

Talk Given by Constance Ling at the request of students on the
beginning of the Threefold Group in the Main House Living Room

November 14, 1976

*Certain additions being made
in this copy.*

"Some of the students have asked how all this work out here started and I have been asked to tell you what I can. Well, it is impossible to do this without speaking first of the years of work in New York before the Farm was begun.

The Threefold Group was founded in 1923. Three people are here today who were among the seven founding members. They are Charlotte Parker, Gladys Hahn, and Alice Jansen. So I am subject to their correction at any point. We are indebted for its founding to Ralph Courtney, Louise Bybee, and Charlotte Parker. Without these three no group would have come about at that time, and all this would not be here. So how did it begin?

Ralph Courtney was an American who at the age of twelve was taken to England for his education. After St. Paul's School in London, he attended Brasenose College at Oxford, from which he graduated with honors in Law. He went into the publishing business in London and at this time came across his first Anthroposophical book. He once said that he could remember walking down a certain ^{street} in London and saying to himself: "To think that there are sensible people who take this kind of thing seriously!"

Later on he became foreign correspondent for the then New York Herald Tribune with his office in Paris. He then became better acquainted with Anthroposophy and often went over to Dornach to hear Dr. Steiner. He was especially impressed by what Dr. Steiner had to say about the Social Question. They say that Dr. Steiner always had time to see Mr. Courtney----- they had long talks. At last it came about that Dr. Steiner said: "You are an American, you should go back to America and see what you can do." At first Mr. Courtney demurred. He said: "But all my work is here; I can't very well go off to America."

When Dr. Steiner had repeated this remark three times, Mr. Courtney arranged his affairs and left.

He knew almost no one in this country. Where was he to begin? As his special interest was in the Social Question and Dr. Steiner's answers to it....perhaps he should go to Washington?

But in New York was a small group of people studying Anthroposophy. It was called the St. Mark's Group and it met in Carnegie Hall in the studios of Mr. Greene, a teacher of singing. Mrs. Greene read the lectures aloud. Miss Hilda Deighton, who lived here for many years was a member of this group and has written a charming book about its beginnings about 1910. Like Miss Deighton many of these members were students of singing and some of them had heard Dr. Steiner while studying in Berlin. Miss Deighton's studio here on Hungry Hollow is now the home of Ruth Pusch. Gladys Hahn was in the St. Mark's Group too.

Mr. Courtney attended the readings at Mr. Greene's and there he met Louise Bybee. Miss Bybee lived just around the corner on 56th Street in an old carriage house that had been transformed into a studio and school: the "Ruth Doing School For Rhythmics". Miss Bybee was a most charming person: small, delicate, amusing, and sympathetic. She had met Anthroposophy while in France during the war. While ill in the home of friends in Paris she had been given a copy of "Theosophy" (in French). This interested her so much that on returning to New York she got into a taxi at the steamer and asked to be taken to the headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society. They drove all around but found only the Theosophical Society. We had no headquarters. Later on, however, through Mrs. Ethel Parks Brownrigg whom she had known in Berlin, she learned of the St. Mark's Group and joined it.

One evening, as Mr. Courtney and Miss Bybee came out from Carnegie Hall and walked down Seventh Avenue, he opened up his mind to her relative to what Dr. Steiner said about the Social Question....the Threefold Commonwealth. He wondered if a few people could be got together who could try to do something about it. Perhaps they could form a little group of producers and consumers. Would she be interested to help and see what could be done?

Through her connection with Miss Doing she knew a good many students who

were strangers in New York and needed places to live, so she looked around her own neighborhood of West 56th Street and found an old apartment that could be rented. It was on the corner of Sixth Avenue up two long flights of stairs. She borrowed \$200.00 from the only one of the girls who had any money and with this they bought a lot of second-hand furniture over on Ninth Avenue, cleaned it up attractively, and offered the rooms to her friends and students. Mr. Courtney took a room and in this apartment, in 1922 he started reading aloud Dr. Steiner's lectures. to anyone interested to come.

One day on the street Miss Bybee ran into an old friend; Charlotte Parker. Miss Parker, also, had been doing war work in France, but they had known one another long before, being family connections. Among other things Miss Parker said "And I'd like to hear about this philosophy you are interested in" Miss Bybee said: "Over here on 56th Street Mr. Courtney is reading Steiner lectures every Tuesday Evening. Do Come." She did, and that was the beginning of the three of them working together.

