

South of the Mountains

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ROCKLAND COUNTY

Vol. 63, No. 2

April-June, 2019



Charlotte Parker

Charlotte Elizabeth Parker
Two New Exhibitions
Annual Dinner

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Marie Monteagudo, M.A., M.A., M.L.S., local history preservationist, moved to the Village of Chestnut Ridge in 2005 and has been documenting its history since 2014. She self-published *Historic Treasures of Chestnut Ridge* in 2016 and since then has exhibited her photographs in Rockland County and presented talks to the Spring Valley Rotary Club and county libraries. In 2018, Marie received the Historical Society of Rockland County's Preservation Leadership Award. This is her second article for *South of the Mountains*.

Two New Exhibitions. Page 16

Executive Director Susan Deeks writes up two new exciting exhibits at the Historical Society: **Influencers: Art and History on South Mountain Road**, a collaborative project with the Rockland Center for the Arts, and **Rockland Voices: Handmade by Henry Varnum Poor**.

The Historical Society of Rockland County Annual Dinner. . . . Page 18

Alice Gerard received the Living Landmark Award, Kenneth Torsoe received the Community Service Award and the Grant Family received the Lifetime Service Award.

COVER PICTURE: Charlotte Elizabeth Parker, circa 1918. *From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center.*

SOUTH OF THE MOUNTAINS (ISSN 0489-9563) is published quarterly by the Historical Society of Rockland County, 20 Zukor Road, New City, NY 10956; telephone, 845-634-9629; fax, 845-634-8690; website, rocklandhistory.org; email, info@rocklandhistory.org. Single copy price of *South of the Mountains* is \$5, including postage and handling.

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Editor: Marjorie H. Johnson

Consulting Editor: Marianne B. Leese

Printing by Harrington Press, Nyack, New York

Charlotte Elizabeth Parker

Co-Founder of the Threefold Community

The Rudolph Steiner Community in Chestnut Ridge

by Marie Monteagudo

In 1926, as Charlotte Parker stood on the crest of a hill in South Spring Valley and gazed past the farmland toward the country road called Hungry Hollow, perhaps she was envisioning what was to become the Threefold Community, today a thriving 140-acre living model of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical spiritual, educational and philosophical movement.

Born February 24, 1890, in Ipswich, Massachusetts, Charlotte was the daughter of an Episcopalian minister, the Reverend Robert B. Parker, and his wife, Sarah. Her brother, Robert Benjamin Parker, Jr., was born November 4, 1891. The family moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where Charlotte studied art history, painting, French and Ancient Greek at Miss Wheeler's School for Girls.

The family was well-to-do and traveled the world, to Europe and the Far East. Both siblings were sent to a German boarding school to learn German. The Parkers moved back to Ipswich in 1912 and are listed as members of the Ipswich Historical Society, which notes

in one of its publications the travels of Charlotte and her brother to support the World War I efforts in France.

Charlotte joined the Women's Peace Party in New York and volunteered as a member of the Fund for French Wounded, traveling to Paris in October, 1917, at the age of 27. Her brother, who was unable to enlist because of his eyesight, joined the American Field Service and traveled with her. Charlotte was assigned duties related to fitting and buying supplies, and her proficiency in French was praised as invaluable.

In France, Charlotte was introduced to the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner by her uncle's sister-in-law, Louise Bybee, who was there as a Red Cross worker. In time, Charlotte and Louise were to become lifelong friends.

Rudolf Steiner called his body of thought anthroposophy—a term he devised from the Greek words *anthrop*, meaning human, and *sophia*, meaning wisdom.

Upon returning from France in 1919, Charlotte pursued interior design studies at Boston's Museum of



Charlotte Elizabeth Parker, Circa 1918
In Uniform for the Fund for French Wounded
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center



Rudolf Steiner
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center

Fine Arts, where she excelled in set design. In the early 1920s, she traveled to New York City to study life drawing at the Art Students League, where she studied with Robert Henri of the Ashcan School of American artists.

This decision to move to Manhattan changed the course of Charlotte's life. In 1922, at the age of 32, she reconnected with Louise Bybee, who invited her to the St. Mark's Group of the Anthroposophical Society in America, the first study group in the United States centered on the works of Rudolf Steiner, Austrian educator, scientist, philosopher and spiritual reformer.

