

Peter Maurin Farm

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, June 1954, 2, 8.

Summary: Describes the progress in getting Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island up and running—building, planting, neighborly help, and summer camps for children from Harlem. Extols Christian Communism of the family on the land. (DDLW #670).

With the Bishop of Aberdeen's message on the need for the family-sized farm, we rejoice to report the progress of the Peter Maurin farm on Staten Island, within the limits of New York City, where Fr. Clarence Duffy is doing a job of restoring the soil and demonstrating his favorite thesis, that a family of normal Catholic size can live off the land on twenty acres or so, given a philosophy of work and the strength to carry it out.

As I write, Paul Yamamoto, a young fellow worker of six, is loading a home-made wheel barrow outside my window full of newly cut grass to feed the thirty or so rabbits that have been his and his mother's care all this past winter.

John Murray

Yesterday I visited our old friend John Murray who is undergoing an operation at Bellevue. His chart says he is seventy-six but one can scarcely believe it. When everyone else was talking tractor and horses when we first took over PM farm he got out and dug up the early kitchen garden, and then in an exuberance of generosity went to my daughter's a mile away and dug up a big patch for her. He has cemented our kitchen floor, two floors in the barn at Maryfarm, put cement covers on wells and cess pools, dug ditches, put in tubs and drainage and performed other Herculean labors in the last two years.

Constant Work

Where else but on the land is there constant work for young and old, disabled as well as able bodied? There is always work to do, and work is as necessary to man as bread. Peter Maurin's slogan, "There is no unemployment on the land," is a true one, **provided one can get that bit of land.**

When we came to Peter Maurin farm three years ago this coming St. Augustine's Day, August 28, the place had not been farmed for fifteen years. The fields were full of witchgrass, and saplings. Trees and grape vines had not been pruned for years and the soil had not felt the touch of spade or plough.

Irene Naughton started the work and the first summer Rita Riley put in an immense kitchen garden and it was a cheerful sight to see her, always with a string of little children following her around, hoeing, planting, harvesting. Last year, Fr. Duffy got a few fields planted, and a good kitchen garden in, so that we could do some canning as well as having our plenty on the table, but this year, he can look with satisfaction at most of the farm ploughed and the fields seeded.

Map

Yesterday he gave me a map with all the fields marked out. Five thousand pine seedlings and multiflora roses have been put along the ditches to provide a natural hedge between the fields, and a windbreak in front. There are grapes, fruit trees, pear, cherry and apple. The vegetable garden has twenty-three different kinds of vegetables planted and there are already radishes, lettuce and spinach from the garden on our table. (Not to speak of the two fat rabbits we had yesterday, and the four we will have next Sunday for dinner.)

There are ninety baby chicks, twenty or so laying- hens and the cow is “coming in” soon. Right now we are buying milk for Linda and the baby and the expectant mother with us also has to have milk. The rest of us are provided with powdered skim milk which came as a donation from the House of Divine Providence in New York. But the fields are Fr. Duffy’s pride and joy, those fat fields that are going to provide more than enough hay for Easy Essay and her calf.

Small Farms

One field is an old asparagus bed which has been feeding us this past month, there are a few acres of corn planted for silage, and eating (cow, chicken and human) and the other fields are planted in every kind of grass, oats, alfalfa, red top, clover, ladina, alsike, Italian rye, English rye, birdsfoot, timothy. Next door to us Mr. Prasse has a fine goat farm, a registered herd, and a milk route, and he has several heavy fields of alfalfa. All around us there are examples of how the little farms of Staten Island were once worked and can still be made to work for man and beast. We have borrowed Mr. Prasse’s lime spreader, roller and seeder and have provided him with some hay. We have gotten plants from Mr. Kaelen across the road (he raises flowers for the market) and we have had the indispensable help of Mr. Hauber from further down on Bloomingdale road. Around the corner on Sharrot road Mr. Kelly lives and he is another neighbor who helps constantly, providing us with siding and tar paper and so on for the damaged barn. God bless such neighbors!

Friends Help

Of course we would not have been able to do this without the help of friends. Monsignor Corrigan gave us the cow, Fr. John Monaghan gave us \$575 to plough and seed the fields as well as to buy feed for the same cow until we got our own crops in. But even so, given the land, this does not seem like much capital to get something underway. It used to be the custom for girls to have a hope chest and for them to be given dowries and it used to be the thing for fathers to start off their sons with acreage, a team, or even a house to live in. Nowadays parents too often hang on to what they have, they have lost all sense of the proper Christian Communism of the family, where what has been built up by parents and children, belong to all in common and is shared by all.

It isn’t too much capital either when one thinks of the price of television and new cars, the latest gadgets, and instalment plan buying.

To go on giving credit where credit is due, it was Jim Corrigan, the chief farmer at Mt. Loretto, who enabled us to buy our seeds wholesale and our feed, too, and our organic fertilizer and lime and who came and planted our corn for us, God bless him. And it was Philip Boyer, a radical Catholic, who sent the hundred baby chicks (Fr. Duffy feeds them on oatmeal, potatoes and fresh greens), and it was Mr. Parsons, an Episcopalian minister of Litchfield, Mass., who sent money for seed, and Bill McDonough, who provided the heat for our chapel who also bought the rest of the seeds needed. And Mrs. Cornell and Mrs. Beeker, of our own St. Joseph's parish here in Rossville, Staten Island, who collected, through the children, forty dollars to help repair the chapel, and through their husbands, some much needed material.

One could go on writing about these cheerful things for pages and pages but this will suffice to give a report to our friends, and readers, our families on the land who are constantly having to get back to the little way of farming.

Campers

During the last two months there were two work camps, ten students in each, who came for a weekend to help us and they were young people of every denomination. This coming week we are having one of the Newman club alumni groups which studied theology during the winter, and now are having a quiet weekend, with work with us. Betty Lou Ginty has had a busy time of it what with bread-baking for all of us as well as the breadline in New York, and being hostess besides.

During the next two months we are going to have our Puerto Rican children from the Little House of St. Joseph in Harlem where Mary Anne McCoy, Eileen Fantino and Helen Russell are working, and we again are begging from our readers, tents, cots, blankets. We have the promise of one tent and one reader sent a camp cot. But we do earnestly beg your help for the money to buy the things if you have none on hand you can spare. We want big tents, two of them to house six to eight each.

Maybe we are rash to undertake this extra work of giving vacations but how can one read Eileen Fantino's accounts of life in Harlem without wanting to do something. We are going to take not more than eight at a time, so that it will be a family affair and it is our answer to the immediate need aspect of this greatest problem in New York today, as the welfare commissioner calls it. A friend of ours used to say when many extra guests came: "There is always enough. If everybody takes a little less, everyone will have a little more."

We are always trying to give answers to the questions asked of us, such as "Peter, lovest thou me? Feed my sheep." Our Lord Jesus has not only stated the question, but given us the answer.