

THE ORIGINS OF THE SCHOOL

Mildred Loomis

I DISCOVERED the School of Living in the late 1930's when I was a young college graduate seeking alternatives. I had been for a few years a teacher in public schools and in religious education and a social worker in the Chicago slums. I was less than satisfied with the work and myself in doing it. The School of Living presented challenges which I wanted to investigate.

A School of Living! We are all familiar with a School of Engineering, a School of Agriculture or of Architecture, a School of Law, an Art School, a Trade School, a Beauty School. But a School of Living! So far as I know, Ralph Borsodi was the first to conceive, to organize, to operate a School of Living. He did it to offset the specialization, fragmentation process that dominates modern education and modern living. He created a School of Living in an attempt at wholeness, completion and fulfillment of human beings.

Ralph Borsodi was born in a middle class family and grew up in the Bronx. His mother died in his childhood. He was privately educated and very early adept at self-education.

Bolton Hall, a co-worker with Henry George, was a friend of Borsodi senior. Young Borsodi was part of many family discussions with Bolton Hall. He learned early of the evils of land monopoly, and the meaning and challenge if a community were to collect its land-value. Quite naturally he wanted to join the crusade. What would you do in the midst of New York City as an adolescent if you were moved by Henry George's teaching? You'd probably do what Ralph Borsodi did when he was 17 — get a soap box, put it down on a corner near Washington Square, mount it and talk to all comers on how to eliminate land monopoly as a start toward a free society. To Borsodi, George's ideas were familiar 60 years ago, and it's been central in his writing and acting ever since.

Ethical, honest economics and business were his forte.

As a business expert, his first book was *THE NEW ACCOUNTING* (1919). In it he stressed how important accurate records are to the integrity of a business. Soon he became a marketing and advertising consultant to large firms, including DuPont, Macys and others. He recognized the service of advertising but also its evils and errors and the tendency for business to 'oversell,' stimulating overconsumption and unnatural dependence on the market. In *Advertising and National Prosperity* (1920) he urged advertisers to put some of their large incomes toward charity and education. But he never lost sight of the basic error behind all industry and centralization — the absentee ownership of and speculation in land.

Still young, he married a Kansas farm girl who had come to New York for a business career. When their two sons were small, the Borsodi family made two 'flights from the city.' On 'Seven Acres' they developed their first productive home. Later they bought 16 acres and built a small home of native rocks. They expanded it as time went on to a roomy, three-section home which they named 'Dogwoods.' They gardened, processed and preserved food, raised chickens, rabbits, goats and bees. They added out-buildings of stone and a swimming pool. Eventually, as the boys grew up, they built a stone cottage for each of them — all still beautiful and serviceable today, fifty years later, in the ownership of a good friend.

Borsodi commuted to his New York City office for some years. But often in Dogwoods' third floor study he pondered human values.

His thinking was spelled out in *This Ugly Civilization*, which Harpers published in 1928. In the book he compared the quantity- and money-minded life which most people were living and seeking,

with the creative family experience of the modern homestead.

WHERE I CAME IN

In those years I was a young teacher in Dayton, Ohio public schools and in their released-time weekday school of religion. There we experienced the great depression of the 1930's. Dayton was hit hard. All its major factories closed down, including General Motors, Frigidaire and National Cash Register. Fifty per cent of the heads of families were unemployed. Children came to school hungry and without shoes. Banks were closed, social agencies overwhelmed, and the city's teaching staff, including most of us in religious education, went without salary. I and some co-workers took what savings we had left and went to New York for more 'light' on this difficult situation back home.

We enrolled in the Teachers College and Union Seminary of Columbia University. We approached two famed sociologists, Dr. Harold Rugg and Dr. George Counts, and asked them, "What can be done about the economic collapse of Dayton, Ohio?" They didn't know but gave us a book, *This Ugly Civilization* by Ralph Borsodi. We read it and decided to try to visit the author.