Musicians, artists and actors gathered to listen to the readings of his work at the Carnegie Hall studio of accomplished singing teacher Herbert Wilber Greene. The members of this group embraced the teachings of Steiner, who believed that human

nature was a "threefold organization of thinking, feeling and willing" and proposed a new social order based on the original spirit of France's motto, "liberté, égalité, fraternité."¹

During this time, Charlotte met Ralph Courtney, a former Paris correspondent and fellow anthroposophist, who desired to develop Steiner's vision of solving social issues and formed an offshoot of the Steiner movement called the Threefold Commonwealth Group. Courtney proceeded to lease an apartment with Louise Bybee at Sixth Avenue and 56th Street. They rented rooms to friends and members of the group, and Ralph began readings of Steiner's work to a small group that included Charlotte, Louise and piano student Gladys Barnett—later Hahn.

In 1923, Charlotte moved to an apartment leased by Ralph at 207 West 56th Street. Along with Louise and Gladys, she learned eurhythmy, a

flowing, expressive, dancelike movement. Eurythmy, meaning a beautiful or harmonious rhythm, was developed in 1911 by Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers, who made major contributions to anthroposophy and later became Steiner's second wife.

The three women took classes from Lucy Neuscheller in New York and traveled once a week to Orange, New Jersey, for an extra class that Lucy taught, rehearsing for a first-ever event of this performance art at St. Mark's in the Bowery.

In 1924, Charlotte met Rudolf Steiner for the first time in Torquay, England, when she traveled with Ralph, Louise and Margaret Peckham, a fellow anthroposophist, to attend his lectures.

In 1928, she traveled to Dornach, Switzerland, with Ralph and Louise for the opening of the world center for the anthroposophical movement, the Goetheanum, designed by Rudolf Steiner. This was the second Goetheanum, built of reinforced concrete to replace the first wooden building that was destroyed by fire in 1922. The impressive second structure would not be completed until 1998.

Back in New York, Ralph Courtney wished to provide evening meals for his tenants, a communal dinner cooked by Louise, Charlotte and Gladys, as well as an afternoon English teatime. Charlotte, who was an heiress and woman of means, had never cooked a day in her life.

Nevertheless, she took the helm. In "A Short History of the Threefold Community," she describes preparations for the evening meal as "prolonged discussions in the kitchen as to how in the world one cooks rice, or

what method to pursue to get the sand out of the spinach."²

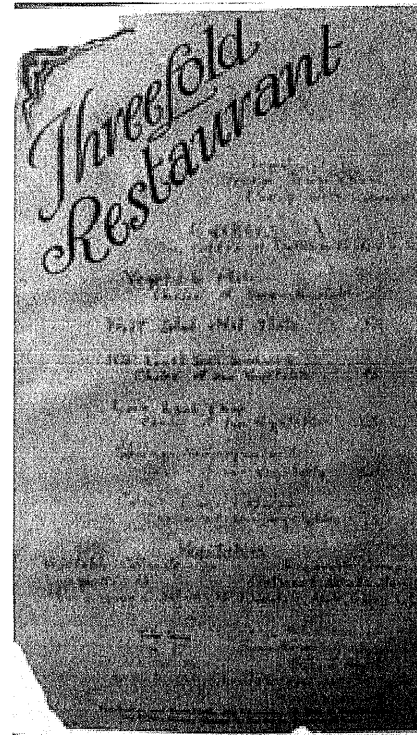
Shortly after the New Year of 1924, with growing popularity of the evening meal, the Threefold Vegetarian Restaurant opened in the basement of 207 West 56th Street. It was frequented by customers from Carnegie Hall, the Art Students League and nearby Broadway theatres.

The walls of the bohemian restaurant, decorated by Threefold members, displayed colorful map-like murals and vine-like designs that followed and covered up the cracks in the plaster. Threefold group members pitched in, waiting on tables, washing dishes and cashiering in a joyful communal spirit.

