

On Pilgrimage - May 1957

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Summary: Witnesses the ugly harassment of the inter-racial farming community, Koinonia, during an extended visit. She shares in the daily work and is shot at while standing watch late at night. Says integration will move forward as others take up similar work. Keywords: civil rights, blacks, African-Americans, segregation (DDLW #722).

First letter

It snowed and rained down through New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, but when I woke up on the bus which was carrying me to Georgia, the sun was shining brightly and all the trees and shrubs were flowering. Wisteria, azalea, roses, irises, forsythia – there was a riot of color and the air was mild. It was as though I were on a vacation, instead of on the rather gruesome mission of spending the last two weeks of Lent, passion week and holy week, with the beleaguered community, Koinonia, in south Georgia where there has been dynamiting, machine gunning, isolated shots from high powered rifles, not to speak of the long continuing economic boycott which has meant they have had to give up their flock of five thousand chickens, and the marketing of many other products which made this community of sixty people living on 1,000 acres self supporting.

I was met at the bus station by Clarence Jordan and his little son, Lennie, and we arrived at the farm in time for supper. A representative from the National Council of Churches and from the Southern Baptist Conference came to visit, and later there was a meeting at which Clarence gave a report of his northern visit to Pittsburgh, Washington and New York. We got to bed at ten. The night before there had been the sound of gunfire, and it was found later that five hogs had been shot, one of them seriously. It was part of the general harassment of the farm. I was so tired that I did not stay up to read. The windows of the house where I had the guest room had light shades, but the curtains could not be drawn, and shots had been fired through three houses already. I could not help but think of that when I saw how close to the road we were. During the meeting, two of the men who had been standing watch were very alert, I noticed, and got up and went out several times to check on cars whose headlights could easily be

seen from the community room. If a car moved too slowly, they were checking it to see if it were going to stop. There had been one house burnt to the ground, and a friendly neighbor would have lost a barn if the two fires started had not been caught in time. Two watches are kept at the farm, one from eight until twelve, and the next from twelve until after three. That is the longest watch of course. Some of the women take turns on the early watch, and it consists in sitting in a parked car on one side or another of the highway and checking the cars that passed. It is easy to see if anyone stops to cut the fences (they have been cut twelve times) to let the hogs out, or if an attempt is made again to fire one of the buildings. Tracer bullets had set fire to the curtains in one house.

I fell asleep instantly and knew nothing until six thirty the next morning when the new day began. I had come to help so my duties were in the kitchen. I helped Mary Jackson make real southern corn bread, and peeled onions and carrots and ground up the latter in a marvelous machine called a Kitchen Aid for salad. The mill to grind flour and corn meal was blown to bits in the dynamiting of the roadside stand but they have an old coffee grinder, which I will work tomorrow to grind some more corn meal. They raise their own wheat and corn of course, not to speak of milk, eggs, honey, butter, vegetables, beef, hogs, chickens, ducks, peanuts, pecans, sweet potatoes, etc. I had a little taste of stoop labor when I went out to the garden to pick radishes for the community dinner and one of the men came in later to say that there was a big job to do in the strawberry beds keeping up with those that were ripening.

After cleaning up, there was time to rest for an hour, from two to three, and there was a meeting then for a short period to discuss the work program, the men so far behind with chores. It was decided that the school children could be used to bring the cows in from the pasture for milking in the morning, and the kindergarten or nursery group could be used to lead them back from the barn yard to the meadow after they had been milked. Another boy could care for the goats, and they would have to cut down on the rabbits since the boycott has meant an end to the marketing of them. The women, what with the planting season under way, would have to take turns too to stand watch.

All morning the men were fixing the bull calves to fatten for beef cattle, and one kindergarten child said that now the bull calves could not help the mothers to make more calves.

I am still tired from my thirty-six hours on the bus, so now, nine o'clock, I am off to bed. The moon is shining brightly over the fields and I pray there will be no "deeds of darkness" this night. The psalms are a very present help in time of trouble. I will not be afraid for the terror by night nor for the arrow that flieth by day. The only arrows around here are those of the children who practice after school at a big target. But I have seen the marks of the gunshot in the houses, and in the house next door where one shot was fired through the children's room, one of the guests built a big barricade of wooden faggots which the bullets could not pierce. None of the other houses have been vacated. Only in those by the side of the road they do not sleep in the rooms nearest the road,

which is only a few paces away.

