

On Pilgrimage - June 1958

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Detailed description of her daughter Tamar's home in Vermont and the Hennessey family's life. Mentions the 25th anniversary celebration of the Catholic Worker and all the "old timers" who came. Lauds Ammon Hennacy's penitential fast for our nations dropping the first atomic bomb. (DDLW #740).

When I don't write about the Hennessy family for a few months so many of our readers ask me about them, especially the family people, that I must catch up on my report.

Perkinsville, Vermont is in Weathersfield township and they live on Weathersfield Center Rd. going from Perkinsville toward Weathersfield Center. Their house which cost \$6,000 with its twenty five acres, has ten rooms with attics over them, and over the connecting outer kitchen, woodshed, garage and barn there are gabled windows and four more finished rooms and more attics. A gorgeous place for a family with eight children!

The Hennessy's have now spent their first winter in the house and found it very easy to keep warm there, though on one occasion outside the temperature went down to thirty-five below! There was much snow this year, though it did not start until after Christmas, but it fell on ground which had not been frozen, so there was no deep mud in the spring. There was only one day when they were not able to get out. The children missed no school. They walk half a mile down the road to meet the bus, leaving at seven thirty and getting home around four. Five of them are now in school which means a lot of washing and ironing, but Becky, thirteen, helps a lot with that. She does all the ironing that is done in that family. Sue makes up for it by cooking, milking the cow, cleaning out the barn. The girls' rooms are very neat even when the rest of the house looks as though it had been stirred up with a giant spoon. Nothing like little ones to trail disorder wherever they go. And Tamar has the happy facility of seeing nothing, but sitting down to her loom to finish the curtains for the living room windows. Even little Margaret, going on five, can weave and keep a very straight edge. And she even helps set up the loom when the others are in school.

They could have gotten by with burning wood all winter in the big hot air furnace down in the basement, but they had two tons of coal. There is a wood-burning kitchen stove, and a trash burner of sheet iron in the living room. When I was up there the last few days of April, they had let the furnace go out, and were using the other two stoves. When Sue, ten, fried chicken for a dozen people, the first night I was there, the big range in the kitchen came in very handy. We had dandelion greens too.

When I got there it was delightful weather, and we did not feel too crowded or confined, though eighty-five baby chicks were swarming around the sheet iron stove in the living room, surrounded by a fence of old doors. Hilaire Peter, nine months, a red head, holds on to this fence in walking around the room, and is quite indifferent to the chicks by now. Rivaling Hilaire Peter in making puddles was a 2-weeks old Hampshire lamb too young yet to be put out, but already such a pet that when I washed dishes, he curled himself up to nap against my feet so that there was danger I would stumble on him if I turned. Out in the barn were two cows, one to freshen in June, and a pig. They had just slaughtered one and the ice box was full of head cheese, scrapple, sausage, bacon and hams: And now Tamar was aiming to get a hundred cockerels to raise and put in the deep freeze before the feed bill made them uneconomical.

Unemployment

According to a story in the **Catholic Digest** on Civil Defense, taken from **The Wall Street Journal**, there have been Pentagon purchases of \$1 billion dollars worth of machine tools ready to feed war industry during mobilization if there were an attack on this country. This among other “vast federal projects” is crumbling away and now the armed services are unloading their machine tools on the market, about 15,000 in the latest batch. Now Perkinsville is six miles from Springfield, Vt., which is the largest center of the machine tool industry in the country, and this ominous item means unemployment in the area for some time to come. So all the Hennessy efforts must go to building up a food supply and to praying that David’s little book business increases. We run his ad each month of his books on distributism and agrarianism and with unemployment increasing, money may be decreasing too but people have time to read and study so perhaps he will begin to sell more.

Town Meeting

Dave and Tamar both attended the town meeting, and 200 were present and 150 voting. It was experience in government by the people that even the anarchist Hennacy agrees with. Maple sugaring was another experience, and the children all joined in tapping the huge maples and going up and down hill gathering the syrup. We had pancakes (another one of Susie’s specialties) with the delicious sweet for breakfast. The deep snow made getting to some trees difficult, but the children were out in all weathers, and the sugaring process took place near the house with a fire constantly going and sampling constantly going on.

May first was holiday and there was no school, and Eric and Nickie were fishing for trout in the streams all around the house all day. They had set out early in the morning, carrying breakfast with them, and their fishing poles (one boughten and the other retrieved from a dump) and had walked several miles to a place at the river, only to come back and find half a dozen people fishing at one of the streams coming down from the mountain nearby. They caught four speckled trout which they brought home and more which they had to throw back because they were under size. They carried a ruler along with them to measure. Both boys live out of doors, winter and spring and their energies are well used up out of doors.

Ploughing, Fencing

One of the neighbors came to do the ploughing May first and Tamar had strawberry and asparagus plants and grape cuttings to put in. In return, David was to go and help him with his fencing. He and Tamar had been working at the side pasture fencing and I could look out of the back kitchen window up the hill to where Dutchman's breeches and trillium were growing in the shadow of an old stone wall. How Tamar loves to work out of doors. How I wish I could stay to help more—just to keep the house going while they are doing so much outside work. As it is, Tamar sterilizes water for the chicks, feeds them, warms milk for the lamb and is up twice a night with him and once a night with Hilaire Peter. She nurses all her babies for more than a year, and a healthier and more vigorous lot of children would be hard to find. She told me that Mildred Hatch of 8 Pine St., St. Johnsbury, Vermont, would send mothers literature on request about natural childbirth and nursing babies, and I am glad we have a letter from this valiant woman in this issue of the paper.