At the front of the restaurant, Helene Luttmann sold anthroposophical Weleda products, including creams and toothbrushes.³ Ralph Courtney went daily to lower Manhattan's wholesale markets and ordered produce to be delivered by truck.

As the customer base grew, an increasing demand for a lunch menu was heard. As she tossed off the tenth order for an omelette, Charlotte discovered that being a chef was not so easy, so Marie Dennett was hired to help with the cooking.⁴

Although faint, an original handwritten dinner menu offers, among other entrees, a Vegetable Plate with a choice of three vegetables for 40 cents and Shrimp Newburgh on Toast with a choice of a vegetable for 50 cents. Among the desserts was Chocolate, Pineapple or Pistachio Ice Cream, 15 cents. "NO TIPS" was printed at the bottom of the menu; however, there was a service charge of 5 cents for every 55 cents or part thereof. The customers were at first mainly female;



Menu
From the Collection of
Threefold Educational Center

but, as the restaurant's popularity grew, they asked that meat dishes be added for spouses and boyfriends, hence the Calve's Liver and Bacon at 75 cents on the menu.

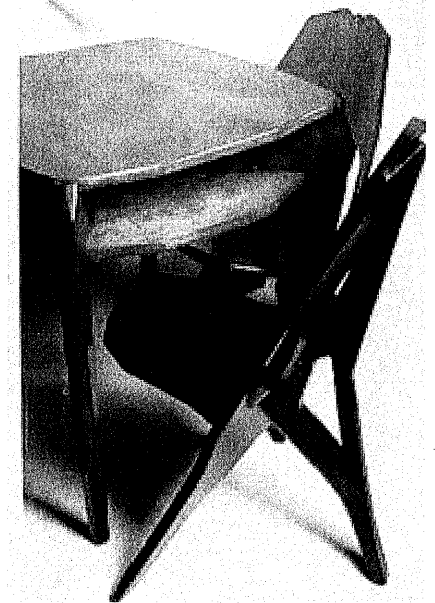
It was said that the restaurant served the best cup of coffee in town, and its popularity could not be undermined even by a *New Yorker* restaurant review which downplayed it as a "tearoomy cellar...ridiculously like a student lunching and dining place."⁵

Soon the restaurant outgrew its space and was moved to 318 West 56th Street in 1930. A carpenter by the name of Carl Schmidt was hired for the interior work, and Fritz Westhoff created furniture of anthroposophical designs. After a year or so, there were

200 lunch customers and 100 for dinner. Additional workers were hired, including Vivienne Clarke to cook dinner and immigrants from Jamaica as kitchen staff.

By now, Charlotte was managing the restaurant. In an article by fellow anthroposophist Jeanette Eaton, "Where the Vegetable Kingdom Acquires New Royalty," Charlotte, is pictured seated in profile and outfitted in a fashionable dress of the day. The caption describes her as the "organizer and head of the Threefold Vegetarian Restaurant." Serenely composed, pen poised in hand, she deceptively appears to be a lady of leisure. In actuality, she was running a hectic enterprise.⁶

In the meantime, Ralph's desire for awareness of how and where their food was sourced, based on the emerging biodynamics movement—



Furniture of Anthroposophical Design
From the Collection of
Threefold Educational Center



Threefold Restaurant at 308 West 56th Street
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center

that is, organic, chemical-free farming and the belief in nurturing the soil—resulted in Charlotte’s trips first to Westchester and then to Rockland County.

Gladys Barnett Hahn recalls what happened next:

One day, Ralph and I were eating lunch in the kitchen at “207” (one of the apartments), when the phone rang. Charlotte was calling from a place we’d never heard of, called Spring Valley, to ask whether Ralph could come out at once. Ralph left in five minutes. The next morning, Charlotte, Ralph and I, and Louise Bybee, the member through whom Charlotte had joined our Group, traveled out to Spring Valley to see what Charlotte had found. She was prepared to buy it if we were all in agreement about it. It was a tiny five room house in good condition. It had a tremendous lawn leading up to it from a dirt road, with a brook edging the lawn. It comprised about 25 acres. There was more acreage available

stretching toward the hill in back, also a large stretch of acreage for sale directly across the road.

