

On Pilgrimage - December 1947

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Summary: Journeying through Florida, Alabama, and Texas she arrives in California working on a book about Peter Maurin. Along the way comments on factory-farming in Florida and a generous woman's care of the downtrodden, racial violence in Alabama, and the need for lay apostles everywhere. Urges graduates to work in understaffed hospitals and institutions. (DDLW #487).

Nevada City, California

I begin to write this account of my travels in California, high up in the foothills of the Sierra's, in a little mining town of 3,500, which was settled in '49 by gold miners. From this county in 1937 was exported twelve million dollars in gold. These mines are among the deepest in the world. The streets hereabouts are crooked and narrow, there are balconied houses, and outside all day long go double trucks with huge logs from up in the mountains, some so enormous that often there is only one log in the truck, which is like a freight train. Yesterday I saw a truck pass with two logs on it as its entire load.

This is the home of the publishing house of Berliner and Lanigan, which is going to bring out my book, "About Peter Maurin," which will be available now in a couple of months. Those schools and libraries who want the book can send in their order now, and all the address needed is Nevada City, California. It is too bad the book won't be out for Christmas, but it can be ordered for an Easter gift, ordination gift, birthday gift.

I am spending three days here in the midst of my trip going over the book again, adding new chapters, trying to picture for our readers this man who has held up a strong light for us these past fifteen years, and who has clarified issues, shown a way, and built up in us all a sense of our responsibility as workers and members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Florida

To give an account of my trip so far: I started out in October, speaking first in Richmond, visiting my daughter in Berkeley Springs, W. Va., and then going to Miami, Florida where I spoke at Barry College. Here are the Dominicans and I had met some of them before at

Adrian, Michigan where Sister Helene has her Studio Angelico (there too you find Peter Maurin's synthesis of Cult, Culture and Agriculture worked out). A good part of the land around Miami was under water, due to the recent hurricanes and there was an estimated 3,000 out of homes. As it is, people live in shacks, trailers, sheds or anything they can get in the way of shelter. Things being as they are, boys should be taught from the earliest age how to build a shelter for themselves and future families, or else pledge themselves to a life of celibacy. Government housing, municipal housing, and the housing put up by private interests is a drop in the bucket considering the great need throughout the country for a house to live in, a place to lay one's head. The story is the same everywhere. You would think we were the bombed out peoples to see the makeshift homes people put up with, and, not only throughout the South.

I had a few days to visit cousins from Georgia who have been living on Biscayne Key, off the coast of Florida for the past ten years. They have been as though on a desert island most of the time, but now these past weeks, a causeway has been opened to the mainland and half the Key turned over to the state for a park, so now though their half of the island is like a jungle, the other half is the world encroaching on their solitude. They have been working for the owner of the island, my cousin the captain of his boat and general overseer. My cousin Kate keeps chickens (there are plenty of coconuts to feed them), and several times a year she has to kill rattlesnakes in her back yard!

The bus trip from Miami to Sarasota takes you across the peninsula, and up the coast, and it is an all-day trip. There our lay apostle is Margaret Connelly, and her little cell is made up of her mother and several friends, Catholic and non-Catholic. She tutors children every morning, and there is many an opportunity for sowing the seed.

While I was there she arranged for me to visit the celery farms where the land sells for a thousand dollars an acre. The Palmer people from Chicago have come down, drained a shallow lake, and on this lake bottom which looks like black peat (it can burn just as Irish peat does when dry) is grown the celery crop for the country. Margaret's friend, a Seventh Day Adventist, formerly from Illinois, showed us his 28 acres on which he can grow two crops a year. Besides celery he can raise cabbages, potatoes, strawberries, etc. For a cover crop they plant cesbania (I don't know if that is the way you spell it) and it grows 18 to 20 feet tall. Its roots are covered with nitrogen nodules and these are ploughed under.

Our friend belonged to an association made up of 30 members, a sort of cooperative which maintains seed beds. Crews set out the celery, and do many another work on it. These crews of Negroes and whites are picked up by truck in the town and, brought out to the fields every night,. and the pay is \$4.50 a. day for men and \$4 for women. Up to a short time ago a great many children worked in the celery and strawberry fields in this section. And the pay was not always what it is now.

As usual in this factory-farming, aeroplanes spray the crop, which is dusted with lime or with D.D.T. In spite of the fact that much fruit is grown in the vicinity and honey is another industry, one farmer will spray to the ruination of another, since the D.D.T. kills the bees which produce the honey and fertilize the fruit trees. Again a proof of our cannibalism, we devour one another.

Florida is the next largest cattle state in the union! This is hard to believe. We saw, everywhere, Brahmin cattle, beautiful animals, with great humps on their backs.

