

Notes By the Way

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Summary: Tells of the work and people at numerous Catholic Worker houses and farms on a journey through New York, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. (DDLW #224).

If you leave New York at 9:00 A.M. you can reach Rochester in the afternoon.

Wilma Higgs and Joe Czarnieki at the Rochester house were the first I saw on the first lap of my trip, and I got to St. Joseph's house in time to help with the breadline. Wilma helped in the serving and I washed dishes. The Rochester house is owned by the group and is a fine spacious place, three stories high, with two great dormitories, a long room for eating, a waiting room, and above it a chapel which Joe finished before he began his jail sentence at Danbury, as a conscientious objector. The girls take turns in coming down and serving the ambassadors of God, as Peter Maurin calls the men who come in on the breadline. The line has gone on all during the war—probably about seventy-five in for a meal. The house of hospitality has also housed fifty Jamaicans who had come up to work in the hospitals.

There was a good meeting that night of the group and the readers of the paper. I spent the night at Mother Weider's and then after a dialogue Mass at the House (they have met together every Saturday for years) spent the rest of the day at the Farron's. There is quite a little community there, what with Margaret and her husband staying with Mary for the time, and the upstairs rented to the Finnegan sisters. In the afternoon, I left for London, Ontario. The speaking engagement I had there at the Christian Culture Forum was the initial reason for my trip, and I was taking advantage of it to visit some of the Houses of Hospitality along the way.

London

One feels far away in Canada. Transferring at St. Thomas to a little train with oil stoves in each car for warmth, we went north to London, where I stayed at the Sisters of St. Joseph convent for the next two nights.

The Forum was well attended in spite of an icy snowfall, and I was glad of the opportunity to talk, of the *Catholic Worker*, and Peter Maurin's program of action, the spiritual weapons such as voluntary poverty, pacifism, the works of mercy, personalism and communitarianism, etc. Peter had spoken in London some years before, and they were glad to hear more of him.

Detroit

Monday morning I set out for Detroit. It had been snowing as I passed through Buffalo. I understand it is always snowing in Buffalo and Rochester. But though I read of terrible snow storms in the east, I escaped them as I reached Detroit.

I stayed there at the Martha House which is headed by Justine L'Esperance. The house was full of mothers and babies, and the best babies one ever saw. We had supper that night, most of the Martha House as well, at the St. Francis House. Louis Murphy has the responsibility of all the works, the two houses and the farm thirty miles out of Detroit, and the job is a large one. Right now he has some help from Bob Neal, who is staying for a time, participating in the lay apostolate. The house is full, and as usual beds have to be brought up from the basement and the bedding rolls spread out through the two large dining rooms on the first floor. Jim Collins still has charge of the kitchen, and it is good to see other familiar faces, Blackie, Frenchy, John Cochran and others who are helping to keep the work going. The men have set up a good laundry and shower in the basement and shirts are mended and collars turned and the usual heroic effort made to keep clean and presentable under most difficult circumstances. The house on Bagley street is bigger than one thinks from the outside, but still nowhere near large enough for the work that is done there. It makes for intimacy and family feeling, but how wonderful it would be to have a place large enough for work rooms and study rooms, a little chapel, a library, in addition to adequate kitchen space and bed space for all. So far the only diocesan hospice I know of is Bishop Boyle's, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, which was formerly an orphanage on Tannehill Street in Pittsburgh. Surely in other cities there are diocesan buildings that can be used for homeless, convalescent, dispossessed people. Many a time the Martha House has been packed with families, white and colored, who could not find a house or apartment in Detroit. Whenever other agencies do not know where to turn, they turn to Louis Murphy in Detroit, who has a genius for doing the impossible, and a high good humor in the doing of it.

A Good Farm

We visited the farm before I left Detroit. They have three horses, nine cows, three of them milkers, and they get seven gallons of milk a day. They also have two sheep, five sows, two of them to butcher. Four men live there during the winter and keep the 60 acre place going. The farm was the gift of the Hessler family, and the whole group are anxiously awaiting the return of Fr. Donald Hessler, whose letter was printed in the October issue of the Catholic Worker. They want to show him their beautiful chapel at the farm, which is a little shrine to the workers. The farm is dedicated to St. Benedict, and on one side of the altar is the great St. Benedict, and on the other is St. Benedict Joseph Labre, the tramp saint who walked all over Europe, and died in a gutter in Rome. In back of the altar is a mural of workers, bearing gifts, one wheat and grapes, one a heifer; a Negro worker, a chicken. "I will go into the altar of God" is lettered above the altar.