Second Letter

Yesterday Florence Jordan and her little son Lennie and I drove in an enormous International Truck with ten speeds and hard to manipulate, for thirty miles down to Albany to see if we could buy seed peanuts. Koinonia needs two tons of them, and she went to the bank to get cash so that she could buy them, paying cash in case the slowness and publicity of a check would make them hesitate to sell. But though we tried Leesburg and Albany, we did not get peanuts. In Leesburg they said they had to supply their regular customers and in Albany they did not have the proper kind.

In Smithfield, in front of the seed store, we had an adventure. A man dressed in a business suit came out of a store screaming incoherently, and followed Florence into the store. She had time to learn that the owner of the store was in Florida and left at once, while the man went on raging a hideous sight. He called us dirty Communist whores and nigger lovers – the usual phrases – and said that he would see to it that no one would sell to us. He shouted that we should be driven out of town. We left quickly, of course, before a crowd could gather – not that you ever see any evidences of a crowd in these little southern towns. Before we reached Leesburg, the man was following us. Florence had gone into a feed mill and had been greeted courteously and told they had to take care of their own, and was about to leave when we saw him again, striding into the mill. All around us were huge trucks full of seed peanuts, and in one of them a man was doing a sampling job plunging a long stick down into the depths of the load and bringing up, as in a syringe, the sample to put in a pail. We were able to make our escape from our pursuer and were soon on our way to Albany, an airport town twelve miles further south. How strange it is that it is the military that brings in this case, with its men from all parts of the country, with its own policy of integration, the more Christian attitude! What a strange paradox!

We drove through cypress swamps and I was amazed at their grotesque beauty, the huge bolls and the base, the tall slim trees with their sparse evergreen tops. Some were hung with Spanish moss. Standing here and there in the swamps were beautiful white cranes, and some were flying, some landing with their two long legs braced forward. There were red winged blackbirds like dark blossoms on the stumps of trees.

We also passed some groups of prisoners from one of the county prison camps. The uniform is now a black jacket, white pants with a black stripe down the side seam, a distinguished garb in both senses of the word. It is a far cry from the prison stripes of twenty years ago. There are no chains on the road gangs any more. Every bit of publicity – every expression of public censure has had its effect. Terrible acts come to light now and again, i.e., when the prisoners in Georgia last year broke their own legs, and in Louisiana, cut the tendons of their

heels, to make a mass protest of self-inflicted suffering to call attention to their long continued agony. But this has not been the result of a policy of official brutality, but of individual guards who made the prisoners' lives a hell on earth.

Later. It rained during the long ride home. I had supper with the Jordans. The pattern here is for the individual families to eat their breakfast and suppers in their own homes, and eat their dinner at noon in common. There are three Negro couples here, and one Negro family with eight children who had to move to Hidden Springs, Neshanic, New Jersey, where with the Atkinsons, a branch of Koinonia is now started. The three Negro couples include the Nelsons who have come to give their physical and moral support to their work.

They need twenty ton of fertilizer, they say, before they do their spring planting. This is another part of the boycott. One of the Georgia neighbors, who says he is not a fanatic on the subject, said that this lack may lead them to explore methods of organic farming. They have cattle, cows, hogs, chickens, though they are being forced to liquidate the last two items. Clarence is a graduate of Georgia Agricultural College, but such courses tend to teach business agriculture rather than subsistence agriculture. The very word subsistence sounds like scratching for a living on depleted soil and further deterioration. But it does not necessarily follow. In the face of a boycott such as this when they cannot raise what they need to sell, to pay taxes and installments on the machinery and on the land, they have to depend on gifts from well wishers all over the country. But they were raising such an abundance before the trouble started (after the Supreme Court decision) that they could supply poorer neighbors with milk, eggs, sweet potatoes, etc. Certainly a community can be a land flowing with milk and honey, and that overflow reaches all around to those who are not willing to embrace the discipline of living together and working together.