But when it comes to helping Tamar, the girls help, Becky, Sue and Mary, and the boys too, though they are absorbed in fishing right now. I used to think Eric worked too hard for a little boy, carrying coal and ashes down on Staten Island when they lived there, and whenever I baby-sat he was a boy to be depended on. All the children are a happiness. I remember how Marian Roche of the Upton farm said that the first five are the hardest.

Vital Statistics

Two babies born to fellow workers recently, a girl, Susan, ninth child of John and Helen Cort in Boston; Christopher, first baby of Kenneth and Mary Boyd in New York. Another happy event was the marriage of Charles McCormack and Agnes Bird who exchanged their vows at a nuptial Mass at Old St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York in the presence of a crowded church of family and friends. Fr. McCoy offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and Fr. Luigi played the organ and it was a most happy occasion.

That same evening **The Catholic Worker** celebrated its 25th anniversary with a buffet supper at St. Joseph's House on Chrystie St. This was Bob Steed's planning. Nina Polcyn came from Chicago, Louis Murphy from Detroit, Helen Butterfield from Cleveland and so many other friends and former workers that it is hard to name them all. It was good to see John Cogley and Gerry Griffin (Joe Zarrella had visited us the month previous) and Martie Corbin and Bob Ludlow amongst the many others engaged in serious and friendly and not too controversial conversation. Fr. O'Connor once said that it was as much as your life was worth to argue about pacifism around **The Catholic Worker**, but this was a happy evening with everyone finding concordances in most mellow fashion. Among the earliest workers who visited were Dorothy Weston Coddington and her daughter Cecily and Eileen Corridan and Genevieve Hawkins. It was good Stanley Vishnewskey was there who had worked with them at the beginning.

A plate supper was served by our very capable pair of cooks, Larry and Roy, and the whole day with the wedding, coffee and doughnuts after, and supper in the evening, went off easily and happily.

What would we do on these occasions without Roger O'Neill and his fiancée, Mary Gargan, and Veronica Flanagan, my own right hand around the house? Roger remembers everyone and finds time outside of his work at St. Vincent's hospital to be of tremendous help at the house, and a good coordinator. When **Jubilee** came out this month with a very good article on the ACTU and the work of Danny Scholder in fighting racketeering unions and dishonest employers, credit was given to the CW for steering Danny into the ACTU. He was a student of St. John's college, ex-warehouse worker and Teamster's union member and when he came to see us, it was Roger who steered him to the ACTU and his work with the Puerto Ricans. Credit to whom credit is due. But Jubilee did not mention that it was John Cort who was the coordinator that brought the ACTU into being back in 1937.

New Blood

One of the things that this article indicated was the new blood, the vitality, in these groups in the church. We are happy at **The Catholic Worker** to have young people like Sheila Johnson, 19, and Bob Steed, 25, taking over so much of the work of the office in the city. Other young college students are coming this summer and we need them. Ammon and I, the older ones, can be spared to go to jail! But this year, after our demonstration in front of the Atomic Energy Commission offices, we were arrested, spent some hours in jail and then received a 30 day suspended sentence from colored Judge Kenneth Phipps. Which leaves Ammon free to go on his long fast in Washington.

Publicity

The news note which delighted me most this month was four or five lines in the Denver Register of May 18, which announced that Ammon Hennacy, one of the associate editors of The Catholic Worker, was going on a forty day fast in front of the Atomic Energy Commission offices in Washington, in penance for his own sins and the sins of his country for having dropped the first atom bomb. This notice appeared in the "Notes In Brief" column together with scholarships awarded, meetings announced, etc. and I thought thankfully, "well this is the way it should be,—the Church announcing this act of public penance casually, taking it as it should be taken—one of the spiritual weapons, one of the traditional means to use in the war against evil, against the mystery of iniquity.

Of course, my appreciation was tempered by the fact that the same issue quoted several German theologians justifying the use of atomic weapons, with many qualifications and conditions which could not possibly be fulfilled.

Ammon's activity however, will let loose in the world some of the spiritual energy contained in prayer and penance and perhaps there will be a spiritual fall out, and a chain reaction, and an explosion of love to combat Fear and overcome it.

The June issue of the Catholic Digest contains an article on religion in Russia which is a ray of hope in a fearful world. If there is this healthy curiosity on the part of young Russians about God and the virtue of religion, if Van Cliburn, the young pianist, can go to Russia

with a worn Bible in his suitcase, and, return with prizes and love and the statement that his heart is Russian, and that he never felt so at home before—then what are we arming for? Against what do we need defense? “All men are brothers.”

Traveling

After six weeks at Peter Maurin farm where I was chief cook while Beth was away in the south, I have done quite a bit of traveling through the east on speaking engagements, and visiting old friends of The Catholic Worker. During the last month I have spoken at Fordham, Swarthmore, at Boston University Newman club, at the hotel Touraine in Boston to the CW friends, at Iona college; at old St. Patrick’s Mother’s Day communion breakfast, at Syracuse, Dryden and Rochester, New York, and I am writing this in Pittsburgh where I am visiting Dorothy Clarke, Cecilia Hugo, and Margaret Gombos, on my way home by bus on Sunday night.

Bus Riding

To ride on a bus is my way of being a hermit. I am away from everyone, no telephones, no door bells, and am content with relaxing and just seeing, just being. I cannot read or talk to fellow travelers. To me it is rest and relaxation and renewal, and a time for praying. It is certainly conducive to the pilgrim spirit and the hermit spirit, in a strange way, and though on the move, one still has time to hearken to the inner voice which says “be still and see that I am God.” A happy halt in the pressure of daily living.