

Mildred J. Loomis
School of Living
RD 7 York, Pa. 17402

FINDING A LIFE-STYLE CONSISTENT WITH RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

Mildred J. Loomis

As in most fields, there's a right and a left in religion. On the right are those reluctant to part company with a dead or dying past. The left want to match religious truth with truths in other fields. In between the liberals at least understand and are tolerant of both right and left. It took me a long time to become a religious liberal; still longer to develop a life style consistent with that framework.

In my childhood, in the early part of the century, I copied the religion of my peers. My Nebraska farm parents knew that life consisted of conquering the prairie. Religion was an extra, brought out when company came, of for infrequent hospitality to traveling Mormon or Seventh Day Adventist evangelists. We youngsters silently watched these black-hatted men pray at our table, and eat no meat. Like them, the first God I knew, had a grey beard.

When I was seven our family moved to town, so that we children could go to Sunday School and to "better" public schools. We sang in the small church choir, and for Billy Sunday revivals; were active in youth groups. In college, the YW and YMCA directed my religious zeal into social problems and big Student Volunteer conventions, where we were urged to "Evangelize the world in this generation."

I majored in philosophy and added courses in Business Administration. I would go into the business world to earn a big salary to repay hardworking parents for putting me through college. But with a cum laude degree, I couldn't muster the courage for the prof-

ferred job of advertising manager in a big department store. I became a minister's assistant in a large city church.

The job was begun in high spirits. Soon I noted the tenement children, who played on the streets nearby, and didn't come to Sunday School. And houses of prostitution across from our handsome church. No church members seemed surprised, nor were they concerned in the local mill workers striking for better conditions. My enthusiasm began to wane for writing the minister's letters, and reminding the elders to attend Tuesday's meeting. I wondered whether I'd be more effective in a job with children.

In 1928, I became a teacher in a progressive weekday School of Religion in Dayton, Ohio. I met hundreds of public school children, in classes for scriptural and character education. Here were challenging concepts of the Bible, of child-development, making friends with negro children, and confronting the challenge of poverty and broken homes.

The Great Depression Raises Questions

Without warning, this City Beautiful collapsed in 1931. The banks closed, factories shut down, half the heads of families were out of work. Hungry children stayed home from school. What had happened? "The Stock Market crashed!" But why? What caused the depression? What could we do about it?

I didn't know; my degree in economics was no help. My college profs. sent contradictory comments. Ministers and co-workers were puzzled at my question, "Has the church a responsibility for preventing such conditions?"

I had to find out. Four of our staff, for whom there was no long salaries, went to Mecca. In New York's Columbia University and Union Seminary, we repeated those questions. They set us reading books on Socialism; courses in psychiatry and Ethical Interpretation of Current Events. I worked with children in The

Bowery and on Riverside Drive. I heard heard Dr. Harry Fosdick, Dr. John Haynes Holmes and Scott Nearing at 'radical' spots in the city. Stimulating and confusing. Sociologist Harold Rugg recommended a book,--"not capitalist, not socialist," he said.

"This Ugly Civilization by Ralph Borsodi is a third way, with the best of each." We along/ with many who had preceeded us, went to talk with Borsodi at their Dogwoods Homestead, in Rockland County.

The Borsodis had built their large, comfortable home from native rock. Copper-hooded fireplaces, handwoven drapes, artistic pottery. In the cozy kitchen, mills and motors ground flour and cereal; juiced fruits and vegetable. An Aga stove gave plenty of heat and hot water on half a bucket of coal a day. Dried herbs in the windows added to the productive atmosphere. Outside were woods for fuel; gardens, fruit and nut trees. A stone shed for chickens, ~~and~~ a pig and two goats. Down the slope was a swimming pool, and a stone cottage for a married son. Here on 16 acres was a ppodcutive life, quite different from Nebraska farming, work and lesure, production and consumption, independence and artistic creativity, all rolled together.

We asked Borsodi "What to do to revive Dayton?"

"Get unemployed families on homesteads like ours!" he quickly replied. "Ring Dayton with small communities where families can build and garden, produce on their own."

It wasn't long until Borsodi was invited to Dayton. With the local Social Agencies, they developed Liberty Homestead Community, widely discussed in Survey Graphic and other journals of the time. ~~in Chicago~~

In the Spring of 1932, I had a Masters Degree in Religious Education and no tie to doctrinal formulations. I agreed that ours was "an ugly civilization" but that "progressive education" ~~could~~ was equal to anything. I would test it out in Little Hell, a Chicago

ghetto, directing girls' work in a Neighborhood House.