Friday morning. The feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin. I had thought I would suffer exceedingly at missing the services on these last holy weeks of Lent. But it is quite the opposite. It is more important to live the Passion than to be celebrating it in attendance at services. I was always disturbed by my own joy at this time of the year, a joy which was apt to be more natural than supernatural, – a joy in the spring, in the dawn of the new season, when the winter is over and gone and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in the land. A joy in visiting repositories, in seeing Easter bonnets which were as gay with flowers as the altars, the sense of newness which comes with the change of garments, the putting off of the garments of winter and mourning and the putting on of the new – “behold all things are become new.”

Down here, all nature rejoices indeed, but last night cars, three of them, crawled by, turning headlights, floodlights, on the place, picking out the night watchmen who stood guard to see that there were no fences cut, no fires. There is no way

to prevent the shootings, but one can try to prevent the damage threatened to what has not yet been destroyed.

Third letter

Saturday noon. Last night I was shot at for the first time in my life. They sat up for fear of fires, and being short of manpower, Elizabeth and I watched from 12 to 3 A.M. She with her accordian, to while away the night watches with hymns, and me with my breviary, remembering the Trappists rising at two.

Friday nights are bad nights, many cars passing. Usually we get out to let them see people are on hand. But this time, at one thirty, we were sitting in the first and second seats of a station wagon, under a floodlight, under a huge oak tree, and a car slowed up as it passed and peppered the car with shot. We heard sounds of repeated shots – a regular gunfire, and we were too startled to duck our heads.

I was shaken of course. There was no other sound from the slowed down car which gathered speed and disappeared down the road. It was not as though it were kids out on a lark. The black silence, the sound of shots, so crackling in the still night. These things are ominous.

It was the first time either of us had been under fire.

One of the men and one woman heard and hastened out to see if we were all right. Ora Browne left me her coat – I was shaking both from fright and the cold night air.

We continued our watch until three but nothing else happened.

What lessons we learn! Here I was wondering at last week's newspaper account of the release of a priest from a prison of Red China, who stated that he could never trust anyone again, not even the reporters who were questioning him. And here I am, after two little experiences of hatred and violence, looking upon each car, each encounter, with suspicion! Better to be like the children – there are still ten or so little ones here, although 12 have moved north to Hidden Springs Community, New Jersey – and go quietly to sleep each night without fear, trusting in our guardian angels. But if they want to keep watch, I must help. It is what I came for – to share in fear and suffering.

Fourth Letter:

Monday – April 15. Since Friday night there has been quiet. Saturday night the only incidents were two drunks driving up to the place and arguing with those who were standing watch. They were southerners so it was lucky it was not Juanita and Wally Nelson. Clarence came back and felt that we should have notified the sheriff of the shots. I was just as glad we did not. Clarence said

that the law enforcement agencies claimed the community was not cooperating with them and made that statement to the Grand Jury and that was part of the Grand Jury findings. We should have telephoned at once, he said. But Ora Browne who had run out at the sound of the shots had said “let’s not do anything unless they come back again.”

The fact of the matter is that this simple Baptist community of families can not believe yet what is happening to them. Here they are, ordained Ministers, most of them, of the white, Protestant, fundamentalist faith, the ruling class of the south. For generations it has been the Negro who has suffered physically, been beaten, raped, tortured, killed, his home burned. This cannot happen to them.

There is enough fear here to make them put a watch on every night, from dark till twelve, and from twelve to three. Elizabeth who was with me the other night said she was only afraid when she saw the cavalcade of seventy cars drive up to the place that Sunday afternoon when they were asked to move. But one night when the fiery Cross was burned in front of the house of a Negro, one of the Negro members of the community fled to the fields, feeling that it was not his wife and children who were in danger, but himself. It is the younger Negroes who are staying, in spite of the pleas of their relatives.

But it is hard for these white southerners to really believe that anything can happen to them. The economic boycott is more real – they are more anxious to safeguard their property from confiscation, from foreclosure, more anxious to restore the insurance to their property to provide against future damage to property, to machinery. So the danger to their bodies seems remote. In spite of the shootings.

