

# Ralph Borsodi

## Father of modern decentralism

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By Mildred J. Loomis

**“Land, like human beings, should not be subject to buying and selling.”**

**D**ropping the day's mail onto a pack of unattended letters, homesteader Ralph Borsodi answered the phone. He listened to an urgent voice, and nodded affirmatively to his wife, kneading bread nearby.

"Thank you," he said to his phone caller. "I'm glad my book has been helpful...Yes, Myrtle Mae and I would show you our homestead. Could you come next Saturday morning, when others will be here? So many have responded to our story that we've had to schedule peoples' visits in groups to accommodate them all."

That was in 1931, during the Great Depression that Ralph Borsodi had predicted in his book, This Ugly Civilization (Simon and Schuster, 1929). Thousands of readers had welcomed Borsodi's philosophy and productive lifestyle at Dogwoods, his modern homestead near Suffern, New York. Reviewers termed it "America's first critique of centralized industrialism." Harry Elmer Barnes said it was both "timely and timeless."

his acclamation as America's voice for decentralization. He represented the self-reliant, the quality-minded, the supporters of freedom and security. From his birth in 1886 and his youthful assistance with his publisher father, to his death in 1977, Borsodi took steps toward an increasingly clear vision of a good life in a good society.

In thirty-five years of work and study with him, I knew Ralph Borsodi as an inner-directed person, a brilliant mind, sensitive and responsive to simple, beautiful things, but always disciplined to act on clear ethical principles. I have seen him impatient and occasionally blunt, but most often quiet, considerate, and compassionate. We who knew him well marvel at his complexity, his range of knowledge, and his many achievements.

Antedating the present nutritional-upbeat, Borsodi discarded packaged foods in 1918. His 1921 Dogwoods Homestead of native rock is still a model for new-age builders, and his 1921 electrified kitchen flour mill a first in

tion in education. His 1942 Inflation is Coming reveals why Keynes' "controlled" inflation is no solution. Education and Living (1948) first suggested norms of living now approached by Esalen, humanists, and other newagers. In advance of today's "citizens' parties" in India, Borsodi issued a simple, far-reaching platform in his 1965 Decentralist Manifesto. That stimulating study, prepared for Ghandian universities, guides many a seeker after integration in today's education.

Borsodi's most strategic contribution came in the late '60s and early '70s. Co-workers joined him to establish the International Independence Institute for two ethical alternatives: the Community Land Trust, to replace land speculation; and the Constant Currency, designed to avoid the inflationary tendencies of the U.S. Federal Reserve banks.

Borsodi was always ready to move on--to leave behind, if need be, those who chose not to understand or who preferred a different standard. Three such "lettings-go" stand out in his life.

**H**is first lost project was Dayton Liberty Homesteads (1931-33). As a member of a homestead-household, I remember my shock when Borsodi explained community-title, rather than individual-title, to land. "Land, like human beings, should not be subject to buying and selling," Borsodi said simply. "Land is not a humanly produced item. Land is everyone's heritage." We would-be homesteaders were, to put it mildly, startled. In long and vigorous discussions, touched frequently by anger, Borsodi remained quiet and sure. Factions developed for and against "community land-tenure," causing delay in the project. Some reported this as a time of "bickering;" I called it miscommunication and inept group process, stemming from our woeful miseducation in land ethics.

Borsodi also stood firm on financing Liberty Homesteads without government and tax support. In those days of tight money, homesteaders often suggested borrowing from the U.S. government when local funds ran out. "But that brings us the risk of losing our control," Borsodi said. "Remember that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune.' Government action, as you know, rests on compulsion. Government funds come out of taxing--either taxing directly or by government-issued money and government deficits. Either way, government help would mean government debt." We homesteaders listened, but knew no alternatives. When the time came, we voted for federal subsidy.

"Sorry," said Borsodi. "The die is cast. The Liberty Homesteads are now yours to complete. I do not choose to work under government supervision." He returned to his home in Suffern. Most of us agreed that Borsodi had plunged us into the responsibilities of democracy, though others simply called him "high-handed."

In 1933 Borsodi planned with his family and neighbors: "If American people are to develop wisdom about their lives--about what government should do and should not do, about where to live, how to be healthy--a new education is needed. Let us build a School of Living."

They procured forty acres, raised money, enlisted families to build homes on sixteen small plots encircling a School of Living homestead. By 1935, Bayard Lane School of Living Community was functioning. Here Borsodi implemented his cherished land reform. These forty treasured acres were in a community land trust. Each homesteader paid a small annual rental to the group trust for use-title to his two acres. He paid no high purchase price for the land. As a land trust member, each homestead family built, paid for, owned, and had personal title to his home.