Fr. Kern and Fr. Carolan help the work in Detroit, just as Father Ehmann and Fr. Vogt do

in Rochester. How fortunate the groups are to have these generous and brilliant priests to give their time and their spiritual and material help to the work.

An Interesting School

Fr. Kern is the administrator of Holy Trinity parish, and he sent me over to Sister Josine at the parish school to see what she was building there from the ground up. With a school made up of one-third Mexican, one-third Maltese and one-third mixed, all nationalities, Sister Josine is trying to teach a philosophy of work. In spite of a lack of tools she has put the boys to repairing and painting chairs as presents for their mothers. After school, they are helping make over part of the school so that Sister can start her day nursery for the neighborhood. Already she has a big kindergarten where the children are kept all day and put in the afternoon on camp cots in an empty schoolroom. One of the little colored children from Martha House is going to the kindergarten and Sister is looking for more colored children from the neighborhood to come in. Her classes demonstrate the universality of the Church. The girls are taught sewing, and now this next term they are going to start breadmaking, and so begin to be homemakers.

Fr. Kern is greatly interested in the labor problems of the Mexicans and has promised that we will have an article on the subject of the beet workers. As I go around from house to house of hospitality and see all that is being done, and has been done in the past year, I wish there were more scribes among them, to write an account of some of the problems that are encountered, and what has been done in the immediate alleviation of them. Justine has promised to be more faithful as a scribe.

Friends at Ann Arbor

When I left Detroit and St. Benedict's farm on my pilgrimage, my next stop was the Gray's at Ann Arbor, where Mr. Gray showed us moving pictures of his farm and its twenty families who are working together cooperatively at Salina. As he talked, he reminded me very much of Leon Harmel, the great French industrialist, who dwelt among his workers. Mr. Gray is trying to build up cooperatives and the communitarian spirit. From the pictures one would consider that here is one of the little oases which Arthur Koestler talks about in one of the essays in *The Yogi and the Commissar*. Peter would say that there was too much stress, however, on cultivation and not enough on cult and culture and clarification of thought in the effort to make a self-sustaining community.

But we did not have time to go into that and find out what was being done, nor to ask if Mr. Gray knew and used biodynamic farming methods. Not only Lord Howard in his *Agricultural Testament*, but Alexis Carrel in his *Man the Unknown*, has stressed the evils of spraying and fertilizing with artificial manures and chemicals. The trouble with a trip of this sort is that you can only touch the surface, and must leave to others to find out more, if they are interested.

Sienna Heights College

The next morning after an early Mass we were off to Adrian, Lou, Justine, Bob and I, to visit Sister Helene and her top floor studios at Sienna Heights College. At the door as you go in are these words, the only known words of Fra Angelico:

“Art demands tranquillity of spirit, and to paint the things of Christ the artist must live with Christ.”

Here the girls try to learn “all the forms of making.” There is spinning and weaving, lettering, ceramics, wood carving, stone cutting, drawing and painting, silver casting and probably many more things besides. Sister Helene gave me the names of some of the little shops around the country which are interested only in religious articles made by Catholics. We had a good visit, talking of Egyptian card weaving; the raising of angora rabbits as a home craft (one can get eleven dollars a pound for the wool); of the appreciation of the Japanese for meditation, and the arrangements in their homes as greetings for guests, before which they meditate for an hour before they greet their host; of the movie they had seen on spinning, rented out by a Chicago house at a dollar a reel to the school; of spinning wheels which date back to the fifteenth century (before then spindles were used I suppose); of the spindles her students were making; of the pattern makers she knows in Detroit, to whose shop one can send for cabinet work; of looms and where to buy them; of different kinds of type, Eve, Libra, Legend, Garamond, Perpetua, Bodoni, Century, Cheltenham, Canterbury, etc. (I shall investigate all the type at our printers when I go back); of lettering and tanning of parchment (Graham Carey knew how to do it, she said); and of various other things. We had lunch at the convent, and were waited on by some of the pupils who are going to get out leaflets to circulate as propaganda signing them –The *Agrariannes*. We are looking forward to getting them.