We sat on the grass in front of the tiny house. Charlotte asked us each separately for our opinion. I, the “kid” of the group and the last one to be asked, said: “Yes! And if you buy it at once, I offer to move out here to paint the whole interior—but remember, this is April and I have my ticket to go to Dornach early in May.” Ralph spoke up: “And I’ll come out to paint the whole exterior at the same time.”

And that’s what happened. While we painted, Charlotte was shopping the city for furniture, bedding, china and kitchenware.”⁷

On April 30, 1926, Charlotte purchased with some of her inheritance 21.58 acres⁸ of this former strawberry farm in Spring Valley in order to grow quality produce for the restaurant as well to provide for a summer place for conferences.

This was the genesis of today’s Threefold Community in what is now the Village of Chestnut Ridge, lying along Hungry Hollow Road and including the Duryea Farm on Ackertown Road. As members of the Threefold group began to transition to the farm, Charlotte continued to manage the restaurant.

By 1955, more land had been purchased and the property contained 55 acres. A *Journal-News* article of that year describes in detail some of the initial work that was done by Charlotte, Louise and Ralph:

With customary resourcefulness, they proceeded to refurbish the old homestead [today’s Main House], hack the weeds away from its doorsill, write their change of address cards, and clear out an orchard in the back yard where evenings they could sit around and talk about the things that had brought them there.⁹

In 1926, Gladys Barnett and Elise Stolting traveled to Dornach, Switzerland, initially to learn eurythmy at the Gothaneum, but they concentrated on learning biodynamic farming, a precursor to the organic farming movement.

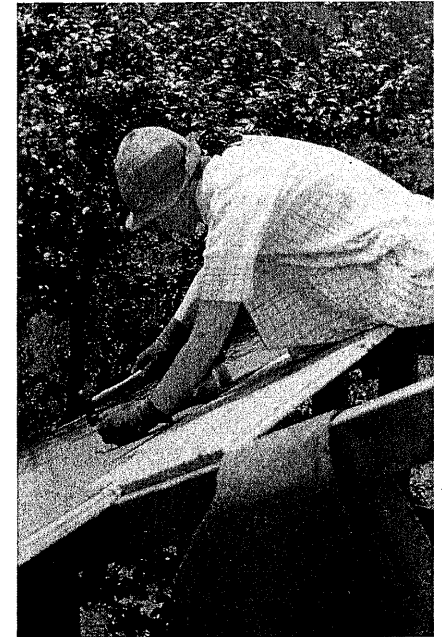
Upon returning to the United States in 1927, they started Threefold’s first garden based on biodynamic methods. They set up beehives and learned how to prune the apple trees in the orchard with Kees Jansen. In time, a cow and a horse for plowing were added and a good-sized cowherd followed in the years to come, as well as pigs, goats, chickens and geese.

Paul Stromenger, trained in biodynamic farming, came in 1928, along

with Carl Schmidt, skilled at carpentry and woodworking. Marjorie Spock came during the summers to teach eurythmy and learn about farming. And so, the community took root in the soil of Spring Valley.

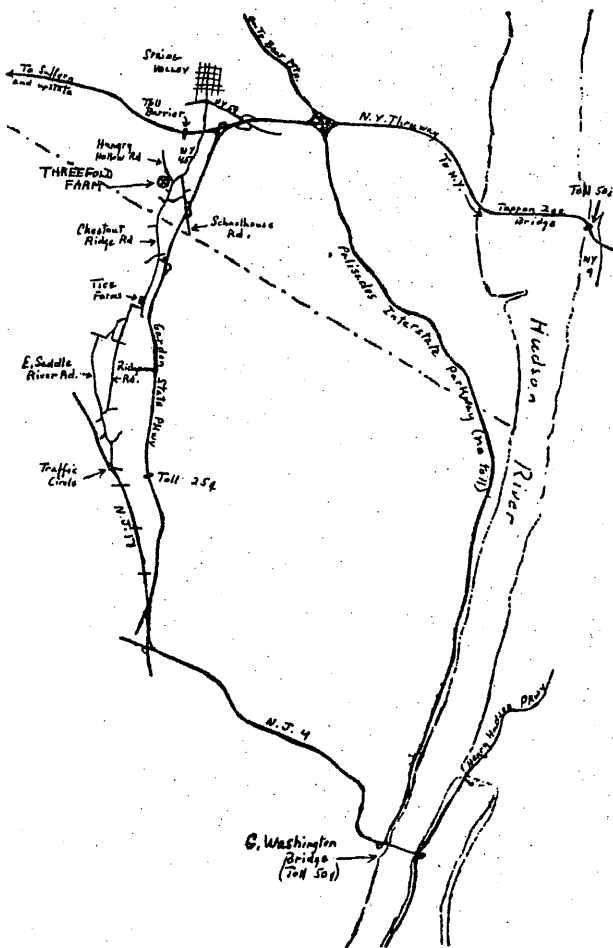
By 1933, the followers of anthroposophy had grown to 20,000 worldwide and the movement was well established in the United States. Ralph, Charlotte and Louise decided it was time to hold a summer conference, and Charlotte became the manager of the Anthroposophical Summer School Conference, the first such conference ever held in America.

