

**A Short History
of the
THREEFOLD COMMUNITY**



Spring Valley, New York

1922-1972



Ralph Courtney, the founder of the Threefold Group, while acting as Paris correspondent of the New York Herald Tribune, became interested in Anthroposophy through his mother who lived at that time in Dornach. In the spring of 1921, having had several talks with Rudolf Steiner, he decided to return to America and was given the task of promoting the anthroposophical medical work already introduced in this country. The St. Mark's Group of New York City was the first group of the Anthroposophical Society to be formed in the United States. Their meetings were held in the studio of Herbert Wilber Greene, a well-known musician, in Carnegie Hall. It was there that Mr. Courtney met the first members in America of the Anthroposophical Society. Among them at that time were a pupil of Mr. Greene, Hilda Deighton, who later lived at the Farm in Spring Valley for many years, Gladys Barnett (now Gladys Hahn), and Louise Bybee, who had become interested in Anthroposophy in Paris during the First World War.

Ralph Courtney soon discovered there was no way in which he could be of help to the medical work, as Mme. Ricardo, who directed it, felt she needed no assistance! He therefore decided to do what he could to arouse an interest in Rudolf Steiner's Threefold Commonwealth, a solution of the social problem that deeply interested him and that he felt to be of tremendous importance.

As a first step toward launching an association of producers and consumers, one of the basic ideas of the Threefold Commonwealth, Ralph Courtney and Louise Bybee leased an apartment in New York City, at the corner of Sixth Avenue and 56th Street, a block below Carnegie Hall, and gradually rented its rooms to members and friends. Here, in the fall of 1923, Mr. Courtney began reading Rudolf Steiner's lectures to a small group that included Louise

Bybee, Gladys Hahn, and Charlotte Parker. Gladys Hahn had come to New York to study piano and took one of the rooms in the apartment. Charlotte Parker, studying art in New York, had become interested in Anthroposophy through Louise Bybee and that fall joined the St. Mark's Group, attending its meetings at Carnegie Hall before joining Ralph Courtney's reading group.

In the summer of 1923 another apartment further west at 207 West 56th Street was leased and the individual rooms rented. One, on the ground floor, taken by Charlotte Parker, was used as a meeting room; and Gladys Hahn and Ralph Courtney moved from the first apartment to the second. These meetings were attended by Alice Jansen (then Alice Smith) and Constance Ling, both of whom were living in the first apartment, and by a few others.

In October Ralph Courtney suggested providing an evening meal for tenants in the two apartments and Charlotte Parker, never having cooked before, fell for the suggestion. With the help of Louise Bybee and Gladys Hahn, vegetarian dinners were prepared in the evening, involving 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. Mr. Courtney was the one whose superior intelligence generally solved these problems. It was he, too, who tactfully introduced the English tea-hour, for which members dropped in for a bit of conviviality in the meeting room every afternoon. Then in November the Threefold Commonwealth Group was formed with seven initial members: Ralph Courtney, Louise Bybee, Gladys Hahn, Margaret Peckham, Alice Jansen, Charlotte Parker, and Reinhardt Mueller.

Soon after the New Year, 1924, as the dinner club, then serving twenty-five, had outgrown its quarters, the basement of the same apartment house was rented, and when the members had decorated its walls by following the cracks in the plaster and producing some rather unusual murals, the Threefold Vegetarian Restaurant was in business.

Being near Carnegie Hall, the Art Students' League, and the Broadway theaters, it attracted artists, musicians, and actors, and soon there was a demand for lunches as well as dinners. This was not so easy as Charlotte Parker, at the stove, tossing off the tenth order for omelette, discovered, and it was decided a second cook must be found. Marie Dennett, a member of the Ruth Doing Rhythms group, to which Constance Ling and Louise Bybee belonged, agreed to take the job. Before long a meat dish at dinner was requested by lady customers whose husbands would not come otherwise. During this time, the group members washed dishes, cashiered, and waited on the tables. A stalwart blond youth named Kees Jansen, who was connected with the Anthroposophical Society in Holland, turned up and became so skillful in balancing trays that he won the heart of Alice Smith, who before very long consented to be Mrs. Jansen. Ralph Courtney went every day to the wholesale markets in lower Manhattan by the river and left orders for vegetables to be delivered by truck. At the end of the 1920's, as more space was needed for the restaurant and there was a possible site available further west on the same street, it was decided to buy 318 West 56th Street, and give up the apartments at 100 and 207, moving the occupants into the rooms at 318.

