat of racial mixing towered over the rest, becoming an increasingly accepted topic of discussion throughout the period. The racial argument consisted of two concepts; the first and most common theory in the early days of the movement maintained that the racial and cultural background of central and southern Europeans was just too different from that of “native-born” Americans, therefore, it would take generations before these foreigners could become “Americanized.” Lorimer describes the situation in hopeless terms: “The rank and file of these unassimilated aliens still live mentally in the ghetto or as peasants on the great estates” he writes, “they are serfs to tradition—narrow, suspicious, timid, brutal, rapacious—easily persuaded by their fears and blindly led through their ignorance.” When it comes to understanding the essential spirit of America, Lorimer believes “license is as close as the mass of these eastern Europeans can approximate to the idea of liberty.” In contrast, he writes that the success of the nation “has been due to two factors—America and Americans” thanks to the natural advantages that “bred a peculiarly happy and prosperous race.”<sup>27</sup>

In her series about the new political role of American women, “Encore Les Femmes!” Elizabeth Frazer examines the racial differences further and determines that the new immigrants, “as human material, as nation makers and builders, were as different from our first forefathers as can well be imagined. They did not possess the same stamina, moral resistance or intellectual caliber as those early leaders who exiled themselves for the sake of an ideal.” She concedes that some immigrants are “good nation-building stuff” but adds “sometimes they [are]—trash.”<sup>28</sup>

The second part of the racial argument gained in recognition over the course of the five-year period, but in time became the paramount issue that elicited passionate

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<sup>26</sup> “Republican Party Platform of 1920,” The American Presidency Project, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273373>

<sup>27</sup> Lorimer, “Self-Preservation,” *Saturday Evening Post* 192, no. 32 (February 7, 1920): 28.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, “Encore Les Femmes!” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 2 (July 10, 1920): 13.



engagement from the *Post* writers. Of course, Kenneth Roberts always seemed comfortable with the subject, depicting the threat in a November 1920 issue as one of two possibilities; either “the United States will develop large numbers of separate racial groups” or it “will be populated by a new composite race entirely different from the present American people.” Roberts takes for granted that his audience shares his fears, adding without further clarification “that the latter outlook is one that should fill every American with shooting pains.”<sup>29</sup>

In an April 1921 issue, Lorimer divulges a glimpse into his recent choices for light reading by pulling a quote from Dr. Lothrop Stoddard expressing that the admission of aliens should “be regarded just as solemnly as the begetting of children, for the racial effect is essentially the same.” This issue marks the beginning of a flirtation with eugenics to which Lorimer alludes sporadically throughout his editorials. According to him, “Congress has it easily within its power to use the wise restriction of immigration as an effective and beneficent method of world eugenics.”<sup>30</sup>

In the article “Checking the Alien Tide,” Isaac F. Marcossion reports on the results of a nationwide interviewing campaign to see what Americans were thinking about when it came to immigration. Conducted during the first half of 1923, the survey reveals that when it came to the earlier belief in the American melting pot, Americans were “beginning to revise the old sentimental feeling.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout the campaign, Marcossion found Americans who supported the eugenics argument, saying “we should take the same care to secure high quality in our human breeding stock as we do in the breeding stock of the lower animals.”<sup>32</sup> He estimates that nine out of every ten men interviewed “were emphatic in wanting a return of the old type of Nordic immigrants” and formulates a composite expression from those he gathered in which the people declare “We have enough, and perhaps more than enough, of the peoples from Southern Europe. The Near and Far East, Russia and Poland. They are too often undesirable from a political standpoint and do not amalgamate with our nationality.” In summary, Marcossion affirms that “the whole national point of view has undergone a healthy change. Save among sentimentalists the tendency everywhere is for drastic restriction in numbers and with it a selective system that will not only weed out the undesirables at the source of supply, but apply the acid test of fitness to assimilate our ideals of life and work.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts, “What Central Europeans Want,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 19 (November 6, 1920): 59.

<sup>30</sup> Lorimer, “The Burbanks of a People,” *Saturday Evening Post* 193, no. 44 (April 30, 1921): 20.

<sup>31</sup> Marcossion, “Checking the Alien Tide,” *Saturday Evening Post* 195, no. 45 (May 5, 1923): 18.

<sup>32</sup> Marcossion, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Marcossion, 166.

The *Post's* fixation on the immigration question reaches its conclusion with the June 28, 1924 issue in which Lorimer announces that the Immigration Act of 1924 had become law. He praises it for rectifying the "injustice of the former percentage law" that determined quotas based on the 1910 census, thus reflecting the increased eastern and southern European population in America. Instead, this law used the 1890 census which favored immigrants from northern and western Europe. Lorimer identifies it as "the most important and far-reaching legislation adopted in our time." In fact, he goes so far as to call it "our second Declaration of Independence, for it reaffirms our right to determine whom we shall let into the United States and whom we shall turn away."<sup>34</sup> It is no wonder that he so strongly approved of the new law, as most of its provisions matched the desires directly expressed in the magazine since the end of the war. The evolution of these views expressed in the *Post* during the period functions as a valuable instrument to measure the changing mood of the people when it came to immigration and offers the ability to gain insight and track the developments that led Americans to reject the time-honored perception of their country as the great melting pot of the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Lorimer, "So Far, So Good," *Saturday Evening Post* 196, no. 52 (June 28, 1924): 24.