The conference lasted from July 8 to July 23, and 75 to 100 attendees traveled from New England, the West and the New York metropolitan area to Spring Valley, known at the time as a



Charlotte Parker Nailing Shingles
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center

ROAD MAP



RATES

SUMMER SCHOOL LECTURES
50c. per Lecture.

EURYTHMY PAINTING and OTHER CLASSES
EXTRA.

BOARD and ROOM at the THREEFOLD FARM
near Auditorium

\$45.00 to \$70.00 weekly.

Daily Rate:
\$7.00 to \$10.00.

RESERVATIONS AT THE THREEFOLD FARM ACCOMPANIED BY A \$5.00 DEPOSIT MAY BE MADE BY WRITING TO: MRS. R. KROTH, THREEFOLD FARM, SPRING VALLEY, NEW YORK. NO DEDUCTIONS FOR ABSENCE

Vintage Map for a Conference at Threefold Farm
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center

bucolic resort area. Most came from New York City, either motoring or boarding buses from the Astor Hotel Bus Terminal in Manhattan at 45th Street. Others took the Erie train from Jersey City, and Ralph picked up these travelers in his roadster at the Spring Valley station, two miles away.

Although it rained heavily most days at the first conference, the participants, as in successive years, would enjoy listening to anthroposophical lecturers from abroad, taking art courses and long walks across the farm, swimming in the Threefold Pond, learning gardening and devouring the semi-vegetarian meals, prepared with produce from the biodynamic gardens.

For the first-ever two-week conference, day trippers paid 25 cents for

tickets to the lectures. Overnight guests were accommodated in canvas tents, rooms and "shacks." They could rent a tent for \$13 a week, or spend up to \$20 for a room, meals included.¹⁰

A large circus tent was set up for lectures, and three European anthroposophists were invited: Ernst Lehrs, Maria Roschl and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, who lectured on topics that included spiritual science, pedagogy and biodynamics.

Ralph Courtney, Louise Bybee and Charlotte Parker had met Ehrenfried Pfeiffer at the opening of the second Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, in 1928. Inspired by Rudolf Steiner, Ehrenfried became a pioneer in and authority on biodynamic agriculture.

Emigrating to the United States in 1940, Pfeiffer would come to live at



Charlotte Parker, Ralph Courtney and Louise Bybee, Circa 1927
From the Collection of Threefold Educational Center



Orchard House
Photographed by Marie Monteagudo

Threefold from 1946 until his death in 1961. Here he set up his Bio-Chemical Research Laboratory to further develop biodynamic farming. In 1996, the Pfeiffer Center was established as a small-scale farm to teach and spread awareness of biodynamics.

Charlotte continued to manage the summer conferences, with hundreds participating each year, for several decades. The conferences have continued annually to this day except for two years during World War II.

Another of Charlotte's major accomplishments was designing her residence, the Orchard House, at Threefold, making use of her artistic talents. Construction began in 1940 on the two-story brick house and was completed in the next several years with Carl Schmidt as the builder and neighbors Mr. Jones and his sons assisting him.

Ralph Courtney also lived at Orchard House, and Ehrenfried originally had his laboratory on the second floor of the garage. Currently it houses euryth-

my students on the second floor and the Fiber Arts classes on the first floor.