Sunday. Palm Sunday. Last night five young students from Goshen College in northern Indiana drove in to spend their Easter vacation here. One young married couple was among them, and we were interested to hear they were Mennonites, that a group of twelve couples were interested in starting a community also. Another carload will arrive, we believe tomorrow, the trips being financed by the Student Council. Sunday morning they decided to attend the Baptist Church, and drove me to the Catholic Church, St. Mary’s, which is served by the Franciscan Fathers, who also serve three missions. Our service was beautiful. There were booklets from St. John’s, Minnesota, in the pews, and the service began with the Blessing of the palms, and then a procession around the Church, which was surrounded by trees and flowering plants. There was a choir but not strong enough to lead the congregation when it was outdoors. The Mass was a low one, but the gospel was read by a group of men, taking the parts of the narrator, our Lord, and the high priests, Pilate, Judas, etc. it was beautifully done, and no one felt any sense of fatigue – there was no stirring on the part of the children but a reverent silence.

After Mass I went into the sacristy and introduced myself to Fr. Henry, who was of the New York province and himself from Brooklyn. He was much interested to hear of Koinonia, first hand, and invited me to breakfast with him, at the home of one of his parishioners. Since I had to meet my Mennonite friends at noon, when their services were over, we did not have too long a time to visit.

Pattern of life

The rising bell is at six thirty, breakfast is at seven. There are eight children going to the local grade school, and the bus comes for them at eight o'clock. There is difficulty on the bus but none in the school where the teachers are very kind. There was one Catholic family which has now moved to Florida who especially championed the cause of the Koinonia children, and one of the older children of that family protected them from harassment on the bus each day. At home in the community Iola Eustis takes charge of the nursery, which is a large apartment which was vacated by one of the families which moved north. The former nursery is now the storeroom. There are four in the nursery now. Eleven children moved north with the two families and five or six of those children were in the nursery. Iola had her hands full then, giving them their noonday meal, supervising their naps, taking them for walks. When school is out, the children return to their own homes, do chores (though they are as reluctant as most children), do their homework, play in the fields until supper which is again a meal in the home. The single people and childless couples eat in the community dining room. Although the families prepare their own breakfasts, getting their supplies from the community house, the dinner at night is prepared in the main kitchen and each family takes its needs. Naturally the family with seven children take much more than the family with two. There are the same inequalities; the same grumblings as there are any place else, but no one pays any attention. I took turns to eat with the different families, and heard the same remarks about chicken, rabbit, goat meat, greens, etc., that I hear from my own grandchildren at home. Sometimes the children make their entire meal on fruit or cereal and dash out to play and ignore the food on the table, and there is the usual criticism from those who do not have children, of lack of discipline, and what is the world coming to, with this willful present generation. There is grace before meals, said by the man of the house, but no other formal prayer. We do a great deal more praying at Peter Maurin Farm, with the Angelus, grace before meals, early Mass, and rosary and compline at night – all this in community, leaving out of account the private prayer of the individual members, some of whom spend a good deal of time in the Chapel.

I could not help but think that the people were more conscientious here about work, getting out into the fields, the laundry, the kitchen very promptly – no time wasted in discussion or reading. It is indeed a community of work, after all, whereas Peter Maurin Farm is more of a retreat house and rest house. Still, I think we at Peter Maurin Farm can examine our consciences on this business

of work, reading perhaps, Fr. Rembert Sorg's book, "The Theology of Manual Labor," as a reminder. If John gets those strawberry, rhubarb and asparagus plants in, not to speak of the tomato and cabbage to be transplanted, there is going to be a lot more stoop labor necessary on our farm.

I thought of these things as I sat out in the sun and hulled strawberries and got them ready for the deep-freeze the other afternoon.

There is so much work around here, that the time flies, and I could not write each day. So many things happen too, little things, but frightening. Yesterday Clarence Jordan was coming home from Americus, at high noon and as he drove alone in the station wagon, a pickup truck without a license suddenly cut in in front of him so close in its attempt to force him off the road, to wreck his car, that his fender was damaged and his car was all but turned over. As it was, he was pushed out on the shoulder of land, which extends a few feet on either side of the two-lane highway. On either side were deep ditches. When he came in he telephoned the sheriff but of course he was not believed. After the grand jury pronouncement only a little over a week ago, that Koinonia had dynamited itself, machine gunned and set fire to its own buildings for public support, and that it was in fact a communist front, there is little that can be said from this end that will be paid attention to by the law enforcement officers of the state. But they had claimed that they had not always been notified before, that Koinonia has not cooperated with them, and so he dutifully made his report.