Needing a carpenter to transform the street floor of 318 into a restaurant, Ralph Courtney visited a German agency on West 86th Street and there found Carl Schmidt who little knew that once in the clutches of the Threefold Group he would never escape! Fritz Westhoff made furniture of anthroposophical design for the restaurant in a basement workshop of the same building and in 1930 the restaurant was moved.

After a year or so it was serving up to two hundred at lunch and a hundred at dinner. By this time there was a kitchen staff of young women from Jamaica and Vivienne Clarke, who now occupies one of our apartments at the Farm, was dinner cook. Charlotte Parker managed the

restaurant for some years and was succeeded by Frances Montgomery, who in turn was succeeded by Blanche Rosse.

During the early thirties a laundry was started, and also in the basement a workshop was installed where Carl Schleicher manufactured various articles and ground the lens for the telescope now at the Auditorium. At this time the adjoining house at 320 was purchased and its rooms rented. During the Depression of the thirties, the restaurant suffered financially and when the war came in 1941, the young waitresses all went into munitions factories and it became increasingly difficult to keep things going. By 1942 the activity of the Group had been transferred to the Farm and in that year the restaurant was closed. In due course the two buildings were sold. As early as 1926 Mr. Courtney had decided the Group should have a center in the country where conferences could be held. So a search was made and the Farm in Spring Valley was found and bought early in the spring of that year. It consisted at that time of the piece of land on which the Main House stands, with an orchard to the right and fields for some distance in the rear up over a hilly ridge.

The Main House had only one gable and, inside, one room downstairs—the present office and the tiny room off it—and two rooms upstairs. What is now the hallway was the dining room with the kitchen projecting to the right with a flat roof. A lean-to room was attached to the back of the hallway. As soon as possible a wing of bedrooms and a wash-room were attached to the back of the house for summer occupancy. In 1937 the present living room, with bedrooms and baths above, topped by a gable, made it look like a real house.

The living room served for a number of years as a dining room, run by Inge Fried (then Inge Lacroix) until in 1956 the present dining room and kitchen were built with rooms over them. The original summer wing was torn down to make way for this structure.

Returning to the twenties, something must be said of the beginnings of Bio-Dynamic farming and gardening in America. In 1927 Gladys Barnett was in Dornach, also Elise Stolting, who later married Ralph Courtney's brother and became Elise Courtney (the mother of Ann Pratt and Charlotte Dukich, both now Waldorf School teachers). In Dornach, through Count Keyserlingk's nephew, Gladys and Elise were introduced to the Bio-Dynamic agricultural methods and became so interested that they visited the Keyserlingk estates at Koberwitz in East Germany where Rudolf Steiner had given his Agricultural Course in 1924, and worked there and on another Keyserlingk estate far north in Prussia until they acquired a certain knowledge of the new methods. Then they came home and started a vegetable garden on the side lawn of the Main House.

Actual farming was begun with one cow in 1928 by Paul Stromenger from Switzerland. In the course of time, a horse was added and, of course, the cow had a calf or so. Mr. Stromenger was succeeded in 1934 by Fred Heckel. The land on which the big barn stands was purchased in 1935 as well as two more cows and a mule.

In 1944, as Fred Heckel had become involved in the war, Ernest Daniel took over the farming. When the sale of unpasteurized milk was forbidden, the Farm disposed of most of its cows and Ernest Daniel began giving instruction in gardening to the Green Meadow School children.

In 1933 the first Anthroposophical Conference was held at the Farm. A large circus tent was erected in the Oak Grove and three lecturers—Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Maria Roeschl and Ernst Lehms—were invited from abroad. In addition, Henry Monges, then General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society, Ralph Courtney, Christoph Linder, Jeanne de Mare, and Clifton Furness were on the program.