Borsodi welcomed us and listened to our story of Dayton's woe. From this and other visits, he was invited by Dayton Social Agencies to come to Dayton. He asked, "Why continue feeding people in the city? Why not help them get on the land to feed and shelter themselves? Develop some demonstration homestead communities composed not only of people on relief but of people from all walks of life."

So the Dayton Homestead Experiment was born and developed.

Dayton Social Agencies first bought an 80-acre farm on Liberty Road west of Dayton and divided it into some 30 small acreages. Not forgetting his first concern, Borsodi helped them put this land into the common holding of its users, who became the Liberty Homestead Association. They were not buying their acreages but rather paying an annual fee to their association for its use. Families applied and were selected. Material was purchased (with Social Agencies loans) and homes were designed and built, to be owned privately by the homestead builders.

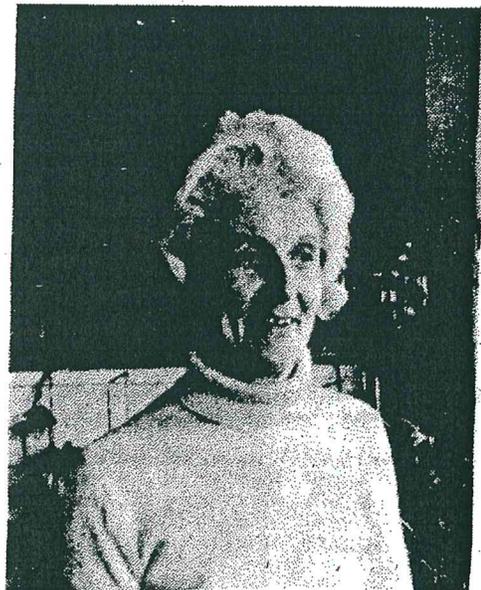
Borsodi wanted this to be an educational experiment. He gained the cooperation of Ohio State University's president, who assigned faculty members in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, etc. to teach and train the Dayton homesteaders in needed skills. The plan increased till Dayton was ringed with fifty small homesteading associations of from 30 to 40 families each. The Flagg method of rock-building which Borsodi had used at Dogwoods was popular; most homes had

an attractive copper-hooded fireplace.

As the available funds were depleted, people suggested borrowing from the federal government. The New Deal was coming into its own. Borsodi resisted this idea, saying, "Government funds mean government control." Urged by necessity, however, Borsodi did go to Washington and see Secretary of the Interior Ickles. Through him he interested the President and Mrs. Roosevelt in the 'homestead answer' to both unemployment and the larger cultural implications of the depression.

Borsodi returned to Dayton with a \$50,000 loan, but with the unusual concession that supervision of the money's expenditure could be in the hands of Dayton Social Agencies. Building continued. On the federal level, a Division of Homesteading was set up in the Interior Department and other homesteading communities were planned around the nation. When Dayton's \$50,000 was exhausted, Daytonians applied for a second loan. The government replied, "Please wait. The Homesteading Division is being transferred to the Department of Agriculture and we're not in a position to allocate funds now." Dayton's homesteaders waited. When pressed, the government sent out inspectors to make a detailed audit of the project. More months passed, then the answer came down, "If funds are loaned from the Department of Homesteading, that will mean the project must be supervised and directed by U.S. government officials. Are you prepared to put control in our hands?"

I had arrived on the scene from a stint of social work in Chicago's slums and was part of the meeting when the homesteaders took the vote. Many



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saw that a government loan was their only chance. Winter was approaching and their homes unfinished. Without money to continue work, they would live in tents or shells of homes. The vote was in favor of 'federalizing' as they called it — to take federal money and federal control.

At this Borsodi decided to leave the Dayton project. He returned to Dogwoods homestead near Suffern, New York and by 1936 had organized and

established the first School of Living. When the government supervision of the Liberty Homesteads ended in liquidating the project, we had to agree that Borsodi had been rightly wary of government funds. The School of Living has always remained free of such entanglements.

MILDRED LOOMIS has been the moving force behind the School of Living since beginning its first magazine in 1943, *The Interpreter*.