This job too was begun with zest. After school, noisy Italian and Negro children poured in for crafts, glee club, gym, dramatics. Wan Mrs. Mitchell from Works Progress Administration helped boys paint tin cans, meant for food-cannisters. When I stopped to approve, Mrs. Mitchell sighed, "But what's the use?" Later, painted cannisters used as footballs in the alley, gave point to her question.

At the Spring Festival, my doubts increased. The audience was arriving at the gym, when girls excitedly shouted, "Mary can't come! Her father won't let her. Come, get Mary!" Mary was a soloist in the operetta, a lead in a play, part of two figure dances. No Mary, no show!" We raced down the street, up three flights, and into the Marcelli kitchen. Mother was wiping Mary's tear-stained face; Father sat with head on his arms on the table.

"We've come to get Mary," we said. "

Mr. Marcelli raised up, shouting, "She no go; she got no dress, no shoes."

"But we have. We'll put shoes and dresses on her!"

"She no go! We got no chairs, no curtains, no food. Nutting! My case-a-wkkk; she give me no work for nineteen months!"

"You come to the settlement house tomorrow, and I'll get you a job.:

We got Mary out and the show went on. Back stage I watched her pirouette in the ballet, heard her sweet singing. She must go home -- ~~soon~~ ^{an angry} to a father frustrated by no work. No one in Chicago could find work for him in Chicago in 1933! As the ~~show~~ ^{months} went on I knew I could no longer stay there, ~~putting band-aids on the~~ ^{putting band-aids on the} ~~wounds~~ ^{old and} vicious economic system.

I went back to Dayton, ~~where~~ Liberty Homestead families were building homes on 80 acres. Busy in kitchens and gardens, women gathered in the afternoons for weaving or child-care. Children ran in the woods and tended chickens, rabbits and goats. How our Chicago "neighbors" would have loved it!

But as winter approached, Liberty homesteaders were troubled. Funds were exhausted, and the only recourse ~~was~~ ^{seemed} a government loan, along with government supervision and control.

Ralph Borsodi cautioned against it. "Government is to protect our persons and property; not to direct our business and our communities." When he chose to return to his home in Suffern, N.Y., a homesteader remarked to a saddened group, "A wise man has returned to the East."

Under Federal control, the Dayton homesteaders shivered in unfinished houses. After much ~~delay~~, changes of supervisors, and ~~uncertainty~~, the project was liquidated, and homesteaders sought ~~relief~~ ^{"relief"}. traditional jobs, or unemployment ~~"relief"~~. I taught public school and enrolled in adult courses in Consumers Cooperation and Henry George School of Social Science. From the later, came the challenge of recognizing land as a common heritage--never to be treated as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, no more than a human being should ever be bought and sold....Ralph Borsodi began a School of Living, at Suffern, N.Y., for research in how to live as a fulfilling human being.

The School of Living

In 1939, Borsodi's School of Living, an attractive Dutch colonial house, ~~was~~ ^{on its} four acres, was the center of Bayard Lane ^{small} community of 16 family homesteads. I went to be part of it--assisted with research in home production. ~~Home~~ ^{Home} canning and baking proved more nutritious and economical than purchased food of equal

largely because advertising, sales and distribution costs are avoided.

The sanity ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ of "modern homesteading" appealed.
 and
 School of Living carpenters/ architects helped families to build other homesteads and communities, similar to Bayard Land. People came to investigate organic gardening, natural foods, cooperative financing, communal-or-trust-holding of land. (sociologists, ~~xxxxxx~~ teachers,
 here
 and journalists ~~too~~. For me it was a challenging new way of life; certainly not 'capitalist' as I knew it, and not the socialism of my student days. I was aglow with a satisfying, non-exploitive pattern, part and parcel of socio-economic reforms I believed would create the war-less world I longed for.

Changes came too in my personal life-style. It was possible to add marriage, sharing the homestead life-pattern with John Loomis. We changed a run-down Ohio farm to Lane's End Homestead, where in creative leisurely fashion, we produced almost everything we used. We added a low-cost concrete building to become an outpost for the School of Living, with library and housing of informal students and apprentices. For thirty-five years, we shared and enjoyed the ups and downs of what we decentralists call the good life.

~~New~~ What Place for Productive Homesteads Today?

Now in the 80s, more people are alarmed by the modern crisis -- pollution, energy shortage, inflation, crime, cancer, alienation, materialism. More people are assessing and welcoming a productive home. Newcomers sometimes exclaim, "We can't turn the clock back!", meaning "we can't change technological trends". But of course we can! The essence of ^{democracy} Christianity is "human beings are creatures of choice, not automatons." Humans have the power (of God) within, and most assuredly reap what they sow. Since human beings create machines, factories, technology, they can direct them.