Mr. Courtney cast about to make Threefold Commonwealth ideas known. As he had newspaper connections he gave copies of The Threefold Commonwealth to Morris Ernst and to Scott Nearing. Many years later when he held summer conferences on the social question at the farm he invited certain men active in this field to speak here. His "Letters" went out all over the country.

The next extension in apartments with rooms to rent was in addition to 100 West 56th Street, Number 207, which was located on the north side between Broadway and 8th Avenue. This became the center of much activity in the next years. It was on the north side, one step above the sidewalk, with a long hall leading to the kitchen and dining room at the rear. Single rooms opening off this hall were rented to friends. The front room had a gray marble fireplace beside which Mr. Courtney, ^{in the evenings} sat in a wicker chair and read Steiner lectures aloud. The students sat on the floor. It was a dark old apartment, so everyone gathered there in the evening to apply paint. The long hall was painted a bright red. In the dining-room was a fireplace (not usable). Gladys said that a lecture had said that surroundings should reflect the use of things, so she painted great red and gold flames on the wall all around it.

As everyone was busy in the daytime they had a gay time gathering there in the evenings, especially after Charlotte Parker started getting supper for the crowd. She had never done any cooking before but she had an epicure's taste as to what the result should be. There were great discussions about methods of cooking, such as the best way to cook rice! They put little red tables around the walls of the room, so that one sat with your back to the wall, facing inwards. Charlotte thought she could cook for as many as ten, then twenty-five, ---but certainly no more----- . I always went over early to fill the water glasses--a practice, along with a few other things, that I continued for about the next forty years! After supper, ^{everybody} ~~went~~ into the front room and listened to a lecture. When Mr. Courtney had finished he would ~~make~~ remarks upon it and we could ask questions.

That year, in November 1923, the Threefold Commonwealth Group was founded there at 207. The founding members were: Ralph Courtney, Louise Bybee, Charlotte Parker, Gladys Hahn, ^{then} (Barnett), Reinhart Muller, and Alice Jansen, ^{then} (Smith).

The following Fall the dining-room had become so crowded with twenty-five people that it was decided to rent the basement rooms below and open ~~it~~ to the public. There was a small areaway between the sidewalk and the house with iron steps leading down. The restaurant was across the front with a long kitchen behind, and two smaller rooms that were later used to exhibit paintings. Again the group gave up their evenings to painting walls. It happened that there were long cracks running across the plaster in various directions and it was someone's idea to make the cracks the boundaries of different colors--a big stretch of blue against an area of orange or green. It looked rather like a map. Across the front corner as one entered, was a small counter, hardly bigger than an ironing-board, where Helène Luttmann sold Weleda products: tooth-brushes and creams. There were also, of course, rag-dolls. On the wall near the entrance was a shelf of Steiner books. No one sold them; they were just there. If a customer was curious he could pull one down and look at it. All through the years one saw Mr. Courtney seated near the entrance. He was always in quiet conversation with someone.

When the musicians over at Carnegie Hall found out that there was a little vegetarian restaurant nearby where for a reasonable price you got perfectly delicious food, they started bringing their friends. The restaurant prospered.

Charlotte Parker, who had said she could not cook for more than ten, was now doing it for sixty, with various helpers. At this point she handed it over to Vivienne Clarke who had been at her side. For many years thereafter Vivienne continued as head cook, at the Farm in the summers as well. As time went on many helpers were in the kitchen. One woman devoted every morning and all morning ^{to} just preparing the fruit-cup.

I should say that at the same time that these members were busy with their own group, their efforts extended into the general society. A book-center had been started some time before on West 57th Street. Miss Helen Susan Belsterli was at first in charge of this. A general headquarters was needed and this was most attractively begun very near Carnegie Hall. It was on the second floor, and people riding on the top of buses were immediately confronted with "Anthroposophical Society" in large letters across the window. Later this was moved to an address on the north side of 57th, west of Eighth Avenue, where it had a large auditorium. The Steiner School had been founded by Mrs. Foltz and Mrs. Birdsall, first downtown and then on West 73rd Street. The twenties saw all these activities begun. The Weleda work had also been brought to this country.

One night in 1926 when I was down from Boston where I was then teaching, I sat ^{at} one of the little tables with Mr. Courtney. He said: "Well, we've been out in the country looking for a farm". I was dumbfounded. Everybody was ^{working as} hard as they possibly could right there and for most of us the horizon was bounded by New York. I had not heard of the B.D. Agriculture. I said: "What on earth do you want with a farm?" He rubbed his hands (a characteristic gesture) and said: "Well, we thought it might be nice to have a place to go to to rest". When we think of the subsequent years when everybody worked so hard out here, this has its amusement too.