Charlotte continued to work with others in the community as it developed its various undertakings over time, including biodynamic farming, a grocery store, a Waldorf school, the 200-seat Threefold auditorium and the Anthroposophic Press.

In 1940, at the age of 50, she, along with Louise Bybee and Esther Eaton, was responsible for a benefit concert to raise funds to continue work on the second Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. Years later, on Charlotte's 90th birthday, her friend Bettina Kroth recalls:

At the end of the Second World War, when it became possible to send parcels to our stricken members in Europe, the basement of Charlotte's home became a veritable department store. Warm underwear, dresses, suits, shoes, coats—in all sizes and shapes—as well as canned goods,

*dried fruits, jams, honey, powdered milk, peanut butter—the list could go on and on—all purchased by Charlotte and packed and mailed with the help of a few members of the group. When my husband and I visited the Stuttgart Waldorf School in the fifties, some of the teachers were still wearing clothes from Charlotte!*¹¹

Bettina said that Charlotte was always thinking ahead, noting that:

*When a conference or festival was finished, Charlotte was already planning the next event. What would the overall subject be? Which lecturers should be invited? How can we arouse a greater interest in the work of Rudolf Steiner? How inspire people to read and study?*¹²

One who remembers Charlotte is Ann Scharff. She and her husband, Dr. Paul Scharff, were co-founders of the Fellowship Community, a multi-gener-

ational, long-term care community in which all ages live and work together on property purchased in the Threefold Community in 1966. Ann recalls how Charlotte loved to entertain.

At a dinner party to which the Scharffs were invited, guests were seated at a long banquet table, with Charlotte presiding at one end and Ralph Courtney at the other. Ann remembers Charlotte's thoughtfulness in sending gifts to the Scharff children.¹³

As a devotee of Rudolf Steiner, Charlotte continued to enjoy studying his teachings and savored reading his original works in German, as well as spreading his "Spiritual Science" philosophy.¹⁴ When Charlotte was 99, she moved to the Fellowship Community to live out the rest of her years, where, Ann recalls, she enjoyed being surrounded by children from toddlers to teenagers.

Charlotte was well known outside the community as well. A staff member recalls that the local florist, A. Dykstra, sent her 100 roses on her 100th birthday. At least three articles were published by *The Journal-News*, including one with a photo of her at the age of 103.

In her 90th birthday tribute to Charlotte, Bettina Kroth said:

*She has been like a fairy godmother, over the years, to dozens and dozens of people. How many students she has helped to finish their training! She takes joy in helping others—her good deeds are accomplished quietly and without fanfare.*¹⁵

There are now fourteen non-profit entities on the expansive, wooded campus that comprises the Threefold Community—grown far beyond the co-



Charlotte Parker and Friends
*From the Collection of
 Threefold Educational Center*

founders' wildest expectations. They cover the fields of arts, education, agriculture, anthroposophy and inter-generational care, and include Green Meadow Waldorf School, the Hungry Hollow Co-op Natural Foods Market, Sunbridge Institute, Pfeiffer Center and Eurythmy Spring Valley.

There are two related businesses, Meadowlark Toys & Sunbridge Books and The Apothecary, which sells home-

opathic prescription and non-prescription items, including Weleda products.

Charlotte Elizabeth Parker passed away on January 6, 1994, at the age of 104, a *grande dame* to the last, with a life well lived, leaving a legacy to last for generations to come. As Bettina Kroth once so aptly wrote: "And so, dear Charlotte, with love and admiration we salute you!"¹⁶ ▶

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AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My grateful appreciation goes to Marianne Leese, Senior Historian of the Historical Society of Rockland County, for her patience, perseverance and expertise in shepherding this article to publication. In addition, the following individuals and institutions provided invaluable research help: Ray Manacas and Christa Lynch of the Threefold Educational Center; Joe Barbieri, Local History Librarian at the New City Library; Kathleen and Martin, Library Assistants in the Rudolf Steiner Library in Hudson, NY; Paul Friedman and other librarians of The New York Public Library; the Reference Staff of the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Ipswich Historical Commission.