



*the life and  
work of  
ralph borsodi*

Condensed from *Ralph Borsodi: Reshaping Modern Culture*, a biography by Mildred Loomis

Ralph Borsodi was born in New York City on December 20, 1886, of William and Anna Borsodi, and grew up in lower Manhattan and in Europe where his mother, suffering terminal consumption, had taken him to visit Hungarian relatives. When she died, he remained until his father remarried four years later. In a somewhat irregular education, he never attended public schools. He had a few years of private schooling, and much informal education in libraries and in his father's home. His father's publishing business was the source of many books and discussions with authors and writers.

Young Ralph Borsodi devoured the history of the American revolution and painstakingly followed the debates over the U. S. Constitution in *The Federalist Papers*. Thomas Paine was his hero and companion. In John Locke, Borsodi found a root defense of freedom; in Rousseau's *Emile*, he first came upon "back to the land." Schopenhauer and Nietzsche helped form his belief that "human beings could perfect themselves through a disciplined will."

Borsodi's political and fundamental values came from America's philosopher-economist, Henry George, and his followers, Bolton Hall and Fiske Warren. These men were progressive agrarians, strong in Jeffersonian defense of country life as an alternative to unemployment and other urban discomforts. Modern machines had taken the drudgery out of farm life; AT&T had eliminated distance. Agrarianism and liberty were central in Ralph Borsodi's life-work.

After assisting his father as an editor, Ralph Borsodi formed his own marketing-advertising service. He was active in the Single Tax Party, and as editor of *The Single Taxer*, promoted its central plank of shifting taxation from improvements to land-values.

In 1911 Ralph Borsodi married Myrtle Mae Simpson, a Kansas farm girl who was in New York City for a career. Finding Manhattan unsuitable to rearing two young sons, the Borsodi's moved out of the city in 1919. They went first to Seven Acres, which they remodeled, and then to build from native rock in Rockland County, their now famed Dogwoods Homestead, near Suffern, N.Y. They produced all their food, most of their shelter and clothing by themselves.

In *National Advertising and Prosperity* [1923] Borsodi indicted national-brand advertising for putting false values

on many products. In 1926 he exposed top-heavy distribution costs in *This Distribution Age*. In 1928 MacMillans published his over-all critique of modern industrialism, *This Ugly Civilization*, presenting a human alternative, the modern, small-machine-equipped homestead.

This book led to an invitation from Dayton, Ohio for Borsodi to assist the Social Agencies in dealing with over-whelming unemployment. Borsodi helped them get people out of the city, to build their own houses, produce their own food, attain a new measure of independence and security on small plots of land. When inadequate financing led to considering borrowing from the Federal Government Borsodi explained its risks and dangers. When government money was sought, Borsodi withdrew, returned to Suffern, N.Y. and began the new education he said was essential if ever "human values and a decentralist culture were achieved."

#### *The School of Living Period: 1936-45*

Friends helped Borsodi work out a new adult education program, The School of Living, dedicated in 1936 to a new life style and ethical economic patterns. The School consisted of a Dutch colonial structure at the center of four acres, and these acres surrounded by 16 two acre family homesteads. Building the homes, developing the homesteads and the community, was the education of living. Three new economic patterns were primary.

1. An ethical land-tenure. The Bayard Land Community organized as a cooperative-corporation, bought and held title to the forty acres. Rather than buying, its 2-acres outright, each family contracted to use them only for homesteading, and pledged themselves to pay a small annual rental to the Bayard Land Community, of which it was a member, with a vote in policy making.

2. A cooperative labor-policy. The Building Guilds were associations of workers who planned with homeowners to build their home for an agreed-on sum. If they finished it at less cost than that sum, the difference was shared between the Guild workers and the owner.

3. A cooperative credit system. An Independence Foundation developed a fund, from which to loan to home builders. Effort was made to secure funds at less interest than the market-rate charged its home-steader borrowers. This saving was shared between loaners and borrowers.

These activities, plus seminars, workshops, a remarkable library and a busy productive-gardening schedule, constituted an adult education for a human culture.

During this time Ralph Borsodi took part in a significant dialogue on small-scale farming with the U.S. Department of Agriculture officials, was published in 1939 as *Agriculture in Modern Life*. In 1940 he wrote his penetrating analysis for economists of exploitive economics in *Prosperity and Security*. In 1943, he predicted *Infalction is Coming*, presenting the family homestead as a personal alternative, and commodity-backed currency as a long-range one.

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**DR. RALPH BORSODI IS A MAN FOR WHOSE IDEAS 'THE TIME HAS COME.'** —Marion Pettie, Washington, D.C.

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Three problems necessitated the school's sale to a private homesteader in 1945: Mrs. Borsodi's need for care due to a growing malignancy, World War II's shaky economy—reducing the School's income, and a controversy over the Community land-tenure.

