

JUL 5 1979

U.S. Becoming Nation of Skeptics

BEFORE television, one of the first things children learned to read was the sign: "Railroad crossing, Look out for the cars!" They also learned the rhyming riddle: "Can you spell that without any R's?"

But thousands of them forgot the warning and lost their lives because they didn't watch out for the trains.

It seems to be human nature to doubt warnings. Many find it hard to resist testing the truth of "Wet Paint" notices.

A few years ago, "credibility gap" became a popular catch-phrase, but doubting did not begin then nor did it end when the term was displaced by other expressions, acronyms and scare words.

By law, warnings are printed in each advertisement and on each package of cigarettes, but being aware of health risks doesn't keep people from smoking nor stop the government from taxing them for it.

Suggestions have been made that similar warnings be required on alcoholic beverages, but this wouldn't discourage drinkers.

Warnings of the hazards of addiction, loss of jobs and health, loss of

capabilities, integrity and money haven't stopped foolish young people from experimenting with marijuana and other drugs.

There can be such a thing as overkill with warnings. If we observed all warnings about hazards contained in foods we eat, we might starve. Dangers do exist, but many scare stories are based upon flimsy, superficial research for political or publicity reasons.

When people observe that the population is increasing and living longer, with many regular eaters thriving to the point of obesity, food and diet warnings may be relegated to the subconscious.

Unfulfilled promises cause the public to be cynical of any political statements, including warnings of inflation and recession.

Contradictory declarations by various authorities have confused the energy situation so that many people doubt a shortage actually exists. They know for sure, however, that neither higher prices nor the Department of Energy will make more gasoline available.

It might be better to warn of se-

vere weather and not have it than to risk being caught in it. Even so, panicky meteorologists have cried "Storm!" so many times there seems to be a tendency to ignore the TV predictions. This could be fatal, if a tornado hits.

In a recent article, "The Doubting American," U.S. News & World Report attributed erosion of credibility to such things as muckraking, scientific advancements, decline in religious beliefs, failure of mass education to produce an enlightened society and our inability to curb greed and violence. There might be other causes:

A cartoon portrayed a pollster interviewing a man with a glass in his hand, who responded: "I am nonsectarian, apolitical, and amoral, and any resemblance of any opinion of mine to the opinion of anyone living or dead is purely coincidental!"

That may be what we are coming to. We are being asked to believe so many things that are not so that our reaction is to be skeptical about almost everything.