

On Pilgrimage - February 1961

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, February 1961, 1, 2, 7.

Summary: Continues her car journey with observations about the geography of New Orleans. Tells of a miracle attributed to Martin de Porres and speaks of an interest in folk medicine. Admires efforts of families living on the land and their efforts at community. (DDLW #778).

New Orleans, Jan. 27.

We are living in a Negro slum and going to church in a little church made from an army barracks, and there is a school and convent built too. The Josephite priest lives in a tiny house next to the church. He is Father Kenny. We are between Pleasure and Humanity streets, on Feliciano, in a section of New Orleans described as Gentilly Woods, but more accurately described as the streets between the industrial canal and the city dump. Sometimes little houses are built on the dump, though the police try to raze them again and again and the neighborhood goes around and scavenges and gets food from some of the best restaurants in town! One old man mends broken chairs from the dump and sells them for fifty cents apiece; families on the dump have no water so with their earnings as scavengers they pay some other poor family with water, twenty-five cents or so to do their wash. It is a little community ridden with unemployment again, and there are always the unemployables.

We arrived here on Tuesday from Natchez (rhymes with matches) and had to be guided here from the Gentilly section of New Orleans, away to the east, by Mary Linda Hronek who met us and drove ahead, past streets with the most remarkable names, Piety, Benefit, Treasure, Abundance, Agriculture and Industry. One takes the street car called Desire to get here (now a bus) and transfers to Louisa bus over another little canal. The dumps are going to be filled in and a housing project built. New Orleans is all below sea level, as everyone knows, and in the graveyards, the dead are buried in cement boxes above ground. The French quarter was the only part high enough to build on and when that was filled up, another city was built by pumping and draining the water off into Lake Ponchartrain and setting the houses up on pilings which rot away and have to be replaced with cement ones. You can imagine what the Negro quarters look like. Even this largest colored housing project in the world was faultily built so that the pipes buckled and all plumbing had to be redone after a settling of the houses.

The Mississippi River, which makes a figure S through New Orleans, as it does all the way down through the country between the states of Louisiana and Mississippi, is 4,300 miles long, the longest in the world, though as the crow flies if it had followed that course, it would have been only 675 miles. It is a mile wide in some places and narrows to a half mile at the

mouth. It was discovered in 1542 by de Soto, then again in 1673 by Joliet and the priest Pere Marquette, and then again in 1681 by LaSalle. These are Mark Twain's figures set in the midst of the meanest anti-Catholic writing I have seen for some time. He sounds in the opening pages of this otherwise fascinating book like the founder of the White Citizen's Councils (which took the place of the Ku Klux Klan) in his hatred of Catholics.

The upper part of the State of Mississippi, the bordering state, is called the Delta Region, and perhaps many thousands of years ago it was indeed the delta, as we think of deltas. Since the river is constantly discharging mud and extending the continent, so to speak.

I shall be here in New Orleans for two weeks anyway, guests of that most hospitable group, **Caritas**, and when I have finished here, I shall go back to Pass Christian (pronounced with the accent on the last syllable). Biloxi is pronounced Bilucksie. Then on through to San Antonio, Texas.

I have made up my mind to stop only in those places where I am invited specifically to speak because if I stopped in all the places where we have readers I would never get to the West Coast. As it is, here we are beginning Lent and on Staten Island we always looked for the first signs of spring on February 11.

Looking Back

But I must go back again and take up where I left off in the January issue. We stayed while we were in St. Louis at the Rogers Residence for women, and went to Mass every day at the college church, which was always filled and during which everyone seemed to receive Communion. I spoke Tuesday night at the Fusz Memorial which is the Scholasticate of the St. Louis Province of the Jesuits. There are many nuns and lay women at Rogers Hall. We have met nuns and lay women who are studying micro-biology, physiology and mathematics, and political science, and one of the girls we had met had been going to college for twelve years, taking time off every other year to work. It is interesting to see the interest of these science students in the Catholic Worker. One nun in the field of micro-biology told me that the professors in her department at the university were all unbelievers and they told her that if they did believe and if they followed Christ, they could take no other position than the pacifist one of the **Catholic Worker**.

