

On Pilgrimage - October 1959

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Summary: Reminisces about her love of cars, describing all the old cars and trucks that have been a part of her and Catholic Worker life. Then explains why they are getting rid of their two cars at Peter Maurin farm. (DDLW #757).

It was William James who said that when you make a resolution, announce it publicly so you will be ashamed not to stick to it. So we are announcing that we are doing away with our two cars at the Peter Maurin Farm. "What causes your brother to stumble!" There is nothing wrong about cars – in fact, they are a joy and delight; but it is what happens on account of them. My love for cars I am sure dates back to the days when my two older brothers both had bicycles in Bath Beach and I didn't, and what I wanted was a tricycle which you sit in with a steering wheel and work with your feet. There was no possibility of my ever getting one and I finally learned to ride a neighbor's bicycle. But from the time I learned to drive out in Hollywood, I have enjoyed cars. Back in 1929, you could buy a secondhand model T Ford for thirty dollars, and with one driving lesson start out practicing all alone by yourself on the back streets. You did not even have to have a license in California at that time. I scandalized the studio I was working for, Pathe, by my old fashioned car, but I was saving money to go to Mexico, and the car got me where I wanted to go.

Later on when I returned from Mexico, I had another old model T, and then in the early days of the Catholic Worker on Fifteenth Street, we had a car for a while to deliver papers and pick up food and clothing. At first we had used a horse and wagon, rented from a livery stable down the street, and driven by big Dan Orr, but later on when he got a job as a taxidriver, we had no one else who knew about horses, and so we took to renting push carts and using them about the neighborhood, helping people move, begging produce from the markets. When we had a house of hospitality in Oakland, California, headed by Bill Everson (Brother Antoninus), the fellows used an old baby carriage to go to market with. You see them being used today on the East Side of New York by old men collecting rags and bottles and old cartons.

When we looked for our first communal farm, we borrowed Mrs. Porter Chandler's car and canvassed New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania for months, and with Big Dan driving for us, I was praying to his and the car's guardian angel every time they went out.

The first car we had for the farm at Easton was an old green truck that Jim Montague drove and we did all our moving in that, with him the driver, transporting vegetables to Mott Street and people out to the farm for weekends and for retreats. First it was an open truck with people sitting all over the floor in back and freezing and having a wonderful time, singing the Gloria and Credo in Gregorian all the way out while they practiced for the Mass we hoped to have some day daily.

But the rift in the lute appeared even then. The other men on the farm began complaining that Jim spent all his time running around in the car and not working as they did in the field, and he eventually, after a few years of this, got sore and resigned his job as farm manager. There was a panel truck after that which was all right for packages but not so good for humans, but it was used until one of the humans burst through the door in back as they were going up a steep hill and fell out. That was one disaster (only skinned legs and a few bruises), but the next was more serious. Three of the men went out and had too much beer and there was a slight accident, the car ramming a tree. The only injuries then were a bad tetanus reaction after the one cut-up driver was treated at the hospital. Another disaster a year later when someone had given us an old beat-up sedan and John Filliger was transporting a goat in it which jumped out the window in the town square at Easton and caused great furore among the townspeople, the goat being a butting one with big horns and a long beard. Both John and the goat were arrested.

And then for a long time there was no car. People walked the steep hills, the long three miles to town and carried home the groceries on their back in gunny sacks. The same in New York. Once I went with Jim to get some big shopping bags full of fish at the Fulton Street market, and coming home, the bottom of the bags fell out and fifty pounds of slippery fish slithered over the floor of the bus and were very difficult to gather up. Lauren Ford says that women ought always to wear capacious aprons of strong denim for harvesting, and I suppose they would do as well for fish as for apples. But I was not wearing an apron.

After the incident of the goat, there was a long period when there was no car and walking once again prevailed. Then a kind friend gave us her station wagon just in time to move to the new farm at Newburgh, and the fellow who helped us most with the moving was a cattle hand from Montana who was more used to horses, but who loved cars. He kept the car in pretty good condition, but nevertheless, it broke down going over the mountains on the way through the Delaware Water Gap, on the last lap of the moving. So once again we were without a car.

