

Day After Day - June 1936

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Summary: Life at the farm in Easton, Pennsylvania, described in detail—toil, joys, care of animals. While planting onions she reflects on the plight of migrant workers. (DDLW #301).

My job this morning is being cowherd. I can sit under a tree with pen and paper and write to the readers of THE CATHOLIC WORKER and all I have to do is to see that Bossie, the Holstein, does not stray from the southeast pasture where the fences are being repaired by Francis and Eddie.

It is an irregular pasture, roughly shaped like the letter K, one end shut in by woods, the other by apple trees. It is up on a hillside and down on my left is the asparagus beds in the field below, and then more sloping fields, some very steep, to the river road and the Delaware. Beyond that more sloping fields, and hills, green and brown like a patchwork quilt. Immediately by the side of me is a hedge of raspberry bushes and a sparse clump of sumac.

There is hot sunlight after a day and night of rain which replenished the cisterns; there are sounds of woodchopping, a train in the distance, a bumble bee, the sound of the cow munching and cropping the grass.

“Don’t Tell Peter”

There is also the sound of the old Ford truck operated by Jim Montague, manager of THE CATHOLIC WORKER Farming Commune No. 1, drawing a two-horse plough guided by Cyril Echele.

We want to get the kitchen garden in and there is no horse nor money to buy one. Someone suggested we get one on the installment plan from a neighboring farmer, but with three dollars in the bank we would be violating principles in making so large a purchase with no money in sight. We know St. Joseph will take care of the printing bill (four hundred dollars yet to be paid), and the groceries which are paid for from week to week. We are frugal enough God knows, though we have plenty on the table.

The horse and equipment will come – we will pay for it. The truck method of ploughing was recommended to us by Louis, former occupant of the farm, who now lives down the road.

“Don’t tell Peter,” said one of the boys to whom Peter had said that hands were made before machines.

Fruits of Field

We went in to see a Polish neighbor yesterday and she was just coming in from the woods with an apronful of coral mushrooms to cook up with butter gravy for supper. Here it is only May and already we have all the asparagus and rhubarb we can eat, dandelion and dockweed, mushrooms and milk. As yet we have no chickens and are buying eggs for 25 cents a dozen down the road.

To many throughout the country our farm will seem sadly inadequate as to size. In writing to a correspondent in Kansas, we have to explain about intensive cultivation, and producing for use. In writing to a correspondent in Belgium the other day, this was not necessary as they are limited as to space over there and understand the intensive cultivation of small parcels of land.

If we were financed our readers could say: “Oh, it is all very well for you – you’ve got money in back of you. But what about us? How are we to start out, without stock, without funds, without hands.”

That is where the farming commune idea comes in. People can work together, can pool their resources, can think in terms of mutual aid. Our program is to work for farming communes and homesteads.

The Day Continues

But this account started to be of a day at the farm. The ploughing went on all day with only an hour or so of siesta after lunch. Mr. J. worked away at the asparagus bed, which had become overgrown with weeds. Mrs. J. was in charge of the kitchen, cooking for fourteen with no apparent effort, on an old wood range collapsed in the middle. K. prepared vegetables, weeded, washed dishes and washed up the sloping kitchen. Bill in high boots shoveled manure into an old wagon to be towed out into the north field and scattered.

For a few early hours in the morning I had planted onion sets, six rows of them and as I crouched and bent and planted, I thought of the three million children and women working in the cotton fields, from dawn to dark. I thought of the women and children in the beet fields and onion fields of the middle and far west, and I thought how even the six-year-olds were pressed into the grueling service until they were deadened and worn and a deep smouldering resentment grew and grew within them, shaping them for revolution or for the flight from the soil to the cities. On the one hand, a hatred for the oppressor, the big business farmer growing up, and on the other a hatred for the soil, the good earth, which Christ Himself blessed for us with His blood.

Terraplaning

After supper the boys all went out to mend a portion of the road as it came up the hill and slanted perilously between fields. With the truck and plough they ploughed up one side, Eddie using a pick as supplementary help and Bill at work with the shovel.

But Cy had the idea of chaining a wide board behind the truck and all of them standing on it, balancing themselves with ropes, the truck pulling them along to level out the ploughed up portion.

Washing up the supper things in the house, we didn't know what was going on until we heard loud yells of joy and triumph and went out to see the fun. The stunt worked pretty well, but in the course of the leveling one or more of the workers was always flung off into the field.

Pursued

Every night, of course, the cow got lost, until the pasture got staked in, and wandered half a mile across fields to her former home. Margaret, here in the city, told me she dreamt the cow had run away, but returned, bringing three more with her. No such luck! She wandered away all right, and Francis, Paul and Eddie had the job of pursuing her. On that evening, she was found in the pasture with other cows, chomping away, and it wasn't until they had separated her from the rest, that they noticed the bull coming after them.

Francis didn't say how he felt, but Eddie confessed his terror. They couldn't get around to the stile but had to lift up a barb wire fence and push the slow cow through. It was a moment.

Two New Friends

On one morning a friend came in at breakfast time, having tramped all night from Philadelphia. He had been a New York fellow-worker, coming for lunch one day and remaining with us for some weeks to help us paint the Mott street house. Going on to Philadelphia he found only one day's work there, and retraced his steps to Easton to join up with us on the farm. The first thing he did on arriving was to sit under the apple tree and bathe his feet.

"My age and my health are against me," he said. "In the old days the union members helped one another. Now they drive each other and in the fierce competition, they cut each other's throats. The younger ones set the pace, and if the older men can't keep up with them, they have to go..."

Thanksgiving

Before bedtime, around nine, we all gathered together, for the rosary and litany. Outside there was a little breeze in the apple trees sighing around the house. The moon shone down on the hill top, washing the fields in a soft glow. There was quiet and perfect peace and a happiness so deep and strong and thankful, that even our words of prayer seemed inadequate to express our joy. May St. Isidore, patron of farm workers, pray for us and praise God for us!

During the last month one of our readers came in and asked us if we could get an invalid chair for him. It is for a poor old lady who gets very tired of laying in bed all day and the family cannot afford to buy one. They are looking forward hopefully to the response from one of our subscribers.