In my talks with Father Joseph Becker, who is a member of The Institute for Social Order, I was much interested to see that he is now engaged in a study of the increasing unemployment in our economy. It is getting too expensive, he said, to hire the unskilled, and with technological improvements there is an increase in the class of people who are becoming unemployables. The cost to the employer of workmen's compensation, insurance, pensions, even the minimum wage, and limitations as to age, made it too expensive to hire the uneducated. I am going to learn more about the Longshoreman's Union of the West Coast and how they have handled the problem of unemployment in their work which is increasingly more mechanized. They have worked out this problem, it is said.

One night we had a very good meeting with Mary Buckley from the Grail and some friends, one of who was the nurse who was taking twelve years to get through college. She told us of

a miracle at Cape Girardeau, which is a town in southern Illinois. She heard of this from a doctor at the hospital in St. Louis, who told of this child being brought up for examination for some disease of the hip, the bone of which was constantly deteriorating. There had been some talk by doctors at Cape Girardeau of another operation and the child was being examined again in St. Louis beforehand. The X-rays and the examination there showed that nothing was wrong at all, but the doctors back home testified that all their X-rays showed a steady growth in the disease. The family was questioned and the story came out that they had been praying to Blessed Martin de Porres. They had been making a novena to him, and the miracle had occurred. When the doctor in St. Louis examined the X-rays he said, "take off these braces, there is nothing wrong with the hip." The muscles of the leg had not yet grown strong, and so the parents did not know of the cure until they saw the child walk. The leg was still thin and with no muscle so she had to slowly begin to walk again.

Some of the details of this story fascinated us. While the novena was going on, a large rat appeared in the cellar of their home, which strangely enough did not terrify them, but they put out a plate of food for it. But one of the members of the family was afraid that their little three-year-old child might try to pet the rat, and their fears being aroused, they diffidently asked Blessed Martin if he would not send a mouse instead. Whereupon at the next feeding they were amazed to see a whole colony of mice run out to feed from the plate which had been put out for the monster rat. Blessed Martin de Porres, the South American Dominican lay brother, was born of a Negro mother and a Spanish father, and is usually pictured as one who loved all creatures even the rats that came around the store-houses of the monastery.

The nurse to whom we were talking was very much interested in folk medicine, and told of an anthropologist friend in Pittsburgh, who was starting a magazine called "Health Folk Ways." She was an anthropologist at the University of Pittsburgh. We ourselves could contribute a few folk remedies, such as milk from the mother's breast used to bathe the infected eyes of children and the use of cobwebs to stop bleeding. We learned the first remedy from our Italian neighbor on Mott Street, and the second from John Filliger, our farmer at Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island.

The next morning we checked out of our very comfortable rooms at Rogers Hall, after Mass at the College church. There were many other things I would have liked to have done in St. Louis. I would have liked to visit other members of our Catholic Worker group. I would like to have seen the Carters who practice such hospitality not only to their friends, but to the needy, and this in spite of a hard life of teaching and of ill health. I would like to have seen Luke Lanvermeyer who suffered so greatly the loss of his wife a couple of years ago, and who, aside from his daily work, has found time to cart around a moving picture machine to the home of invalids to show films several nights a week, to which the neighbors also come. I would like to have seen again Father Elmer H. Behrman, who is the director of a department of special education of the archdiocese, who had done much for handicapped children. I would have liked to see Father Ong again, who was the roommate of Father Taillard de Chardin in Paris. I would like to have seen Father Higgins, who has given Recovery Retreats, and has worked with many Recovery groups, and whose pamphlet on the subject has introduced this group therapy to so many people who have been mentally or emotionally disturbed. And there is also in this city a priest whom I have never met, a Father Dismas who works with

prisoners. I saw Frank Lakey only once; I would like to have visited him and his family at his home again. Frank had spent a summer with us at Maryfarm at Newburgh. But there were so many engagements ahead, we had to proceed on our way.