One of the reasons we needed a car was to transport groups of children to and from the farm for vacations, so the Hughes children, who were living with us at Mott Street back in 1948, started to pray. It was as though the Lord was playing a joke on us all. The first car that "came in" was a Columbia, 1928 model, which stood head and shoulders above every other car that passed it. When halted in traffic, everyone turned to jeer. It should have been in a museum. Besides it was

very small. It did for shopping, however, but the Hughes children kept praying.

The next car that came in was a Chevrolet, 1932. One of the men working on the dam some miles north of us at Newburgh had had his license taken away for drunken driving, and so he turned over the little car to us. There were no windows in it and the headlights did not work and wind came up through the widely spaced floor boards and there were other things wrong with it, too numerous to mention. I do not remember whether that was the car whose gas pedal got pushed into the floor, or whether its battery fell out on the ground just as we arrived home one night with a car full of sick old people. It did not last long.

More prayers from the Hughes, and a 1936 Buick belonging to a television actress arrived and we used it for some time. But it really was not big enough for our crowd, so the prayers went on.

Finally another station wagon, and the children were satisfied. That was a good summer with a regular ferry service between New York and Newburgh, and once Tom Sullivan falling asleep at the wheel coming home and being saved by his guardian angel. From that time on there was always a car of sorts for the trek between Newburgh and New York, which made it cheaper transportation. Bus fare was five dollars a round trip if you counted the thirty cent bus fare at either end. We did not begin to feel guilty about cars until there was a grand argument about insurance, with John Stanley holding that it was unChristian and lacking in faith to so indulge, and the rest of us upholding it for the common good. However, thank God we never needed it except for a few scratches on the cars of others made by inexperienced parkers.

At Peter Maurin Farm we did not have a car for a long time and walked to shop and to go to Mass. When Father Duffy came we passed on a car which a dear friend from Louisville had given to me and he wore it down making trips between farming experiments so that was the end of that. There were a few others which were handed over to us when their owners got new cars and as they wore out they were sold for junk or for parts. The last time we had junked cars, they had been rolled down the incline behind the barn into the pasture in an attempt to make them start, but they never did, and there they sat in the middle of the field, even after they had been sold. Months passed and the cars were still there, even though two of them had been sold for \$25. It used to be said that the homes of the poor were known by the numbers of hound dogs there were around, but now it's derelict cars.

I have explained in a former issue of the CW paper that there is in our midst a young lad out on bail who has a passion for cars. So the third car provided an employment for him, an outlet for his energies and desires. He took it apart and put it together again, and found other parts to replace old ones, and when he finally got it going, he made a two ring circus out of the fields that John was going to plough up this fall. Round and round and round the car went, with one or two or three young people in it (no license plates) until there were well-defined

roads in the lower and side meadow. If there were bumps, all the better, and if it rained, fine, the skidding was fun. I think they would have liked it better if they could have had a squeal in the tires to make it sound more exciting.

It was all right by John, the farmer, but it got on the nerves of some of the older men. But kids have to have something to do. Later they made a truck out of it, cutting off the back of the car and leaving the floor. Right now it is standing there, derelict but still loved. One night around two, there was a screaming of brakes, a roar of an engine, a scattering of gravel, and a gang of young ones drove up to help out Frank, the car's mechanic. Sizing up the situation, they jumped back into the car, roared down into the field, attached a tow rope, and pulled the car up to the top of the incline so that another attempt could be made to start it.

When they came by daylight, I could see how uniform was the garb, the turned-up dungaree, the very tight pants, belted just above the thigh bones, the flying open shirt, the Castro effect.

No More Cars

And now we have decided to do away with all cars on the farm. There have been incidents. There have been near tragedies. In fact, the situation got so serious and tense last week that Charles, Beth and I decided that such devils could be cast out only by prayer and fasting. Charles thought literally of fasting, as Gandhi had done on Tolstoi Farm in Africa. But I thought fasting from cars, walking where we could walk, using only buses, calling a cab for Mollie or anyone crippled to get to Mass on Sunday, reciting prime each day when we did not have a priest, instead of driving to Mass – would be a good move. God knows we have done much praying. When you see how little you could do you depend more and more on prayer. We have little control over anyone except ourselves, and we see little progress there. We crawl along in the spiritual life.