By this time the summer kitchen and dining porch had been completed and Alice Heckel and Margaret Selke installed as cooks, with the white headgear appropriate for chefs. Tents, shaped like crusader tents, dotted the hillside

across the road and could be rented, with meals, for thirteen dollars a week! The most expensive room with meals was twenty dollars.

The conference was well attended and one of its results was to bring Henry and Alfred Barnes and Anne Stockton into the Movement through Mrs. Stockton who, with her dachshund, also participated.

After 1933 a conference was held every summer, the first few through the month of July without a formal program. Various lecturers from Europe were invited, including Frederick Hiebel, Hermann Poppelbaum, Hermann von Baravalle and George Adams.

In the early thirties, Charlotte Driggs began managing the winter guest house, Bettina Kroth taking it on during the summer. Though a succession of cooks from the outside world have come and gone, one among them, our good friend, Mrs. Cassis, was responsible for the meals during the summer conferences as far back as one can remember, as well as being on hand once a week through the rest of the year. Dick Kroth lectured and gave painting lessons during and after the conferences and Hilda Deighton conducted singing classes. Discussions on the Threefold, led by Mr. Courtney, were included in all programs. For many years the interest in the social question was kept alive, not only by monthly letters written and circulated by Mr. Courtney with the help of Susanne Kingsley, who acted as his secretary, but also by a study group conducted by Fred Heckel over several years after Mr. Courtney's death. In the thirties Nancy Laughlin built a house for herself and Germaine Monteux on top of the so-called "New Land." There she lived as a fairy godmother, taking an interest in the varied activities of the Farm. Mme. Monteux, who was a concert pianist, greatly enriched the musical life of the Farm until her death.

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer lived at the Farm from 1939 until his death in 1961. In spite of ill health he soon established the Biochemical Research Laboratory on the second floor of

the Orchard House garage. There research was carried on and the crystallizations made.

Early in the thirties Louise Bybee bought the piece of land at the corner of Hungry Hollow Road and Route 45 on which a grocery store stood for many years. The store was run by several people, including Fanny Combs, until Mrs. Burns and Sally arrived and took it on for a number of years. In the late sixties Mrs. Burns' health necessitated her withdrawal and the store was put in the hands of Mr. Alex Flaum.

To provide a hall for the conferences, the present White Studio in front of the Main House had been constructed on the foundation of an old cow shed, and in it space for an audience of eighty was made available.

Carl Schmidt during the thirties had been occupied with additions to the Main House and a number of small buildings. In 1940, he and Mr. Jones, a neighbor, began work on the Orchard House and garage. When that was finished, Carl started on the Auditorium with Mr. DeBaun. Mrs. Scott Pyle (formerly Mieta Waller) had made, at Mr. Courtney's suggestion, a small model of the exterior of this projected building, which was used by him in planning the interior. Mr. DeBaun, having been a building contractor, had knowledge of overall construction, while Carl Schmidt could follow Mr. Courtney's ideas for the interior, and using his particular skill as a cabinet maker could fashion the beautiful wood inlay of the walls. It has seemed to many of us as little short of a miracle that these three men came together at this particular time to collaborate on this building that was so important for the community.

New quarters for the Biochemical Research Laboratory were established on the lower floor of the building and the space it had formerly occupied was transformed into an apartment for Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. Mrs. Sabarth, Mrs. Vibber, and Mrs. Pfeiffer carried on the work of the laboratory for many years. On the second floor, opening off from the Auditorium, stacks for books were installed as the begin-

ning of a library where, in due time, when the shelves were filled, Mrs. Leaver catalogued and arranged the books. In 1948 a small building was put up behind the Orchard House where Margaret Selke has been in charge of producing the Bio-Dynamic Compost Starter ever since.

In the summer of 1949, preceding the summer conference, the Auditorium was dedicated with an artistic program composed by Paul Nordoff. Lisa Monges directed the eurythmy in which Sabina Nordoff and others took part. There was singing by Hilda Deighton and Gina Palermo and recitation by Margaret Selke. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer was the chief lecturer in the conference that followed.