Our host told us of his adventures in coming to live in this land of milk and honey. One winter he was broke when he first came down and he asked one of the Negro workers how people lived under such circumstances. The Negro said, "we have little fish for bread and big fish for meat." Always, everywhere, on every canal and stream and lake you see people fishing. And there should always be fruit, if we were still following the Old Testament, which taught that the poor had the right to glean in the fields. But we don't keep the old law any more, let alone the new.

Another one of Margaret's friends was a woman who raised earthworms and went in for composting instead of using artificial fertilizer. She assured us there were no earthworms in Florida and that she was going to introduce them. She took us around her lovely garden and showed us where she had planted a thousand worms around trees and shrubbery, etc. These little farmers plough the soil and are great aids to man, and one of the tragedies of commercial fertilizer and sprays is that they kill earthworms as well as bees.

House of Hospitality

The high point of my visit to Florida however, was the Sunday afternoon visit we paid to Mrs. Corbett who runs as near a thing to a house of hospitality as anything I have seen on my trip. She was a poor woman, but not destitute, since she owned her home which spread out, what with porches and sheds, all over the place. Her husband became paralyzed and she began to help sustain them by taking in another old man whose pension barely took care of himself. There is no old people's home in Sarasota county in spite of the millionaires who winter in Florida, so pretty soon social workers were begging her to take care of others. Now she has a household of twenty three, and among them, three children whose father is in a leper colony in Louisiana and whose mother deserted them; an imbecile of 22, bedridden; a man with infantile paralysis, very bad; another man dying with cancer of the eye, a woman with dropsy and so on. The pensions are tiny, and Mrs. Corbett does even the cooking and serving all this large family. The country pays her nothing but provides her with a Negro helper. The money she gets does not quite cover the bills. The group that formed together to help her under Judge Grey, a Methodist, and which included the Connelys, saw to it that additional porches were built on the house, and showers and toilets put in to accommodate the crowd. They have put a few thousand dollars in the house and it must be confessed that now some of the members of the committee feel that they have a stake in the house! Poor Mrs. Corbett, who has never received a salary, and who works with love and serenity for her children!

People are always criticizing, Judge Grey said. He himself was her staunch supporter. She was not as tidy as she should be. They had built a porch and had made it into a bedroom. Etc.

She had no warning of our visit, but to me it looked like any crowded home on a Sunday afternoon. It was not like an institution, that is true, and thank God for that. The beds

were not on line, no one was afraid of ruffling a spread by lying down in the middle of the afternoon. God help these martinets who run institutions who keep the old up all day, who keep the sick weary in chairs, because they do not want their white spreads disturbed.

Only last summer I had heard a horrifying story of neglect from the county old people's home in New York. Old paralyzed people who were kept to their beds and could not move, had been bitten by rats about the nose and ears and could not protect themselves. This was told me by a doctor who had attended them. Think of these things, you our readers, before you consign your aged mother, father, aunt, etc., to an old people's home or institution, no matter how beautiful the surroundings, how gracious the buildings. Help is scarce everywhere, there are no attendants, and throughout the country hospitals and institutions are gravely undermanned. And I would say too, that this is not only an argument for personal responsibility as opposed to state responsibility but also an argument for young people to choose useful work instead of the white collar job, the job in which to get ahead and become "better off." I've met so many college girls selling in department stores, catering to concupiscence, one might say, and people are dying of neglect all about us and positions in hospitals, orphanages, mental institutions remain unfilled. Thank God for the Mrs. Corbetts. Of course her home is not the ideal place. She needs more room, more help. But she has the right spirit, and "where love is, there God is."

Alabama

There were cases of floggings in jails and lynching along the country side as I passed through the South. I do not doubt but that we could match the account with scenes of violence in the North. At any rate, St. Bernard's college in Cullman, Alabama, was playing a Negro college from Birmingham in spite of hell and high water, as one of my southern relatives said. One can only call a sample of hell the spirit of discrimination and hatred of one's brother. I heard a tale from a Sister who was from Tampa, of a priest in the Spanish district speaking from the altar in favor of Franco in Spain and the irate, working class parents taking their children from the parochial school. The Sisters and priests feared violence, so this Sister said, and who should call up but a representative of the Ku Klux Klan, offering to protect them from the "Spicks" who were almost as bad as the "niggers." God save us from such friends, and how low we have fallen that we have raised such friends from hell to our aid. Indeed, as Pope Pius XI said: "the workers of the world are lost to the Church," and how often the devil has entered into the Church to make them hate Her. Because it is indeed the bad they see in Her that they hate. De Rougement points out that the devil is indeed in the Church too, and he recalls the incident when right after our Lord made Peter head of the church, he said to him, "Get thee behind me Satan," because Peter was trying to argue Him out of the Cross, in other words, out of dying for us to save us. And we can hear them yet, those advocates of the use of force, to save our brothers or to save the church.