The big expansion in New York came about 1926 when two big houses further down the street were purchased. They were 318 and 320 on the south side of 56th Street between 8th. and 9th. Avenues. The first apartments at 100 and 207 were given up and the restaurant was moved into the much larger street-level floor of 318. The houses were typical brick-fronted New York residences with long brown-stone steps leading up. To enter the restaurant one crossed a small paved space.

there were four or five stories to these houses, with long flights of stairs and sky-lights at the top. Some of the rooms were converted into small apartments with kitchenettes. Miss ^Parker and Miss Bybee each had one. Most of the others were single rooms. Everybody ate down in the restaurant. Friends, members and students moved into the rooms. It was a great convenience for out of town members to be able to find a room available for a short or long stay. Furniture was especially made for some of these rooms by Fritz Westoff who was a gifted cabinet -maker. We have pictures of his desks and chairs as well as the furniture he made for the new restaurant.

The Threefold Restaurant at 318, 320 West 56th. Street was a most attractive place. The furniture was so designed that space was saved by fitting it into corners and around curves. It was wide at the front and back, with a narrower lane in between with tables for two. Some tables accommodated four, some six or eight. They were of shining wood, without cloths. The occasional small windows were arched at the top with red curtains. A garden room opened off the rear section with umbrella tables, seen through the French doors (and wicker furniture.)

It became a great meeting place and a clientele built up of friends and general public. Again there was a shelf of Steiner books near the entrance and again Mr. Courtney sat near the door at what became known as "the Family Table". Every Saturday night the four Zay children were to be seen at this table: Billy (Sabina) Eileen, Patty, and Thorne. When you went in you could always find someone you knew to sit with. The tables were waited on by our student friends. Miss Parker bought them most attractive smocks. The ones I remember were a light green with big red wooden buttons down the front.

The food was delicious and inexpensive. You could order a single dish ~~or~~ ^{an acorn squash running in butter and} ~~or~~ at a time, like a hearty soup or "squash-on-the-halfshell", or a delicious ^{← brown sugar. ←} salad. At first the dishes were all vegetarian but later a separate meat dish could be ordered.

Begun in 318 the restaurant was later enlarged by cutting an archway through into 320, making it twice as large.

During these years other houses along the street were rented and the

and the rooms made attractive for "renters"...Number 205 briefly and number 306 for a number of years. These houses as well as 318 and 320 became filled with members and people they knew. It was convenient too for travelling Anthroposophists to find a place where they could put up for a short or long stay.

Mr. Courtney continued to read lectures here through the years. Even after many of us were living at the farm the group on the Threefold Social Order would meet there after the restaurant was closed, discussing current political and social issues.

To quote from an article written by Mr. Courtney about this time:

"Community enterprises now in operation include : an apartment house, the Threefold Restaurant, a work-shop for making furniture, a guest-house at the Farm, a country store at Spring Valley, and the Threefold Farm which supplies the restaurant and guest-house with produce. The community at Spring Valley has also acquired an additional tract of land for use as a housing development. The terms for use of smaller or larger pieces of this land are available in a separate prospectus."

The "new land" above referred to begins just beyond Indian Rock Road, property then owned by Dr. Reynolds, and extends beyond with the large barn, the white house, then remodelled by Mis Ester and Mis Jeannette Eaton and the house beyond for years occupied by Mrs. Mackelroy. The house beyond was built for Mrs. Soble, and up on the hill the white frame house was put up by Mrs Nancy Laughland and Mme. Germaine Monteux. They later had a French architect build the brick house now occupied by Sayre Burns and Anna Newhouse. Down on the road the house now occupied by Mrs. Zajac (Mme. Monteux's sister) was bought by Mrs. Elizabeth Sayre where she lived for many years. Mrs Olive Hasbrouck joined her there for several years before they both died.

Mr. Courtney's report continued:

"The community has had a slow and correspondingly sound development in the first years of its existence. It is now in a position to make rapid strides with increased membership. By enrolling as a member you are helping make known a sound form of community organization...which has been lacking until the necessity of making the threefold division of social life into its cultural elements, its life of rights, and its economic structure was discovered. A detailed exposition of the social philosophy from which the organization of the Threefold Commonwealth Community was adapted is to be had in "The Threefold Commonwealth, the Social Problem in its True Shape" by Dr. Rudolf Steiner. The advantages of membership in the Threefold Commonwealth Community lie not only in joining in its early stages a community with large possibilities, but also, even now, in securing greater conveniences of living, of companionship, and of using and developing one's talents at the same time."

