

On Pilgrimage - June 1971

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Summary: "Travelogue" of a speaking trip to South Dakota where she admires rural family life, the folk university movement, and a sod hut. Comments on the women's liberation movement. (DDLW #510).

It took only five hours to go by plane from LaGuardia Airport New York, last month, to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, stopping at Washington, D.C., Champaign, and Peoria, Illinois. After the crowds in the East, the airport there seemed vast and deserted, with one man, and he a bishop, pacing the long corridor until he met a priest who turned out to be a missionary I had met in Rome during the Vatican Council. I had spoken at the Holy Cross Seminary there, and here he was, just returned from Chile and from his manner I judged that he was pleased with the turn of events there.

Since the last issue of the *Catholic Worker* came out in May, I spent a week in South Dakota at the home of Alice and Prof. Gerald Lange in Madison where the Dakota state college is located. They are a young couple, both of them brought up on the land, she in Minnesota and he in North Dakota. They have four children from two to eight years old and a good house with picture windows looking out on a lake and fields in which a little flock of sheep were grazing, with some calfs being fattened for beef. While I was there I ate the food from the farm, including bacon and eggs, milk and butter, canned fruit and tomato juice, meat and potatoes and many canned vegetables, all the produce of their own farm. Of course there was coffee and tea to be bought and the flour for the bread which was baked at home, but in general the Lange home was a self-sustaining unit. There was also honey, since South Dakota is the second largest honey producing state in the country. It is really all the year round big business since one man has hives all the way across and down country to Texas. There is a large extracting center in an abandoned high school nearby in Winfred, South Dakota.

Centralization of the schools has meant that here and there through the flat prairies there are two-story brick school houses empty and abandoned with a few acres and a windbreak of trees. We passed one where there were several small bungalows also on a five acre plot, and Professor Lange said it could be had for a few thousand dollars and he wished it could be bought by a group for a house of hospitality or farm or free school—whatever one chose to make of it. Since I returned to New York I met a real estate broker upstate who said that she would like to have the listings of such places. "I'm sure I could sell them," she said. "All kinds of young people are travelling back and forth across country looking for a likely place to settle and start a commune."

But South Dakota is notoriously conservative and rabidly anti-communist and the very word commune would turn people off, for a while at least until they learned a little more of the personalist and communitarian philosophy. I haven't heard from the folks out there since I came back, and am hoping that there were good reactions to my talks to sociology and history classes during the week I was there.

Alice Lange comes from a German background in Minnesota and she was brought up in a large family living in four rooms, who worked hard on the land. She will never forget, she said, the bitter long winters. Her husband came from North Dakota which is a more progressive state where the farmers are organized and Gerald Lange's background is such that he has no fears of the conservatism of South Dakota. The climate of these central northern states certainly produces energetic workers. The pace of a big city is nothing like the pace of an active farmer, and when that farmer is also a teacher, and his wife a dietician working one day a week in the local hospital and teaching apprentices from hospitals in neighboring towns, and taking one course in chemistry in the local college.

There was company several nights the week I was there and meals appeared on the table like magic. Alice is lucky however in having a good baby sitter. One of the visitors was Paul Redfield and his wife, lifetime residents of the town of Madison. He is interested in starting an outlet for home industries and also in a cooperative that will take care of the egg situation. Farmers thereabouts get only eighteen cents a dozen for their eggs.

On Gerald Lange's twenty acres, two acres are given over to corn and carrots to supply the local hospital and a home for the aged.

Maxine McKeown

A year or more ago, one of our visitors at First street was Maxine McKeown who told of how she raised enough vegetables on a five acre plot in Bushnell, South Dakota to supply seventy five families. I met her again on this trip and she brought me a sack of onions which would fit in my suitcase to bring back and plant at Tivoli. Instead of one onion, the harvest will mean a cluster of bulbs, shallots, I think the name is. She reads the **CW** so she will be glad to know that they were immediately planted as soon as I got home, by Fr. Andy Kruschel, our most active farmer who has started all the young people around our farm to starting little gardens.

I had not been twenty four hours at the Dakota State College when I met two young men (from California of course) who had been sent out as missionaries. Sixty-two others are dispensed around the country. One was a young black who had recently been studying for a degree at Berkeley, who had taken the name of Yatif Schvar on his initiation into Ananda Marga and the other David Trent from the East. Both were giving lessons at the Newman club each night to groups of students in the work of meditation, which they urged should be for half an hour in the morning and again in the evening, and for an entire day once a week. They emphasized that all faiths needed this discipline.

The young men came prepared to earn their living, and already had jobs to put in some thousands of seedling trees for one of the teachers. "There is not a tree around this area that

has not been put in by man,” Alice Lange said. It is true prairie country.

