

RALPH BORSODI.

OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

by Mildred J. Loomis

Dropping the day's mail onto his pack of unanswered letters, homesteader Ralph Borsodi answered the phone. He listened to an urgent voice . . . and nodded affirmatively to his wife, kneading bread nearby.

"Thank you," he said to his phone caller. "I'm glad my book has been helpful. Yes, Myrtle Mae and I would show you our homestead. Could you come next Saturday morning when others will be here? So many have responded to our story that we've had to schedule peoples' visits in groups to accommodate them all."

That was in 1931, during the Great Depression, which Ralph Borsodi had predicted, as he reported his family adventure in *The Ugly Civilization*. Thousands of readers had welcomed Borsodi's philosophy and productive lifestyle at Dogwoods, the Borsodi's modern homestead near Suffern, New York. Reviewers termed it "America's first critique of centralized industrialism." Harry Elmer Barnes said it was both "timely and timeless."

Ralph Borsodi's values, writings and actions led to acclaiming him America's voice for decentralism. He spoke for the self-reliant, the quality-minded and believers in independence and security. From his birth in 1886 and his youthful assistance with his publisher father, to his death in 1977, Borsodi and his family took definite steps toward his increasingly clear vision of a good life in a good society.

Today, in the 1980s, Borsodi is labeled "fifty years ahead of his time." One who not only spoke, but acted in the vanguard, Borsodi not only met successes, he also encountered critics and adversaries. In his predominately upward climb toward self-conscious goals, three of his outstanding projects brought reverses that would have discouraged a less intrepid soul—one in 1933, another in 1945, and a third in the 1960s. My 35 years of study of and work with Ralph Borsodi allowed my participation and close observation of them.

A COMMITTED MAN

I knew Ralph Borsodi as an inner-directed person, a brilliant mind, sensitive and responsive to simple, beautiful things, but always disciplined and committed to acting on clear, ethical principles. I have seen him impatient and occasionally blunt, but predominantly quiet, considerate and compassionate. We who knew him well marvel at his complexity, his range of knowledge, and his achievements on so many levels. A chronological listing of events has shaped a forthcoming biography.

Antedating the current nutritional-upbeat, Borsodi discarded packaged cereals in 1918. His 1921 Dogwoods Homestead of native rock is still a model for new-age builders; and his 1921 electrified kitchen flour mill a lead in appropriate technology. His expose of high distribution costs in *National Advertising and Prosperity*, is the Waterloo of centralized industry. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* popularizes self-reliance, and Borsodi's 1934 *Flight from the City* was republished 40 years after it appeared.

Borsodi's Suffern, New York School of Living (1936-45) opened the door for widespread experimentation in free universities, home education, etc. His 1942 *Inflation Is Coming* suggested both short and long range steps that show why Keynes "controlled" inflation is not the solution. Borsodi's *Education and Living* (1948) suggested "norms of living." Borsodi's study-writing in India and the Far East showed *The Challenge of Asia* (1958) and tied into the Eastern Buddhist permeation of Western concepts. In India too, Borsodi produced *A Decentralist Manifesto*, a simple, far-reaching "platform" in advance of Citizens Parties. His stimulating summary of *Seventeen Major Problems of Individuals and Society* (1968) guides many a searcher for integration in today's education.

In the late 60s and early 70s co-workers joined in Borsodi's most definitive social changes; the International

Independence Institute presenting an ethical alternative to land speculation in The Community Land Trust, and a people's cooperative money system, The Constant, to replace the exploitative aspect of the U.S. Federal Reserve and its consequent inflation.

In 1977 at Ralph Borsodi's death, friends and students published a memorial *Green Revolution*, and re-dedicated themselves to continuing his work for a truly free society.

A LONE HETSMAN

Borsodi was always ready to move on. He worked alone; he was not beholden to a corporation, an educational institution, or to a government. He was ever ready to leave behind, if need be, those who chose not to understand or who preferred a different standard.

One such incident was the Dayton Liberty Homestead (1931-34). As a member of one of those homestead households, I remember the shock we felt when Borsodi explained his principles—especially the *community* title (rather than *individual* title) to land.

"Land, like human beings, should not be subject to buying and selling," Borsodi said simply. "Land is not a humanly-produced product. Land is everyone's common heritage." To put it mildly, this startled us would-be homesteaders.

Long and vigorous discussions followed, with fear and anger frequently cropping up. Borsodi remained quiet and sure. Factions developed for and against "community land-tenure." Delays and no action in the project, which some reported was filled with "bickering." I called it miscommunication and inept group-process, stemming from our woeful miseducation in land ethics.

Borsodi also stood firm on financing Liberty Homestead without government and tax support. Those were the days of tight money and the Great Depression. When local funds for building homesteads ran out, homesteaders suggested borrowing from the U.S. government.

"But that brings us the risk of losing our control," said Borsodi. "Remember, 'he who pays the piper calls the tune.' Government action, as you know, rest on compulsion; government funds come out of taxing everyone's pocket or government issuing-printing money, which we eventually pay for too. Either way, deficits raise prices and bring on inflation."

The homesteaders listened, but knew no alternatives. When the time came, we voted for federal subsidy.

"Sorry," said Borsodi. "The dye is cast. Liberty Homestead Project is now yours to complete. I do not choose to work under government supervision." He returned to his home in Suffern, New York. Most of us agreed we were plunging into the responsibilities of democracy. Others called Borsodi "high-handed."

SCHOOL OF LIVING

That year, 1933, Borsodi planned with his family and neighbors: "If American people develop wisdom about their lives—about what government should do and should not do, about where to live, how to be healthy—a new education is needed. Let us build a School of Living."

They responded. By 1933, they had built Bayard Lane community—they procured 40 acres; raised the money; enlisted sixteen families to build two-acre homesteads, with a school homestead in the center. Here Borsodi implemented his cherished land reform. Their 40 treasured acres was in a *community land trust*. Each homesteader paid a small annual rental to the group-trust for use-title to a small acreage. He paid no high purchase price. As a land-trust member, each homestead family built, paid for, owned and had personal title to their home.

The Suffern School of Living developed, and so did its problems. Students, apprentices, sociologists came to observe and to study. One Bayard Lane homesteader, Hiram Merriman, was dissatisfied. He was successful with his dozen chickens, but he was ambitious. He wanted a thriving egg and poultry business. Why fiddle with a dozen hens?

When he proposed it, his neighbors, including Borsodi, reminded him that his contract with the community land trust limited his land-use to home production—not a commercial business.

Replied Hiram, "If it's the trust land contract that prevents it, let's rescind the community control of land use."

Hiram planned a campaign. He had energy and he undertook changing the community's land system. He found no strong conviction or support for land ethics among his fellow homesteaders. When the vote was taken, Hiram had a majority. So the Merrimans built their three story houses for 1,000 layers.