As the School of Living developed, so did its problems. Students and sociologists came to observe and study. But one Bayard Lane homesteader, Hiram Merriman, was dissatisfied. He was successful with his dozen chickens, and he was ambitious. He envisioned 1,000 layers and a thriving egg-poultry business. Why fiddle around with a dozen hens?

When Hiram proposed his poultry project, his neighbors reminded him that his community trust contract limited his land use to family production, and ruled out a commercial business. Then Hiram would change that! "If it's the trust land contract that prevents a business, let's rescind the community control of land use." He planned a campaign to return the land system to private ownership. When the vote was taken, Hiram had a one-vote majority.

So Hiram built his three-story chicken houses for 1,000 layers, and soon his truck was busy hauling in feed and hauling out eggs and poultry. Homesteaders were dismayed at the added traffic, incessant cackling, and doubtful odors from the Merriman farm. Borsodi too was dismayed, but not discouraged. He took a leave of absence, going to India to work with Gandhians who understood a decentralist culture. Several new directors managed the School of Living between 1936 and 1945.

Some people unfamiliar with the School's history say it fell apart during Borsodi's absence. Actually, Dr. Ralph and Lila Tomplin, and Paul and Betty Keene, officiated ably. But World War II interrupted financial support, and in 1945 the School of Living was sold to homesteader Larry Wray. Most of its library and program were transferred to the Loomis homestead in Ohio.

But the dream continued, at another School of Living Center developing at this time and directed by former Dayton Liberty Homestead co-workers. Some fifty families settled along winding roads in "hammock" pine woods on 240 acres in Florida. Returning from India in the late 1950s, Borsodi and his new wife Clare were glad to join the attractive homestead.

Borsodi developed a "teaching center," moving there a one-room schoolhouse. He established in it a linotype, published the quarterly Praxiology, and led seminars on universal problems of living. Shortly, a Melbourne citizen bequeathed a 20-acre plot nearby, on which Borsodi erected a dignified, one-story Melbourne University, on whose outer walls one read:

"A self-governing association for study. An institution for the guidance of people. An agency for resolving the problems of living"

We dedicated the building with a week-long seminar, seeking to identify the nature of man. Approaching the building in December of 1951 to sweep out the last of the carpenter's shavings, we stood silent, absorbing Ralph Borsodi's words and vision.

Willis Nutting, on sabbatical from Notre Dame, presided. Borsodi stated the question as "What is the essence of human nature?" Well-known panelists answered: Joseph Wood Krutch, famed naturalist; Paul Tillich, eminent theologian; Philip Wylie, popular humanist. Seminarians listened, questioned, expressed feelings. At the seminar's conclusion, Wylie said: "We have examined more ideas in a week than most people ever heard of--examined them both exhaustively and, in my case, exhaustively."

As in Borsodi's earlier projects, interruptions came--the Cuban incident affected Melbourne University. Would Communists settle in Cuba? Would it cause war? Americans responded with a military build-up "to stave off revolution--and provide employment." Nearby Cape Canaveral mushroomed into a military air and space center. Inpouring military personnel built mansions and estates.

Land values skyrocketed, and the Melbourne area was inundated.

Commercial pressure to purchase the Borsodi university site increased. Its trustees demanded that the site always be used for education, and land speculators responded. "Canaveral needs an engineering school. The little university can be its beginning." Borsodi shuddered, but the trustees sold the plot. The engineering school expanded into a six-story building, engulfing the original Melbourne University. Now the university's front facade, sans its inscription, is the wall of a glassed-in reception room. All that remains is a photo hung on a wall at the York, Pennsylvania, School of Living. We frequently read its inscription to refresh in us the purposes for which we and our friends work.

**T**hree times Borsodi's projects were halted by "established" enterprises. Three times they fell into the hands of miseducators, opponents of much that Borsodi represented: first the untrained co-workers in the Dayton experiment, then the supporters of money-values rather than quality-living among the Bayard Lane homesteaders, and finally the expanding military-industrial civilization at Melbourne. Borsodi was nearing 80, yet busy in New England with an ecumenical coalition to which he introduced plans for seventeen books. Each would discuss one of the universal problems of living that he had identified.

What sustained him? Borsodi's energy flowed from his earlier accomplishments: his homestead, the school for adults, experiments with land tenure and constant currency, his books and the response of their readers. His work did not falter. In 1968 he essayed into semantics with Definition of Definition, stressing the urgency of an agreed-on vocabulary in the social sciences (akin to that in the physical sciences) to assure improved communication in dealing with social problems. He renewed his global peace plan, uniquely arranging for global use of the economic rent (unearned increment) from coal, oil, ores, and under-earth deposits. In 1977, at the age of 91, Borsodi fell, injured his skull, and died in a coma on October 26th.

Today, friends honor Ralph Borsodi for the dignity and courage with which he met difficulties. They respect and learn from the major thrust of his life--that long series of positive steps on the path to a good life and a good society.