

Community Conference

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*Summary: Attends a conference on establishing Christian communities, especially of families on the land. Admits that Catholic Worker attempts have not been successful because the “vision of community is not yet clear” and the spiritual foundation has not been laid. Recommends Edmond Wilson’s book *To The Finland Station* on communities. (DDLW #703).*

Community Conference

Last month there was a meeting of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (Regional Branch) at Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania, at which Robert Steed and I were present. The other groups represented were the Glen Gardner Community, made up of Catholics and non-Catholics, the Society of Brothers, Hidden Spring, Gould Farm, Tanguay Homesteads and Pendle Hill itself, which is a community of study and so a very good place for the conference. The discussions were on sharing within the community, sharing between communities, and the relationship with the state and the “outside” world in general.

Emphasis was placed on the impossibility of any land movement today in the face of growing industrialism and centralization, without community as a way of living. The trouble with all the communities represented was that none of them have time or talent to report or write practical articles on what is going on – finances, family relationships, relations with the state, so it is good to have these quarterly conferences to keep close contact with each other.

The Community of Brothers at Rifton have a magazine *The Plough* which can be obtained by writing to them at Rifton, New York. And we will try in succeeding issues to present more material on this movement which would have been dear to Peter Maurin’s heart. There is an interesting chapter in Edmond Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* on the growth of communities in the United States which he calls the great nursery for these experiments, from the time that Robert Owen came to America in 1824 and was helped by Horace Greely in the *New York Tribune* to propagandize his movement, which resulted in forty groups going out to build what they called phalansteries (including Brook Farm in its second aspect). Katherine Burton has written a very good book on Brook Farm, *Paradise Planters*, which can be obtained at any library.

The hardships of many of these early communities is dealt with in Part II, chapter 4 of Wilson’s book, which is the briefest account available. Calverton and Morris Hillquit have also written books on the community movement in the United States.

The foundation of the Community of Brothers is a religious one and Tom Potts who represented them at the conference emphasized their basic desire for a church community rather than a community of families. But the fact remains that it is just as a community of families that their work in South America, England and the United States is so impressive. Recently they have united with one of the Hutterite communities in North Dakota, so there is constant emphasis on the dynamic quality of their witness. They have not only a deep religious sense, an emphasis on the importance of the interior life, but also an acceptance of voluntary poverty, hard work, discipline, a practical working out of that scene at the last supper, where Christ in washing the feet of his disciples, told them that as He had done, so were they to do likewise. I would love to see a community of Catholic families established near them, in either New York or North Dakota, so that they might learn from them some of these profound truths. The nearest beginning we have ever had to a community of families was at Upton, Massachusetts, where four families lived on St. Benedict's farm, and although the men worked individually and supported their families, there was community of land, and a great sharing in many ways with each other. This community has divided up the land, however, and now they are a community of neighbors. The same has happened at the Detroit farm at South Lyons, Michigan, and at the Holy Family Farm at Rhineland, Missouri. There have been many attempts at farming communes, beginning with Maryfarm at Easton, Pennsylvania, and spreading over the country, but there has been nothing we can point to as success. We can only say that we have lived, we have suffered, people have married, brought forth children and somehow have managed to keep going. But the suffering of it all is what stands out the most and with faith we may conclude that this dunging the ground, this ploughing the field, will eventually bring forth fruit. The vision of community is not yet clear, there are not yet those in *The Catholic Worker* movement who have the vision, or the time, the skill, the ability to work it out. Or even the spiritual foundation.

In the face of war and taxes, however, it still seems to me the only practical and workable method of getting away from the cities and to the land. The ever changing editorial staff of the Catholic Worker has had its hands too full with Houses of Hospitality and the issuing of the paper, meeting head on with the sufferings and anguish of the present day, to be able clearly to work out this aspect of the program of Peter Maurin. And it is true that faith in it has been lacking, the vision obscure. Given the people to carry it out, we are sure that God would send the means, as He always has to houses of hospitality. The fact remains that we have never been able to take the funds sent for the poor, to establish families on the land. What farms still remain are given to caring for the poor so that they too have become hospices on the land. Our farm at Pleasant Plains, Staten island, is a farm only, because Father Duffy, and now John Filliger concentrates on that aspect of it. The vision there is to raise as much as possible for the soup line in New York, besides providing those who live there with fresh vegetables and wholesome labor and to have days of recollection monthly and summer conferences and retreats.

The Glen Gardner community is built around an industry, a printing press, and though they have gardens and a cow, it cannot be said to be a farm. The Rifton community is materially building itself up around a toy industry, a factory where many of the men and women work in making blocks and other constructive and durable toys for children. What with an office force and salesmen who are also missionaries on the road, there is plenty of employment. Their

difficulty is lack of housing. But there are already around 150 people there, with well-run kitchen, bakery, schoolroom, laundry, nursery, and so on. It is a joy to visit the place.

There was a good deal of talk at the conference about means of livelihood, from the raising of peanuts to the making of overalls and all the work that could be done between communities. But the conclusion that I reached after a day and a half of sessions was that we must deepen our own interior life and pray for understanding and that the dear Lord would send laborers into His harvest so that this work can grow.

The conference took place between blizzards on Friday and Sunday, though the proper promise of spring was before our eyes, with the children of Pendle Hill tapping the sugar maples for syrup.