

On Pilgrimage - September 1946

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, September 1946, 1, 2, 6.

Summary: Surveys the rural area around the Easton, PA, farm from “a distributist point of view” visiting a bookbinder’s shop and complaining about polluting factories. Laments that the Catholic Worker hasn’t produced more craftsmen. Enumerates all the work projects underway and the schedule of retreats. Joyfully announces the birth of her second grandchild, Susanna. (DDLW #428).

One of the books William Cobbett, author of *The Protestant Reformation* wrote was about what was happening to England during the industrial revolution. In *Rural Rides* (two volumes, Everyman edition), he tells of traveling around the countryside with his son, on horseback. It would be interesting for people to make a survey of their neighborhoods in the country, or around the small town, from the distributist point of view.

Rural Rides

We don’t know a great deal about Easton, Pa., where Maryfarm is located. We have never had a car to travel around in, in the casual fashion that makes for explorations. The station wagon is always in use, shopping, taking people to and from the train and bus, going to the mill, going in and out of New York. It falls apart, is put together again, and still ambles merrily along, climbing hills with ease. This week, one of our retreatants had a small car, and she told me I could use it during the retreat, for all the extra errands. So on three occasions, a few of us not making the retreat went for *rural rides*.

A Bookbinder

One of the first trips was to a book binder’s we had heard of through the Easton Library, a young man by the name of Easton who has a bookbinding shop in Belfast, a little place of half a dozen houses, near Nazareth. Both Nazareth and Bethlehem, of beautiful names, are industrial towns, the former a giant steel works, and the latter the home of a great cement works, so vast that it powders the trees and fields for miles around.

A Ram

On the way over to Belfast, we passed a farm with a sign on it: “—Diversified farms No. 2. No selling of cattle on Sunday.” Since there were sheep and rams in a fold near the house, we decided to stop in to see if we could buy a ram for our little flock of three sheep. There were a few beautiful ones there with beautiful curly horns. But there was no one at home and there was a great savage dog in front of the porch, untied, so that we could not even get up on the porch to knock on the door. Way off in one field there was a man on a tractor, but he was far off, and it was near the baby’s feeding time, so we did not linger.

Diversified

It was good to see the word *diversified*, however. All around, for miles and miles, acres had been bought up for the raising of alfalfa for a dehydration plant nearby. The houses were no longer farm houses, but little suburban homes, set in the midst of gardens and lawns, and they might have been city houses. They did not have the look of rambling industry that most farm houses have, with their pig pens, barns, chicken coops, sheep folds, rabbit hutches, goat pens, corn cribs, blacksmith shops, tool sheds, etc.

Lack Correlation

During my year away from The Catholic Worker, when I lived in an old school house belonging to a convent out on Long Island, I grieved mightily over the fact that what once had been a farm was turned into chicken hatcheries and potato fields (cows were too dirty) and the novitiate a few miles away at the advice of the spiritual director, turned into landscaped grounds, as more refined surroundings for spiritual females! (So he said in a book he wrote about the order.) What a lack of correlation between the spiritual and the material here! One healthy young nun liked to get out and work in the potato fields and tucking her garb up about her, filled and loaded sacks, even helping to drive the truck! She was much criticized by the others.

Book Binding Crafts

We were looking for a binder to do over our set of Newman’s sermons, and when we found him he was so busy that he could not take our work until October. Until then he had to be doing school books that he wandered around the countryside collecting. He had a good sized shop, heated with a great stove, plenty of windows all around, and on that afternoon, looking out on what seemed to be

a garden party going on next door. “But no,” he said, “They just have lots of children, and the women get together and sew every afternoon.” Across the street was a small shirt factory. I looked at it with interest because my mother when she was fourteen went to work in a shirt factory up in Poughkeepsie, New York, to help support her widowed mother and four younger sisters and brother. Her father died as a result of the Civil War. I have seen his discharge papers, Napoleon Bonaparte Satterlee, chairmaker. We are not so far away from crafts after all!