How to reach young people? Have they faith at all? I remember two young car thieves back on Mott Street who were always walking off with the station wagon during the war. We did not prosecute them. The police returned the car each time, and we tried to talk to them. They did not believe in God and they had no knowledge of the natural law. They certainly had no impulse to keep His commandments. They had so little knowledge of human love that they could not conceive of a love of God. Seventy times seven in the way of forgiveness may be all very well, but there were no sanctions – no reason why they should not steal if they could get away with it. Their heroes were gangsters and crooners and jazz artists and what they wanted was money and they did not care how they got it.

Thinking of these things, and of the times this past year when the cars were misused, and the envy they aroused, and the resentment of those who stayed on

the farm and worked for those who “were always running around in cars,” we have come to this determination to do without.

I say that we have to depend more and more on prayer, but that does not mean that we do nothing ourselves. One weapon, one spiritual weapon, is to try more and more to be poor, and not to have those things towards which the world is striving. To be stripped, to put off the old Adam, and to put on Christ!

What strange problems to be confronted with – some families overrun with debts, paying off bank loans by which they have installed heat and hot water and plumbing in the houses which they have bought with much struggle, and then to have cars, both husband and wife, to get to the jobs to pay off those bank loans; and the debts on the cars making it necessary to go in for moonlighting – taking on extra jobs; and then there is the frigidaire, deep freeze, washer, dryer, and all the things to save their energy for the jobs, and finally television to keep the children quiet who have been deprived of mother and father and home.

A poverty stricken people yet smothered in luxury, enjoying all that the rich enjoy and haunted by payments to be made. No wonder we have delinquent children. And no wonder the problem is a baffling one for the idealist, who has a craving to work for justice, for better wages and hours and conditions, who wishes to see the problem in black and white – the wicked capitalist, the noble worker. And the problem is a far more subtle one. It has to do with the spirit, the spiritual poverty of our times.

During the Month

We went to press late in September, because of the retreat over Labor Day and the absence of some of the staff. It takes a week to mail out the paper and now we go to press again two weeks later. During those two weeks, I visited Tamar and Dave and the children and we had great fun harvesting some of the crop. I was specially pleased with digging potatoes having planted some of them on Ascension Day. The crop was a beautiful one, many huge potatoes that would have to be cut up before they were cooked, they were so large. There was so rich and lush a garden of flowers and herbs, as well as corn and potatoes and other vegetables, that all I could think of was how the Lord rewarded the slightest effort, far more abundantly than we would ever dream. This is the spiritual order, of course. There are always such things as drought and too much rain and insects and birds to feast on the crop, and negligence in weeding. Tamar planted everything three feet apart so that there were paths between the rows, but still the garden became a wild and luxurious growth; carrots, beets, melons, corn, squash, peppers, cucumbers, cauliflower, broccoli, peas, radishes, onions, herbs, parsley, basil.

It was a good thing I saw the garden when I did, because the next night there was a heavy frost and the tops of the herbs and tomatoes and all the zinnias and dahlias were blighted half way down the stems.

A new family has moved in next door, half a mile down the road, and there are eleven children, and their mother, a widow. There is no electricity nor plumbing in the old brick house which is plenty big enough, and they must go down the road to a spring. Our children go there after school to play, when they have finished their chores. Little Hilaire valiantly carries huge hunks of wood, almost as big as he is, to feed the furnace and makes a wooden road all across the kitchen floor. With each piece he calls out, “**Big log**” to call attention to his heavy work.

I stayed for four days and then had to come back for a meeting at St. Finbar’s parish which is very near my old home in Bath Beach. In fact we drove down Bay Thirteenth Street to Cropsey Avenue where we used to live when we were children. It is a very wonderful parish, and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine is made up of all the societies in the Church. I have spoken there before, and am always happy to be invited back again.

Peace Meeting

Now at the end of the month, I shall be at a Peace Conference in New Jersey the first few days in October, held by the Quakers at Hudson Guild Farm. There are so many meetings, and so many discussions and plans on how to meet the threat of war, and meanwhile, this present life is a war, and the most pathetic is the war of the children against the adults which has resulted in teenage gangsters and their savage violence. Our life in the **Catholic Worker** family, both on Spring Street and on Staten Island is that of a family in war time. We can only live from day to day and pray without ceasing. And do without cars, which cause our brother to stumble.