There was a great calm and gentleness about these two young men and it was interesting to see how they approached the students. I was sitting one afternoon in the student’s center having a cup of coffee with some of the teachers and saw David Trent come in. He stopped at a table where six or eight young men were gathered and they were at the other end of the room so I could not hear what he said. But his few words caught their attention, and they began to listen. A few drifted away, the others offered him a seat and they talked a bit more, and then he was left with only one. But they had given him a serious reception. It takes courage to try to talk about prayer and meditation in this way.

Brookings

One evening the Langes and I drove up to a neighboring college at Brookings, South Dakota to hear, as I thought about folk universities. When we got there, however, the gathering was held in the religious center and the talk was from some young woman on Women’s Liberation and she began with a plea for free abortions. I was asked to comment, which I did briefly. I left to one side the points I disagreed with and spoke of the meeting held at Graymoor last fall when Betty Friedan spoke and where I was asked to end the meeting with a talk. The report of my speech in the *Commonweal* was that I did not mention Women’s liberation but reminisced about my life and travels. I really had taken up three points of Mrs. Friedan’s talk. She had said that women did not need to be involved in children for more than fifteen years of their lives and I talked then how I felt very much involved what with nine grandchildren and four great grandchildren. She spoke also for the middle class, pointing out the technological advances which freed women from drudgery and gave them more time for a public life, and again I could only point to my own experience among the poor and the most recent one of travelling through India and seeing women with baskets and trays of cement and bricks on their heads which they fed in long lines to the men who were working on the bamboo scaffolding around the new buildings going up for housing. The struggle as far as I could see was still a class struggle and the big issue today was world poverty. It is good to think of the way Cesar and Helen Chavez, Jim Drake and his wife work side by side in the building up of the first Farm Workers’ union in the United States. Around the **CW** I like to remember those words of St. Paul, “neither bond nor free, neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female.” Certainly we see plenty of men at the sink washing dishes and resetting tables for the lengthening soup line and stream of guests that are with us.

Folk University

The ideas of a Folk University are most appealing. It is three years old and began on the campus of the University of Missouri and soon involved working people—janitors, storekeepers and farmers, and is made up of entire families. It is not youth group or leftist group, but family groups, rank and file people, committed to radical and profound changes. Local chapters are built around activities. In Kansas City they have a hootenanny theater every

Saturday night; they also put on old fashioned melodramas and the cast of twenty or so are made up of people in the neighborhood.

I was reminded while listening to this program of the Radical Book Shop in Chicago, on North Clark street where there was a theater like the Provincetown Playhouse and Ibsen and Strindberg were performed in addition to modern American plays. I suddenly remembered how drama played quite a part in the radical movement of the twenties.

“Our aim is revolution—revolution in the finest sense of the word. We work for a cultural revolution which will precede a change in the political, social, and economic structure of American society. We wish to create a new life style of change in the fundamental ideals, values, aspirations, and actions of people, a life style which will lead to the creation of a good world.”

“We use as tools of our trade the Art of Argument and the Argument of Art.”

“Through the Art of Argument we make truth a weapon and a force in the community. We expose the myths which produce so much human unhappiness and wretchedness and prevent us from seeing the nature of our true best interests.”

“Using the Argument of Art we make music, drama, poetry, literature, film, dancing, and painting a persuasive cultural force for the creation of a human society.”

For more information write: Folk University Society, 3312 Summit, Kansas City, Missouri, 64111.

This seems far off from the problems of Pakistan and India, and the four million refugees from terror, bringing cholera and famine in their wake. Far off from Vietnam and even far off from the problems of the west coast and the south, the farm workers and the unemployment of the cities. But one begins where one is, with one’s own neighbors and their problems. The Personalist and communitarian revolution is everywhere. There are three parts to their program: discussion; Art which includes pottery, painting, ceramics; and music and theater—Art which is a catalyst for social talent. There are three folk houses in Kansas City and plans for more. There is a farm in Arkansas. A group has been started in St. Louis and even far off Tallahassee.

Hutterites and Benedictines

I wish the Hutterites and the Benedictines would get together. The Benedictine abbey of Blue Cloud in the north eastern corner of South Dakota was a pleasant place to visit one afternoon but I was not able to learn much about the plans to turn their missions over to the Indians. This means the schools which they have been maintaining. It is a plan which will take several years to accomplish or more. But what the Indians are going to do with the schools, how to maintain them, heat them in those brutal winters, staff them with teachers is a question. This solution of the property of religious orders and the poverty of the Indian solves nothing immediately. Perhaps the Indians don’t want the schools. Perhaps they have thought along the lines of Ivan Illych and don’t think schools necessary. Will they turn them into apartment houses? What indeed will become of those mission schools? How much land

is there around them? It is understood that the Benedictines will retain their churches and their living quarters.

