



Lew Louderback, here with his wife, Ann, is the author of a forthcoming book on the dilemma of the fat person in a society that worships slimmness. They live in New York.

## More people should be **FAT**

By Lew Louderback

**F**at, we are told, is ugly. It's self-indulgent, therefore immoral. It's certainly un-American—for the President's Council on Physical Fitness has declared war on it. Schoolchildren are taught that overweight individuals eat to assuage their feelings of inferiority, insecurity, sexual inadequacy. Fat is unhealthy; in fact, suicidal. I concede that all this can make sense for naturally thin people. But these views are nonsense when they are applied to people who are honestly fat.

Americans, as a Yale physician put it recently, are "prisoners of a culture that worships thinness." Never before has so large a minority—an estimated 20 million fat people, about one out of 10 inhabitants—accepted the majority's view of themselves with so little protest. Never before have so many people been browbeaten into slimming down toward an arbitrary image (an estimated 10 million Americans are on diets). America's overweight population can with justice echo Falstaff's anguished cry: "They would melt me out of my fat drop by drop."

There's something distinctly unhealthy, even sinister, in the anti-fat madness that has swept this country in recent years. American culture, for all its liberal ideas, seems intent on forcing a single acceptable form of body build on everyone, including those whom nature has endowed differently. The pressure to conform physically is intense. Any overweight person can confirm this—and I speak here from personal experience, being well over the "norm" for my height and build, just as my wife is. It would seem that the affluent so-

ciety has finally spawned its Reformation, and that instead of "roundheads" we now have "thinbellies" making life unpleasant for the rest of us.

Most Americans, being devotees and victims of the slimmness cult, do not care when fat people are subjected to persecution. A 260-pound New York City civil engineer is told to lose weight if he wants to keep his job; New York policemen who check on parking-meter payments are ordered to avoid overweight, and half a dozen are fired when they fail to do so; in other cities, policemen are instructed to reduce or quit; a recent survey shows that colleges turn down overweight students in favor of slim students. If such discrimination happened because of race, religion, or almost any other personal factor, the protest would be fantastic. But when people are persecuted because they are fat, not a word is spoken in their defense.

A fat man's natural inclination is to blame the entertainment, fashion and dietetic food industries, to see some massive conspiracy. But the motivating force, in my opinion, comes from some deeper level—perhaps a Puritanical reaction to affluence, and also to an ugly snobbery. Non-fattening foods are expensive. Starchy staples like beans, spaghetti and potatoes aren't. The waistline has in some ways replaced the accent as a handy guide to class. I'm also convinced that the craze for slimmness and the hate for fatness are related to the increasing tribalization of contemporary life, to the growing power of the group over the individual.

There's more than a hint of the Nazis' *Kraft*

*durch freude* in our Government's physical-fitness program; a reminiscent whiff of the McCarthy era in the injustices perpetrated on the fat citizen and the reluctance of the population at large to speak out against them. Weight reducing, I submit—and some doctors agree—has now reached the proportions of a mass neurosis. It has become so "in" to be thin that fat people's civil rights are repeatedly and openly violated. Take, as an example, the recent conclusion by a Harvard School of Public Health study that college-admissions officers and high-school teachers who recommend students to colleges usually discriminate against the fat student. Reports of the study were widely circulated in the press. Yet no editorials appeared defending the fat students' equal right to an education. *The New York Times* headed its story this way: *College Admission Hint: Lose Weight*. The meaning is plain: Conform or suffer the consequences.

The situation in the job market is even more obnoxious. Any fat man knows that the overweight executive has virtually no chance at all of securing a decent position. Even if he gets past the employment agencies, he'll find that personnel directors are reluctant to hire him. It's part of the slimmness insanity: Overweight individuals, it seems, might tarnish the "corporate image." An editor of my acquaintance recently settled on what he considered the perfect secretarial applicant, only to be overruled by his boss on these grounds: "We already have too many fat people on that floor."

Cases like this rarely come to light, of course. The applicant is formally rejected for other reasons, and is usually unaware that weight had anything to do with it. The person who makes the adverse decision will often mutter something about a "weight problem," but may not even be aware that he is prejudiced against fat people. The fat, we are told, are not a true minority. They are not permanently imprisoned by the physical characteristic that makes them different; they can always join the majority by becoming thin. That's what we are told—but it simply isn't true. It is time for the public to learn the facts, and for the American Civil Liberties Union to bring out picket lines in defense of the persecuted fat. All that the fat person can do, at great personal sacrifice and daily torture, is attempt to "pass" as a thin person.

The fact that millions of fat Americans live such charades in order to survive, that they are forced to lead what a nutritionist has called "lives of diet desperation," is the most tragically wasteful aspect of our slimmness mania. My wife and I are refugees from this insanity. Both of us are, by nature, fat. We didn't know this—or at least refused to admit it—until a few years ago. Instead, we fought against our natural condition through most of our adult lives, compulsively following each new diet, gulping down appetite-depressant pills, getting ourselves injected with thyroid extract, filling our shrunken bellies with tasteless low-calorie drinks and foul-tasting dietary supplements.

It didn't seem too high a price to pay. We were young career people, and our professional and social lives depended on our maintaining at least a semblance of thinness. The trouble was, we rarely maintained thinness for more than six months at a time. Then our rigid self-control would snap, and off we'd go. The result was an endless battle. We never knew from one month to the next what our sizes would be. We spent our money on new clothes, and having our old ones taken in and then let out again.

The psychological toll was terrible. Stringent on-again, off-again dieting shattered our reflexes