One could write a book about St. Bernard's abbey, which stems from Latrobe in Pennsylvania. Half the enrollment there is non-Catholic, thanks to the GI bill of rights. And more than half is rural, so I was glad to speak of the Green Revolution. It was not converting the converted, it was to try to give them Peter Maurin's philosophy of work and poverty so that they would

not sell their souls, their freedom and their land, for the sake of modern machinery and factory farming. All but six of the Brothers who are magnificent craftsmen have come from Europe, southern Germany many of them. There are shops all over the place in addition to the great farm which feeds the students. There is a bakery, book bindery, butcher shop, a shoe shop and a tailor shop, a cabinet making shop and an apiary as is usual when there is this synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation, the men are artists too in stone and wood and painting. Brother Joe's rock gardens and reproductions of the Holy Land, the south west missions, scenes from fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, as well as his great shrine to our Lady, have charmed visitors from miles around. Fr. Michael was my host (he had been our guest at Mott Street the year before) and I met too the Abbott, Boniface Seng, eighty years old and a valiant man yet. It is a happy place, such a monastery, with its atmosphere of work and study and prayer. It reminds you of that saying of St. Catherine of Sienna, " All the Way to Heaven is Heaven, for He said, 'I am the Way.'"

Bus Travel

I took the bus out of Birmingham where I had spoken to the Catholic Men's Club at noon, at two-thirty. Mr. Wright, a baker and an oblate of St. Bernard's bought me my ticket and put me on the bus. At two-thirty the next afternoon I got into Houston, Texas. There is a picnic here each year for the relatives of Sam Houston and I should go too. My grandfather's name was Dr. Sam Houston Day of Tennessee. But Houston is a shocking city. It is a port town, a materialistic town, and if you told the Houstoners they were Black pagans and as materialistic as the Marxist, they'd be shocked no doubt. The headlines in the daily paper stated, "Possible War" plans conference here. Area to gain 20 Millions in industry."

There was an oasis there of course. I visited with Fr. Al Smith of Maryknoll and Fr. William Roach, who is head of the Charities, and who was the twin brother of Fr. John who gave his life to his brothers in the Texas City disaster. When I told them of Mrs. Corbett in Sarasota, they said that one of the problems of their own city were these homes for the aged, where dozens were crowded in little rooms over garages and given the minimum of care. They call them convalescent homes. On one occasion the priest who was talking to us about such a situation told us he had to hear a confession down in the back yard by the ash cans and administer the last sacrament there. (The patient was still up and walking but with a fatal disease. What has become of our homes? And yet how can we have homes if we have no housing? And why will not those who have big homes, share the homes they have. Many an old couple are left with an entire house which they could divide with others.

Every where the story is the same. Not enough attendants, not enough lay apostles, not enough vocations. One can well see the need for organized Catholic Action to build up personal sanctity. Then we will have holy apostles, holy families and more priests. Fr. Smith is certainly imbued with the supernatural. He sees clearly the need to sow in order to reap. "We must sow priests to reap priests," he said. "If each diocese, no matter how short of priests they were, would send a few away, to Japan or China, for instance, where there is a great call for workers, they would reap a hundred fold. Archbishop Cushing sent out his priests

from Boston in all directions, knowing not only that he would reap, but that he would get back his priests more apostolic men.”

Another thing Fr. Smith said that I will not forget. “We do not do spiritual work, so we have no spiritual hunger or desire,” he said. “If we worked hard we would be hungry, and frequent the sacraments more.”

We all like to hear of miracles in this day when evil seems so triumphant. One of the priests who came to visit at Maryknoll that afternoon in Houston was an aviator and he told of a prairie fire which was ravaging the countryside and threatening every home in its wake. He flew over the area and dropped a Miraculous medal and sprinkled holy water and the next day the papers said that during the night an unprecedentedly heavy dew had fallen putting out the fire. There is an account of another miracle in this issue of *The Catholic Worker*, of the saving of the farm at Upton, Massachusetts.

And here I have gotten only as far as Houston Texas, and this account is already too long. I must work the rest of the day on the book about Peter, so I will leave this writing now and start putting on some lunch. Prisca is here from the Grail, on this little branch of the Mystical Vine which is the Church. All over the country I have been finding these little cells, this yeast which is leavening the wheat. And the wheat is good, and God is with us in our work so how can we lose, no matter what happens throughout the world. We are living in an instant of time, and this world and all in it are in the hands of God. He is love, so of course, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”