Good Materials

There was the machinery in the book binding shop to stitch and to cut and to press, and it was a joy to wander around and look at the materials, the buckram, the bright colors used for the history books he was engaged in binding. We talked of leather for binding, and he told us that if we bought any leather from the shops on Mott Street (we are right next to the leather district in town) be sure that it was from Canada or South America, as the chemicals used in tanning American leather made it wear out within a year. It was all right for purses and pocket books (women and their vanity!) but not for books.

We talked again of tanning our own leather from goats, pigs, etc., on the farm (pig skin for footballs, sheep skin for diplomas, David Hennessy said) and Tamar added, let’s make our own ink from sumac, and letter our own diplomas.

Few Craftsmen

Pretty soon, our book binder host told us, he would have to take apprentices, and it took four years to learn to bind books. And I thought mournfully of the fourteen years this Catholic Worker movement had been in existence, and how many talkers it had produced, and how few craftsmen. If only a few women would learn to spin and weave, and a few men would learn to make shoes, bind books, tan leather, farm, build, print—and put in a good day’s work at it!

The Beginnings

Well, we have the beginnings. There are some who work hard, otherwise the work would not go on. There are women learning to do housework, to spin, bake and turning out wonderful bread on the farm here, and the hospitality takes time, and the washing and cleaning and cooking. If we had less hospitality, God forbid, we would have more work done. During retreats, during the wonderful, the holy silence, there is much done. Only this last month, logs sent to us for building have been cleaned of bolts and nails, and that took three men all their

spare time between conferences during a long retreat; priests' rooms are being built of cement blocks, potatoes have been dug from the field, and half a ton brought in, haying, gardening—oh the joy of the farm where there is always much to do!

Paper Mill

Another afternoon we took a drive nine miles down the Delaware river to Riegelsville where there was a paper mill to see if we could buy paper for Stanley's little printing press on the farm. We found they sold only cardboard, white and many colors, and that we could not buy from them, directly from the factory, but only from jobbers. However, they said that they would give us odds and ends of samples, and we gratefully returned the next week and got about twenty pounds.

Chemical Works

Within walking distance of the farm—one does not need to go on a rural ride to get there—is a chemical works, owned by the Penn Salt whatever that firm may be, and where there is hydrofluoric acid manufactured, which is used in chemical warfare, in laundry fluids, in the atom bomb, and in many other diabolic concoctions, one of our neighbors told us. All the woods behind the plant are blighted, and the dead trees stand out sadly on the hillside and the surrounding neighborhood is deserted. Our own little pine trees which we planted by the hundreds on one of our hillsides were all killed by the fumes which come from this plant, and many other trees in the neighborhood are blighted by it. It often amazes me that conditions which are scorned in the back yards of the slovenly are tolerated and even taken for granted around industrial plants and on the outskirts of cities.

Tremendous News

These rides were taking place during the month of August, because it was a period of waiting of great expectancy. Every afternoon my daughter and her baby Rebecca used to come over to my porch and sit with me while we sewed and knit and teased wool for carding.

Retreatants came and went, there was Fr. Vaile's retreat, Fr. Ott's retreat and then Fr. Ignatius' retreat. A coal shed, a tool shed are being built. Trenches were dug in the hill to put in new pipe from the spring; logs were taken to the mill and sawed with the help of some of our own men. The women washed,

mended, baked and helped in the cooking. Visitors came and went, there were picnics on the hillside and down in the meadow under the pear trees.

And all this time was a time of happy waiting for us. And now there is a new life on the farm, there is a little Susanna, born Sunday, August 25, on the feast of St. Louis, to David and Tamar Hennessy and she will be reborn a child of God on the feast of Mary, Sept. 8. It makes me very happy that these two little grand children are just a year apart, because I know just how companionable sisters can be.

More Retreats

After this Labor Day retreat which Fr. Benedict Ehmann is giving (all the floor space has been occupied as well as the beds) there is a retreat September 15, and I'm thinking that will not be a crowded one, since most people will have had their vacations. So come visit us if you can. After that the next will be Thanksgiving weekend.