David Mason 1897-1969

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Summary: An obituary for David Mason a Catholic Worker beginning in 1937. Details his abundant energy and work in Philadelphia, New York, and on Catholic Worker farms. His was a lifetime of doing the works of mercy. (DDLW #903).

The story of David Mason begins for us when he began reading the Catholic Worker back in 1937. Some of the Philadelphia readers had already started a House of Hospitality down near the docks. Paul Toner and Dick Ahearn were the two I remember best who started the house, and it was larger than our own accommodations in New York–so commodious in fact that during some of the local strikes of waterfront workers or seamen they used our facilities for meetings or for food and lodging. I cannot remember who painted the murals on the walls–perhaps it was Ade Bethune or perhaps it was one of the men in the house. She was always generous in her praise of self-expression, and many of our houses were colorful with these wall paintings.

Dave was working as a proof reader for one of the Philadelphia newspapers at the time, a member of the union, and getting a good salary which he brought to the house. He worked nights and slept but little, and it seemed to us he was working days, too.

When the workers in Philadelphia clamored for a farm (the yearning for the land began in the spring), Dave underwrote the cost of renting a fine farm in Oxford, New Jersey, and helped stock it with sheep and cows and chickens. Dick Ahearn was mad about the land and the farm was run tidily and efficiently by him. I was afraid of the ram which ruled the meadow where the sheep grazed, and through which I had to pass when I stayed overnight in the little guest cottage down by the brook. Good as Dave was he did not have the grace of bi-location, but it certainly seemed to all of us that he was everywhere at once.

Then the War

When the second world war began and we were involved, Dick Ahearn went into service (was drafted), the men were scattered, the house and farm were closed down. David Mason came to us in New York and those who remained went out

to western Pennsylvania to work on a farm, the use of which had been given to the group by St. John's Abbey, in Minnesota.

We were a thinned-out crowd in New York, too, during those war years. Dave Mason, Arthur Sheehan, Fr. Clarence Duffy held the fort for a while, and then it got to the point where it was only Smokey Joe and Dave Mason and I. (That is the way Joe tells the story.) David did everything, attended to the mail, the shopping, distributed clothing, cooked the meals, not to speak of getting out the paper. He was a careful and fastidious man about the use of type and loved to make up the paper and proofread it, and he wrote many a story those years. He found time to spend his spare hours on an invention he had long worked on–a Chinese typewriter.

I travelled a great deal, as usual, from one end of the United States to the other, visiting the relocation camps where the Japanese were detained (I was kept on the outside of the barbed wire fences of course), and writing of machine gun nests in the gardens of Franciscan friaries, in general embarrassing Church and State. David Mason stayed home and worked.

One day he was in the midst of cooking supper for the house of hospitality, enwrapped in a large apron when the FBI arrived on the scene to arrest him for failure to pay, attend to, or respond to the call of selective service. He was one year within the age limit at that time. Impossible though it may seem, this man of 45 was being drafted. Men who had been in mental hospitals, and men blind in one eye were being accepted into service. This is literally true and happened to men in our midst. I can name names.

He was not at all reluctant to take off his apron and accompany the two federal officers. He was confined in the West Street Federal Detention Center, and complained that the supper served him was not as good as the one he was preparing for the house.

He was not there long. He had hoped to be free for a time of all the responsibilities the Catholic Worker placed on him at that time. He forgot about his Chinese typewriter and had begun to dream about a novel he had always longed to write. But the judge, when his case was called noted his grey hairs and burly frame and scolded government officials as he discharged him.

When the war was over, and the young men from all our Eastern houses began to be discharged from C.O. camps, hospitals, prisons, as well as the service, and came to stay for a while and exchange reminiscences, David went on with his loyal and constant service to the poor. At that time the Easton farm was rebuilding from its almost dormant state, and some of the younger men began to work there. David kept on in the city for a while. When we moved to Staten Island I remember how he practically rebuilt the heating system in the old farmhouse, and started a bakery with an oven from a battleship (a surplus commodity). Bishop Shannon who was studying at Yale at the time used to come to visit on occasion and always drove a carload of bread into town for the soupline, baked in that oven that only David knew how to regulate.

Then came an opportunity which David could not resist. A group had long been trying to publish a Catholic daily and had located in Kansas City, at the invitation of the Bishop there. David was invited to join this short-term venture. Wasn't it Bob Hoyt who was associated with that too? At any rate they had a hard time keeping going, and all the staff were advised to go back to their usual occupations for a time until they could start again. David returned east to Philadelphia, to go back to his work on the Philadelphia newspaper which had released him during the war years because of his pacifism. His work of course did not keep him from all the works of mercy he had been performing all his life. Recent issues of the Catholic Worker carried articles he wrote on a project called **Loaves and Fishes** which he was advocating for old people on welfare or pension, living alone in furnished rooms and scarcely able to feed themselves on what they got from the state. His plan was a series of co-operative dining rooms which could also be recreation centers.

And here is where I make my complaint of the fewness of correspondents, the fewness of writers in the Catholic Worker movement. There are writers yes, of these but not reporters who can send in news notes as to what is going on, projects started, by whom and how and what for, what friends are at present in jail, at work, marrying or birthing or dying.

I had the promise of two or three of the Philadelphia friends to send me details as to David's funeral in Philadelphia, where Bishop McSorley presided and where many of the clergy as well as the laity came to show their love and gratitude and respect. But details I have none. David's health had not been good, diabetes meant failing eyesight, and yet he found work aplenty to do, helping a lifelong friend run two rooming-houses in a residence section of Philadelphia. He was clipping the hedges in front of the house he lived in the night before he died, of a heart attack which came while he rested from his day's work. Marge Hughes, one of our editors, represented us at the funeral. She had known him as long as I had and had worked as closely with him at the Catholic Worker, and was one of the young people who was always visiting the Philadelphia house and the Oxford farm. Janet Kinjierski and Paul Toner and Dick Ahearn were all there and countless others whose life had been close to his at one time or another. It would take more than these few pages to tell the story of his life–this is just a suggestion of what Dave meant to the Catholic Worker. May he rest in peace.