

# Affluent America's Costly Christmas

THE GAMUT of costly Christmas presents being carted out of shopping centers reflect a degree of affluence in America that belies persistent political claims of hard times.

Readily available credit at 18 percent interest makes it possible for us to buy nearly anything we want without going through self-discipline of saving up for it.

The great middle class has historically predominated in the United States, but it seems to be dwindling. Fortune magazine says "the broad middle class, defined as families with incomes between \$15,000 and \$35,000 per year (in constant 1982 dollars) fell from 51 percent in 1973 to 44 percent last year. The extremes on either end, those making less than \$15,000 or more than \$35,000, grew as a percentage of all families."

This affluence is reflected clearly in allowances received by children. The Wall Street Journal looked into this and reported that 15-year-olds receive \$7.50 to \$12.50 per week. Others get from \$70 to \$250 a

month. This may be hard for parents who grew up on 25 or 50 cents a week to understand but they seem to be paying these amounts, if they can afford it.

A Donnelley Marketing Information study reported a few weeks ago that the average household income in the United States is \$20,031 and that if your household income from all sources has reached \$50,000 you are in the top 6.4 percent for income.

Since July U.S. senators have been paid \$69,800 a year and they may earn another \$20,940 for speeches and articles, making \$90,740 per annum. Voters would like to be their peers in income.

"Some people think American aristocracy died out 200 years ago when inherited titles were banned by the Constitution, but that definitely is not so," writes Martin Stansfield in a copyrighted article in U.S. News & World Report (Dec. 12, 1983). He adds that aristocracy is very much alive and growing — socially, economically, politically.

Some people try to hid their

wealth, while others flaunt it. Million dollar houses and the number of expensive sedans on the streets are evidence that more people have money or can borrow it.

A science publication recently stated that for us to live in the same fashion we do today without any help from machines, every person in the United States would require at least 80 servants. Some well-to-do people have machines and servants, too.

An academy in Florida is advertising for placement of graduates of its school for butlers, defined as "a gentleman's gentleman or personal assistant." They're for ladies, too.

The privilege of borrowing money by mail or by machines in department stores and supermarkets is spreading. However, the sale of souvenir coins at premium prices may be the most pretnetious display of our wealth.

For \$28 you can buy an uncirculated silver dollar in a blue gift box. It will buy a dollar's worth of something.