The next year George Adams was invited to lecture and from then on almost every year someone from abroad has headed the program. Mr. Harwood, Mr. Mann, and Mr. Edmunds came more than once and through the initiative of Mr. Edmunds, conferences for young people took place beginning in the fifties. Through the sixties Arnold Leaver and Fritz Koelln lectured at all the summer conferences. In the mid-fifties Sabina Nordoff began sharing the eurythmy classes of the conferences with Lisa Monges, and at this time Hans Pusch started his yearly production of scenes from the Mystery Plays in which Bettina Kroth, Howland Vibber, Fred Heckel, Walter Leicht, Peter Escher and many others took part. Sarah Burton contributed to the stage work by reciting and putting on plays, and for many years Anne Stockton conducted painting classes.

It had long been the desire of the Threefold Group to establish the beginnings of a Waldorf School at the Farm and in 1948 an attempt was made with a nursery class in the White House. The class was taken by Mary Dailey, who was helped by Elise Courtney when numbers increased. As a kindergarten was added, Stephanie Jones and Susanne Kingsley joined the staff. In 1956 a first grade was started and it became necessary to think of moving into larger quarters. The decision was made to put up a preschool building on land that bordered on Route 45. Walter Leicht, long a

member of the community, planned the building and later the one below. Recently, a gymnasium, an arts building, and a high school building, also designed by Mr. Leicht, have been added. Early in its existence the name of "Green Meadow" was given to the school because the children played on such a meadow above the first school.

The artistic life of the community has been enriched by the presence of the school, which has put on plays and given concerts in the Auditorium. A community chorus was formed through the initiative of Arnold Logan, and much of the responsibility for the festival celebrations has been carried by the teaching staff. In the fall of 1972 a ninth class heralded the beginning of a high school.

The conferences up to the time of Mr. Courtney's death in 1965 were given under the auspices of the Spiritual Science Foundation that had been established by him in 1950. In the last year of his life a charter was obtained with the aid of his friend and lawyer, Edward Aranow, for a tax-exempt foundation to replace the former one, to be called the Threefold Educational Foundation and School. Howland Vibber became chairman of the new foundation, Fred Heckel, secretary, and Charlotte Parker, treasurer. Mr. Leaver, Mr. Alexandra, and Mr. Mahle subsequently took care of the finances.

Fred Heckel and his wife were active in the Bio-Dynamic Association since its inception: Alice editing the journal, *Bio-Dynamics*, and Fred managing the yearly B.D. conferences as well as overseeing the agricultural work on the Farm. His activities were many and he has been greatly missed since his death in 1971.

With the return of Erling Anderssen to the Farm in 1971, the garden work is again in good hands. Also in good hands is the maintenance of the grounds and buildings of the Farm proper, watched over for the past twenty years by Bill Wegman. In 1971 space in the Auditorium was made available to the Anthroposophic Press, which, under the management of Gilbert Church, had outgrown its facilities at the

Anthroposophical Society in New York. A number of Threefolds, including Ralph Courtney, Charlotte Parker, Fred Heckel, and Lisa Monges, have been connected with the Press almost from its inception in 1922, so its move to the Farm was welcomed.

In 1970, around 600 students attended an international youth conference at the Farm. The proceedings conducted by eighteen lecturers were held at the Margetts School less than a mile from the Farm.

In 1972 the Threefold Center for Adult Education, consisting of the Eurythmy School and the Foundation Year came into existence under the direction of Siegfried Finser.

Howland Vibber has read the lectures for the Thursday evening Threefold Group meetings since the death of Ralph Courtney and Fred Heckel.

No historical sketch of the Farm would be complete without mention of a retirement home, called the Fellowship Community, established by Ann and Paul Scharff on property next to the Farm on Hungry Hollow Road. Upon this land, bought from the Farm, Henry B. Monges had built a house in which he lived for a number of years. Following its purchase by the Fellowship Foundation, a wing was added and alterations made that would render it suitable as a home for the elderly. Two or three years later a second building made up of apartments was erected on the same property and a third was planned. Many delightful events take place at Hilltop House and much is done there to enliven the existence of the children of the community.

One regrets that in a historical sketch covering such a period of time it has not been possible to mention everyone who worked first in New York City and then at the Farm in Spring Valley and helped to develop a group of seven into a community of several hundred. Without many helping hands it could never have come to pass and one hopes that there will continue to be helping hands to carry it on into the future.

— C.E. Parker