I visited another mission school once and I do not remember whether it was Franciscan, Jesuit or Benedictine, but it was a boarding school and far from the shacks the Indians came from.

My visit to the Hutterite community was a brief Sunday afternoon visit, and we did little besides talk to the children who sang for us in friendly fashion and gave us a chance to admire their colorful long dresses and healthy smiling faces. There are nearly forty communities in South Dakota and a half dozen more scattered through the western states. There are more in Canada. These are communities of families, each with their own homes, a strict religious discipline and separation from the world. There is need for such communities, but for the poor, and it would be well to study them as well as the economy of the kibbutzim and moshavim of Israel which Martin Buber writes about in his book, **Paths in Utopia**. In times of increasing unemployment and the disintegration of cities, country life is only conceivable as community life. Man is not meant to live alone. We ourselves have nothing to offer as a model. Our farms have been more in the nature of houses of hospitality on the land and two of them have broken up into neighborly groups of family, dividing the land between them.

Houses

At last I have been in one of those sod houses which I have read about but could never figure out. On the vast prairies of the west there was no lumber, no rocks as in New England, nothing but miles and miles of prairie grass. In Madison, South Dakota, through the enterprise of the aforementioned Mr. Redfield, there has been built up a place for vacations and tourists. A Prairie Village, a little railroad station, and various buildings have been assembled from neighboring towns to reproduce this village, together with a great collection of early machinery. For me, the sod house was the great attraction, just as the merry-go-round with its hand hewn horses and animals was for the children.

Bena Jackson was raised in such a house in Amisk, Alberta, Canada, near Edmonton and walked three miles to the nearest school for her grade school education. With the help of a few of the men at Prairie Village, she built the sod house and displayed with pride the 22-inch walls and deep window seats which certainly must have kept out the cold.

“You plough a twelve inch wide furrow four inches deep as long as you wish, and cut it into three foot lengths. You lay it like bricks,” and she drew a little picture to show me, two strips wide. It is the roots which hold it together—the roots of this prairie grass.” Twisted prairie grass was also used as fuel.

I’m not sure of the frame work of the roof, but I know the top was of sod also. The house was cozy enough inside and there was a good sized kitchen coal stove at one end for rainy damp days and to do some fall canning. She herself lived in this house part of the summer.

Fr. Marion Casey

After my week's visit was over, Fr. Casey, who has given us many a retreat back east, called for me and drove me to Marshall, Minnesota where I found a lounge full of students waiting for me when I arrived. Joe Amato is now teaching at the Minnesota State College at Marshall and when the afternoon meeting was over (it lasted from two until supper time) we drove to his home in Cottonwood, a nearby town where his wife served a good spaghetti dinner to the crowd that accompanied us. They have a big house, plenty of room for their little children whose drawings covered the walls of the dining room, and for neighbors there are other teachers with children of the same age. It is a delightful setup and the Amato family is happy there. He has a book coming out on Emmanuel Mounier which we will certainly review some time in the future. Mounier's **Personalist Manifesto**, and the writings in the magazine he founded at the same time the **Catholic Worker** began in this country, were introduced to us by Peter Maurin, our teacher.

Home Again

One returns after such a week spent far away, to the work at hand more than ever convinced that Peter Maurin was a prophet for his time. Discussions, houses of hospitality and farming groups,—the extended sense of family—personal responsibility, voluntary poverty,—these are the only solutions for our time. And over all, beyond all, without a strong faith, hope and love, the seeds of which we have implanted in us by our baptism in Christ, which need to be watered and tended by prayer and meditation (meditative reading too) there is no hope, no happiness, in these dire times.

Being confronted immediately on my return by particularly hopeless situations of a number of women, due to drink, drugs and sex, I can only propose in all seriousness that the Women's Liberation groups which are Catholic and so espousing only part of the program of the large general body, remain loyal to their sisters by finding concordances, but also to make the Mother of God, Mary most Holy, their patroness. If we believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, we must also believe in his humanity, and the flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary, as St. Augustine said. How can we put her to one side? The only way we can continue in hope and love is by putting these hopeless cases into her hands and begging her to share our responsibility. We may not see the results, but they will be there. It is an exercise in faith to believe this.

Next month I shall be away again for three weeks on a peace trip to Russia, leaving on July 15th and returning on August 5. I'll try to write a better travelogue than I have this month. Through the generosity of Corliss Lamont my trip is paid for by a travel fellowship, and the tour is sponsored by Promoting Permanent Peace, and led by Jerome Davis, who is eighty years old and has been conducting these tours for many years.