In 1926 when Miss Parker came out this way to look for a place, there were no bridges across the Hudson and no highways coming out this way. She took a train out from Hoboken or Jersey City. She had heard of this area and looked at several places. Although the plan was to start Bi-dynamic farming, she was particularly looking for a place suitable for holding Anthroposophical conferences. She thought this land had possibilities. There were fields (it had been a strawberry farm), and two brooks. The farm house, now much changed, is our present Main House. Year by year it has been changed and enlarged. What we call the white studio was a barn. It was at first converted into summer bedrooms. Then later into a lecture hall. Dr. Poppelbaum ^{Dr. Von Baravalle} and many others lectured there. As time went on other parcels of land were added. Miss Bybee bought several across the road and the corner which contained the small country store (Now Weleda). ¹⁹⁷⁸ Other pieces were bought and some again sold. Each season saw developments and improvements. Most of the group who spent the summer here returned to the city for the winter's work. Sometimes Mr. Courtney would drive a crowd out for a week-end or holiday. I remember one New Year's when we arrived out of the cold and were greeted by a buffet set out in the dining-room which was the present front hall. The present mail table was the dining table. Underneath in the floor was a trap-door that led to the cellar. You had to move away the table if you wanted to go down.

After the George Washington Bridge was built, Routes 4 and 17 were opened up; but there were woods on either side for miles and miles. When we left 17 we wound up this way by country roads, passing Tice's which was a roadside market run by the Tice family.

In the years between 1926 and 1933 two winter groups should be mentioned. One winter Helène Luttmann took in winter guests. ~~She~~ To heat the house she put little individual stoves in each room.

At last the first summer conference could be held, bringing lecturers from abroad. A big circus tent was hired and put up in the oak grove (in the woods down beyond the summer dining-house). We all had to give up our rooms to the guests and sleep in tiny "pup-tents" around the place. It rained heavily every

day.

In the next years the "white studio" was made from the former barn and each year a summer conference took place there. It was not until 1949 that the Auditorium was ready for dedication after several years' building. A group of people worked over its design, conceiving it, as I believe Dr. Steiner indicated should be done, as a block, from the outside first. The corner-stone was laid with ceremony, Mr. Courtney, Dr. Pfeiffer and Mr. Monges being among the speakers and the actual dedication taking place with Eurythmy, Music especially written for it by Paul Nordoff. Every year since then it has housed summer conferences and been the center of constant activity of many sorts.

- 1921 Ralph Courtney returned to America.
 Ralph Courtney and Louise Bybee members of the St. Mark's Group
- 1922 Apartment at 100 West 56th rented and rooms let. Steiner lectures read.
- 1923 Apartment at 207 West 56th. St. Rooms rented and lectures read.
 The Threefold Group founded at 207. Tea and suppers started. Lectures read
- 1924 Charlotte Parker and Margaret Peckham go to conference in Torquay, England
 Restaurant in basement of 207 opened to public.
- 1925 House at 318 West 56th. St. Purchased Restaurant reopened there
- 1926 House at 320 West 56th. St. Purchased. " opened in both houses.
- 1926 First piece of Farm purchased. (in summer).
- 1927-28 Alice and Kees Jansen, Gladys Barnett and Elise Stolting winter at farm
 1928 to 1934 Paul Stromenger does B.D. Gardening at Farm with Horse, Charlie.
- 1928 C. Parker, R. Courtney, and L. Bybee attend world conference in London, then
 went to Dornach. Met Dr. Pfeiffer. Attend opening of 2nd. Goetheanum.
- 1927 Summer wing added to house. Dining-room house built by Mr. Poetzel.
- 1930 Brook dammed. *and Pine trees*
- 1932 First gable added to Main House. (over front kitchen.)
- 1933 First Summer Conference held. *at Farm*
- A Summer Conference was held every summer from this time on.
- 1938 Dr. Pfeiffer returned to this country to stay.
- 1937 Living-room added to Main House.
- 1939 White House acquired.
- 1940 Orchard House completed. Built by Carl Schmidt, helped by Mr. Jones and sons.
- 1941 Lingfield completed. Built by Mr. Debaun and Mr. Hall. Orchard House Garage
- 1946 Auditorium planned and begun. built by Mr. DeBaun.
- 1949 Auditorium Dedicated.
- 1956 Old wing torn ^{down} and dining-room, porch and bedrooms added.

Ralph Courtney died July 1, 1965

Louise Bybee died October 9, 1965

Ralph Courtney died

July 1, 1965

Louise Bybee died

Oct 9 (?) 1965

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