In 1948, Myrtle Mae Borsodi died, but Ralph Borsodi kept at his crusade. He toured the Far East, and reported it in *Challenge of Asia*, urging that the East improve and continue its family-village culture, rather than aping the industrial West. Later, he established a linotype in the basement of Dogwoods and set, in hot metal, two volumes of *Education and Living*. Completed in 1948, Vol. 1 outlined six centralizations of industrial America; Vol. 2 defined "ranges of normality" and expanded his vision of normal individuals, normal families, normal communities, regions and world.

#### *Melbourne [Florida] University*

In 1966, Ralph Borsodi and Clare Kittredge were married; and moved to Melbourne Homestead Village, established by two former Dayton co-workers, near Melbourne, Florida. Here the Borsodi's built a small university for the study of human action. Seminars were held with outstanding panel leaders including Dr. Joseph Wood Krutch, naturalist; Dr. Paul Tillich, theologian; Philip Wylie, humanist; and Dr. Willis Nutting, professor of Notre Dame. With them, seminarians probed *The Nature of Man, The Nature of the World, of Truth, of Validating Human Action*. They examined alternative solutions to problems of health, production, distribution, possessions, government, organization and occupation. This beginning renaissance in education was soon overwhelmed by the influx of the military-industrial complex during the Cape Canaveral build up.

Concluding that the temper of the United States was not ready for "normal living", the questions it raised and the education it called for, Borsodi returned to India. In Bombay, at the invitation of Editor Suraum Lotvala of *The Libertarian*, Borsodi wrote *A Pan-Humanist Manifesto*, outlining the essential points for freedom and justice in a humanized world.

Soon he was guest of Chancellor B. D. Patel of Vidyanagar, a Gandhian University of Ambala. He addressed the faculty on what he called the lack of an integrating factor in modern education. Urged to prepare it, he resumed work on his *Major Problems of Living*. He had barely begun when a controversy developed. Technicians on the faculty wanted a more 'modern approach', objected to an American decentralist on their faculty. The Gandhians defended a do-it-yourself, agrarian based culture. The technicians won; the Gandhians were deposed; Ralph Borsodi's writing stopped.

Gandhian friends rallied to develop a social science institute to sponsor Borsodi's work; helped him move to a cooler climate in north India. There he fell ill. When 11

partially recovered he returned to his wife and to their New England homestead in 1962. For four years he had been well-received by the Libertarians and Gandhians in India, "not without honor except in his own country."

#### *The Exeter, N.H. Period*

In Exeter, N.H., Borsodi found and created ample opportunity for his counter-revolution. He resumed regional conferences on Population Control, on Ecumenical Humanism, and on Non-Exploitive Economics. He wrote and published his challenge to general semantics, *Definition of Definition*, calling for a dictionary of precise terms in the social sciences. "Without it," he said, "social scientists cannot communicate, and chaos continues."

During the Exeter period, Borsodi advanced two of his cherished reforms. A younger friend, Robert Swann, came to him for help in opening economic doors for the underprivileged of the Southern United States. Together they organized the International Independence Institute to foster and demonstrate ethical access to land, The Community Land Trust, where land is used for a rental-fee, rather than outright purchase.

Borsodi set up and operated a year's experiment in the use of a new currency, backed by (and redeemed in) actual staple commodities rather than gold, (or nothing, as is now the case with U.S. dollars).

Borsodi completed his *magnum opus*, the definition of seventeen major problems of living, and the listing of three alternative solutions to each one, along with bibliographies. With his friends, Mary and Maurice Young of Muscatine, Iowa, he flew to Europe, to register the Independence Institute at Luxembourg, and on to India for the third time to arrange publishing of *Seventeen Problems of Man and Society*.

In 1973, fifty years after the completion of Dogwoods homestead, Ralph Borsodi and friends celebrated his achievements and some belated recognition in America. *The Bergen County Record* (N.J.) published a full-page account of his experiment with Constants. They also issued a supplement to their Sunday edition recording Borsodi's fifty-year effort for decentralization. *Mother Earth News*, honored him with two of their Plowboy interviews. He participated in the Dines seminar on money, and *Forbes*, *Barrons* and *New York News* carried stories of his experiment with Constants. At one of several conferences, friends presented him a \$1000 purse and a sheaf of glowing appreciation.

Those who know well his life long indefatigable energy, and unswerving devotion to ethical principles share Dr. Gordon Lameyer's evaluation: "Ralph Borsodi is the Socrates of New Hampshire, the Sam Johnson of the North, the Aristotle of classification in the Social Sciences, the Free World's Answer to Karl Marx, the Gandhi of America, and the best teacher I ever had."