

On Pilgrimage - November 1953

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Summary: Details life at Peter Maurin Farm—nearby brush fires, visitors, discussions, neighbors—“It is not a Utopia.” (DDLW #659).

Peter Maurin Farm.

November 1, Sunday.

Today was mild and sunny and all the children and Peggy Conklin and Tamar and I went for a walk down around the grape arbors that Jonas Dumchius has been cultivating and mulching these last months. He has cut posts from the woods and put up arbors and there is a good cleared walk all the way down through the field instead of the treacherous brambles that the babies stumble over. There had been two days of rain, thank God this last week but the brook at the foot of the property was dry as a bone. Just before the rain there had been an awful outbreak of wood and brush fires all through the island, in one day the calls to the fire department totalling 214. All the woods in back of us, from McQuire avenue down to the brook, were burnt through and the fire swept on out through one of the upper fields and raced halfway across through the yellow witch grass before it was put out. Everyone was on hand to help fight the fires that day, the firemen with their totally inadequate cans of water strapped on their backs because the fires were too far from any hydrants. Our brooms were worn and burnt out with the fire fighting. Fr. Kiely's forehead was blistered with the heat and there are the scars of two burns there yet. The fires did not come near the houses or chapel but the flames roaring above the tops of trees and the sight and sound of it was terrifying. I was not there for the worst day of it, but there was one day when I saw one fire on McQuire when the flames roared sky high and one could hear the crackling from a great distance.

It is hard to see the woods so ravaged, and to hear that many of the fires are caused by carelessly tossed cigarets.

Down here at this far end of the island there are many bridle paths through the woods and there are at least three horse farms near-by. The children look enviously at the horses, but walking is good too.

We have to ride to the beach as the two miles each way are too much for the littlest ones, but we can load up the back of the car with drift wood for fires this

winter. My room has an old wood stove in it and so has Hans's and Fr. Duffy's. So we three have to put by our store of wood. The rest of the house is heated with a furnace which roasts some of the rooms and leaves others stone cold. It just wasn't made to supply what was practically a two family house with heat.

Mike Gunn came down as usual this Sunday afternoon for the discussion group which meets every Sunday at three to discuss WORK. As a matter of fact, the title of the talks are **The Whole Man**, and we will continue these meetings all winter, with sometimes a priest giving a conference, and the day ending with benediction and the rosary.

Families come too, these Sunday afternoons, but there are so many children usually that their meetings take place out doors. We hope to have our Sundays so organized some day that the Hot Chocolate and Walking Club will take care of the older children, and there will be helpers to babysit in my room which has also two double decker beds in it so that it is practically a dormitory for children, so other parents can sit in on the discussions.

New neighbors have moved in. There is one little old house two doors down and a colored couple have bought that to be repaired little by little. All the windows are out and there is much work to be done. When they came to clean up the place they have dinner with us. Then our immediate neighbors are a seaman and his wife and two children and a funny little dog called Low-Down. They are here just a week now. Mike Gunn had been looking longingly at that house for his brush shop and discussion center, but he will eventually have to put up a cement block place. Plenty of room on twenty three acres. We're going to apprentice Eric and Nickie to him when they are eight and nine! Agnes and Ysaye have worn out all our brooms. And Betty Lou too, beating out the fire. The latter is in charge of the bakery now and Vincenzo is turning out very good bread indeed for the line in New York. Anybody wanting to learn how to bake bread come down on Saturday mornings.

I'm trying to give all the news of the Peter Maurin farm for Emily Scarborough who is in England and Ed Foerster who is back in Chicago, taking a breather after a year with us here. The Smith family have a house now in Brooklyn in Our Lady of Victory parish, and they all love their schools and their parish but not the city. Only Thelma the oldest and Paulie the youngest are at home with Celie the mother. Betty Lou went over and spent Saturday evening with them. Dave Hennessy has been helping Fr. McGrath in St. Joseph's cemetery this past month so little Charlie's grave has been receiving special attention. Becky and Susie Hennessy have been staying at the P.M. farm since school started, giving their mother a little rest in the morning. When they are through school at three they help with chores at home, taking turns with dishes, and then come back to P.M. farm for their homework and to bed at eight. Tamar has only four to put to bed then! Susie especially is going to miss Paul Yamamoto, five, who left today with his mother for Baltimore after being with us since Labor Day. They are coming back by Christmas we hope and pray.

Looking through the log book which we keep very inefficiently (and those who talk most about the need of organization and efficiency never remember to get visitors to sign up, or to chronicle accounts) we find the following visitors: Simon Obi Anekwe from Nigeria; Hermes Massimo, Innsbruck; Ginette Meyer, Paris; Rev. L. Blondell, Belgium, besides many other priests and laymen from the U.S. and New York City.

Mary McArdle has been doing the cooking, and most of the time there have been 25 or 30 sitting down to table; and as for Agnes and Molly, what would we do without them? I just can't list everyone who is here with a revealing and pertinent little comment as Emily used to do, conveying a picture of our home life in this inn by the side of the road, this house of hospitality on the land, this meeting place for folk, this place where we are trying too to restore the Sunday. It is not a Utopia. It is truly a place sometimes like heaven and other times like hell. A place where people live. One evening there will be long discussions down in the basement kitchen and up in the dining room; sometimes there will be much singing like the night when the French Canadians were here, and they sang their songs and Michael and Fr. Wenceslas and Fr. Elias sang Ukrainian, Russian and Polish songs, and Stanley and Jonas sang Lithuanian songs. Other times quiet reigns (everyone has been reading Picard's *World of Silence*) and there is much reading and writing and study.

Two weeks of this time since last issue, I was away, covering engagement to Earlham College, Dayton University, and the Rosary society of Fr. Ehman's church at Glens Falls, New York. By a big swing around I was able to visit the Detroit Houses of Hospitality, the Gauchat's at Cleveland, and to hear about their house, the Rochester House, and the new Trappist foundation at Piffard and the new Benedictine monastery at Mt. Savior outside of Elmira. I also visited Marjorie Hughes at Chemung, New York and found her and her family happy and well on their hill top farm. I got back in time to speak at a communion breakfast of the Hearn strikers, which was held at the hotel Statler. I'm not writing in more detail about the Houses, because I want them to write an account themselves of what is taking place there. I know how they feel. When I am here I want to live and work, not write, but "love is communication" someone said to me this month so let us have communication, whether by letter to the Catholic Worker, or by visits.