We visited the St. Charles shrine of Philippine Duchesne, and then we went out to Old Monroe to visit Mignon McManame on her farm. She goes into St. Louis two or three days a week to work at the Pio Decimo Shop, but most of the time she tries to stay on the farm where she lives very much like a hermit. She has an interesting habit of asking her friends who visit her to read a favorite excerpt from some book they have with them on to a tape recorder, and then she plays these readings during her solitary meals. The last time I visited with her I read aloud to her a long excerpt from the pamphlet "On The Invocation of the Name of Jesus," by a monk of the Eastern Church.

Mignon too, is a strong believer in folk medicine, and she recommended that I take vinegar and water with honey for the arthritic pains in my knee. After a short visit we went on to Rhineland which we were anxious to reach before nightfall. It is very easy travelling with a car, and we can cover long distances between cities, but it always takes hours at the last to arrive at our destination, especially when our friends live well off the beaten track in places like Starkenburg, Missouri. There at Starkenburg is a lovely shrine to Our Lady of Sorrows with a replica of the grotto of Lourdes, with Saint Bernadette, an outdoor chapel, stations of the cross, and a shrine church in addition to the parish church. Right now there is no priest resident at Starkenburg, and the well in the grotto, which was the answer to a prayer, has gone dry. So we were sorry that we were not able to get some of this water to which Lourdes water was added once a year.

To get to Starkenburg we had to turn off the main highway thirty five miles or so north, and some of the roads were newly covered with pebbles which made the driving difficult. They were high roads with a deep gully on either side, with no fence to give one a sense of protection, so that it was most difficult passing other cars.

We arrived as night was falling, and had to use a flashlight to see our way down through the valley and up the other side to the farm where Ruth Ann Heaney lives with four of her children and with her brother Richard Boylston from California who is helping her build up the farm. He has done a great work there repairing fences, building beautiful white gates and putting up new fences around new pastures and making cattle guards on the wider roads around the farm. It was a joy to look out over the fields the next day and see the peace and order which reigned. They have a herd of Herford cattle. There is a dairy herd, chickens and geese, but we did not see any of these things that night, as it was dark when we passed through the woodland and came up to the house which Ruth Ann had designed and which had been built from an old barracks by Marty Paul and a neighbor.

Marty Paul and his wife Gertrude had lived on the farm with their children going into this venture with the Heaneys back in 1947. Both families had saved their money and had chosen Starkenburg because it was next to a church. But certainly their beginnings were full of sorrow. Larry Heaney died of an abscessed lung and is buried in the little cemetery next to St. Martin's Church. After a number of years, Martin Paul was forced to leave the farm on account of the illness of his wife and they are now living in northern Michigan near her family, so that they can have the help of her parents with their children. Ruth is alone on the farm.

She has good neighbors and she has had the help of good brothers who have taken turns to be with her. Her boys are now 14 and 16 years old and can do anything on the farm, and her girls are good companions and good help. It's always a lovely experience to visit with them and life is arranged very comfortably although they have none of such conveniences as central heating and central plumbing. There is a wood fire in the open fireplace of the main room which is large enough for such a meeting as we had on Saturday afternoon, where three families with all their children gathered together with the Heaneys and with me to discuss community for families. I had just received the latest newsletter from the Taena Community in England, situated next door to Prinknash Abbey, in Gloucester, a community which has inspired many Catholic families with a desire for just such an experiment. The Sebergers, Linmenkamps, and Rudolphs all came with their small children, and despite threatened snow, it was a lovely midwinter picnic. Mary and I set off before the others to get a good start out of the backwoods and difficult roads before night fell.