In addition, the bags of pecans and the other packages which were being shipped out by post and freight office, were damaged by having turpentine sprinkled on them by persons unknown during the short time the driver of the car was in the post and freight offices.

Every noon the whole community has lunch together, and letters are read from all over the country from friends, letters, which are calculated to encourage and strengthen those who are here. I noticed while the letters were being read that the strain was telling on Clarence Jordan – his eyes were sad and tired and his face showed the terrible strain he has been under.

The fact of the matter is that he is the target. He is the minister, he is the founder of Koinonia, and it is his planning and vision which has kept things going since 1942. He has consistently tried to follow the teachings of Jesus, living the Gospel message of love of brother. The entire way of life of the community – the firm foundation of non-ownership, is a challenge to the capitalist system of America. If others followed the example of Clarence Jordan – if priests and ministers throughout the country set out with their flocks, to build up a new society within the shell of the old by the hard labor of their hands, an oasis where they would be common ownership and the responsibilities which went with that common ownership, the problems of tenant farming, sharecropping, day labor, peonage, destitution, debt, and so on, would be solved, for Negro, for white, for Mexican, for Puerto Rican, for all. There would be less absentee ownership, corporation farming. There would be the farming commune envisaged by Peter

Maurin as a solution to unemployment, old age, sickness, alienation of all kinds.

Not that we would have an earthly paradise. The poor we will always have with us, and that means the poor in soul and body. There are always going to be problems to face and such people as these at Koinonia are no Utopians. For the twelve years or so that they worked in peace on these acres, which increased from a few hundred to over a thousand, there were not many Negro families who joined them nor whites either. People reject the discipline. They want their wage no matter how paltry. They don't want to bear each other's burdens. Life is hard on the land. Everyone has to work hard. Mothers of families as well as the men. There are always guests to put up, extra cooking to do, (the cleaning, for instance, this afternoon of fifty chickens, fifteen of which were eaten for supper when ten extra guests arrived.) Jeanette has charge of the laundry. Margaret of the work crews, Iola of the nursery and Ora of the sick ones, since she is a trained nurse. The men do everything and the women too. There is never a time when one can settle down and say, "What is there to do?"

They have built their own homes and their own community house. The latter cost \$6,000 in materials and one of the homes, a very nice one, cost \$2,800. The women have a gift at home making and there is music and recreation for old and young. Two of the homes, which have small children, have good inlay linoleum on the floor, I noticed, and the Jordan home has the usual linoleum rug. They get what they need according to the funds on hand. I envy them their kitchen and laundry equipment, which certainly makes the work easier and more quickly done.

And now suddenly, this community which has worked hard, supported itself, was building the future, is confronted by this ugly terror, this policy of harassment.

What does it mean? It means first of all, that if others did likewise the racial policy of the south would be changed completely. (When Alma Johnson, a valiant young 18 year old Negro, married a year to a seventeen year old neighbor, was called before the grand jury and asked to testify as to his status, he spoke clearly and well. When he referred to the white family who had the next apartment above the community rooms, and he spoke of Margaret and Bill, he was caught up; "You call a white woman by her first name?" "They asked me to," he said simply.)

It is terrible to hear of how his mother came weeping and mourning and crying out for him to come home, not to live at Koinonia any more. She was thinking of Emmett Till, kidnapped, murdered and thrown in the river last year. It is terrible to think of another Negro head of family, fleeing like a hunted thing into the fields.

Second, it means that huge farms would be threatened – there would not be the labor pool if these ideas caught on.

Third, – there is an organizing campaign in the south, Negroes and whites are being organized in industries, in mills and mines and factories, and I suppose

eventually in the fields now that there has been a supreme court decision and integration is the law of the land, and now that AFL and CIO have combined forces, there will be more changes. People are raising their heads. There is growth. Whether or not Koinonia succeeds or fails, whether or not the families here move elsewhere, shaking the dust from their feet of this hostile town of Americus, this hostile country of Sumpter, integration of the races will continue.

“What we want to do,” Clarence Jordan says, “is simply the will of God. If He shows us we should move, we will move, but as up to now, our conviction is that we must stay. And how I’d like to forget about all this furor and get out there in those fields and plant a few tons of peanuts.”