Assumption, Ohio

But pilgrims are restless souls, and after lunch we were on our way to Assumption, Ohio, a town so small that it is not on the map, and can only be described by saying that it is seven miles north of Swanton on Route 20. When the buses are not on strike they go from Toledo straight west and past Assumption.

There we visited Sister Colombiere (Fr. Fromherz, the pastor, was away) and we learned from her all about the credit union of the parish into which every baby is enrolled, of the freezer which the farmers have built cooperatively; and we talked, too, about farm work, and the importation of Jamaicans and Mexicans for the picking of tomatoes and the work among sugar beets. Most of the farms of the district are self-sustaining, but there is also the cash crop for which they need extra help. One hundred and twenty boys from the neighboring farms have been drafted and taken away from their farm work.

We left Sister Colombiere at nightfall with a big lunch of fried chicken, home-made buttered bread and fruit in a box to eat along the way. From Assumption we drove into Toledo, where I took a train for Cleveland.

Again one feels the need of a scribe in Cleveland to tell the story of the Martin de Porres house on Franklin Avenue and how it has kept going during the war. Rumors lately have spread that the house is closed, but I assure that Mr. Russman is still in charge, under William Gauchat, and that meals are still served and men housed. While I was visiting there the Sisters of St. Joseph sent down a car full of blankets, and the man in the kitchen, a Welshman and a former miner, told me of the chickens and turkeys they had contributed for Thanksgiving.

Convent Nursery Rooms

There is a Cana group in Cleveland too, Mother Margaret Mary told me, made up of married couples who meet together for days of recollection and for retreats. We discussed, Mother and I, the feasibility of convents starting a nursery room, so that mothers of young children could come and leave their babies with the nuns while they enjoyed days of recollection once a month, and Mother Margaret Mary thinks she will start one.

I was in Cleveland long enough to have a good visit at Our Lady of the Wayside farm, to visit the house, to go to the wedding of Mary Elizabeth Smith to Mr. Haas (they are also going to live on the land), to visit Martin Ribar, who is co-trustee of the farm with Bill Gauchat, to talk to the St. Joseph nuns and then take the night train for Cincinnati.

Cincinnati

I was met by one of the Grail family at the station in Cincinnati, and we drove out to Loveland, arriving in time for the Mass of the first Sunday in Advent. I had not wanted to miss that Sunday sung Mass. It was good to meditate those next few days on the meaning of Advent, the joyfulness of Christmas and the crowning feast of Epiphany when our Lord manifested Himself to the whole world. I had never before thought of the feast of Epiphany in that light, that it was the peak of the season—that Christmas began the feast, the rejoicing, but that Epiphany crowned the new-born Saviour Christ the King. It is good to be living even for a few short days with a large group who are working in silence, and who use every moment of the day in most vigorous work, study and prayer. There was baking and cooking, washing and ironing, the storing away of corn in the big barns, the plastering and painting of another large dormitory, spinning and weaving the making of a cobblestone walk, and work with the cows, goats and chickens. And there were good meditations and conferences, and an early going to bed, most welcome to me after my journey.

Pittsburgh

The last three days of the week I spent in Pittsburgh, visiting friends and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on Tannehill street, and the House of Mary on Webster avenue around the

corner, where Sister Cyril, Sister Angelica, and Sister Hugh, with the help of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, have made a little oasis of beauty and joy in the Hill district. They have a Christ room in the house and right now an old lady of 80 is occupying it. She is a very beautiful old lady with her brown face and white hair, and not at all helpless, either. There are classes three nights a week at the House of Mary and clinic several afternoons a week. Food and clothing are stored in the cellar right now, piling up for Christmas blankets.

There was not near enough time to see all the friends I wanted to see in the Pittsburgh area, and I shall just have to go back and make another visit. I wanted to get back to New York in time for the coming out of the paper, and to help arrange for the Christmas retreat, which will begin on December 27 and end on January 1 in the evening. We beg everyone to bring an extra blanket to that retreat, and good warm heavy clothes. To suffer from the cold is a distraction, so put on as many layers as possible and come prepared for a bracing and rejoicing week.