

# At Van Hornesville with Universalists

Johannes

AT midday on the thirteenth of June, 1941, in Van Hornesville, New York, some two hundred and fifty people might have been seen leaving the little Universalist church and making their way down the main street of the village to the grounds of the central school built by Owen D. Young. There on the bank of the Oquago, under the trees that border the playground, they sat down to a meal which marked the close of two days of meetings.

We must begin with the meal and work backward, that is if ever we get past the meal. It was a picnic of course, and a picnic is by no means to be sneezed at when Central New York housewives of Universalist blood do the providing. But for the officiating clergy, their wives, their children, their guests, it was a hot dinner served at a beautifully appointed table under the trees from another table where half a dozen women workers of "the larger parish" presided over the platters, casseroles, and bake dishes that Mr. and Mrs. Owen D. Young had provided. The host and hostess also were working steadily to give all a good time. Coffee, ice cream and cake were furnished for everybody, but for the elect—it would take the pen of a Dickens to tell about it.

There was the hot, baked ham, for example. Smoked? It must have been smoked over hickory sticks by an expert. Baked? It must have been baked by an artist who could turn a gigantic hog into a suckling pig. Carved? It truly was carved down to the bone to bring seconds and thirds that grew in succulence and aroma. Never was there such a ham before, at least so it seemed. Never did one rest on a nobler foundation of baked pineapple. Never did diners, led by the capacious and competent state superintendent of Universalist churches in New York State, do a ham more justice or enjoy one more.

And those heaping plates of little, crisp, brown, buttered rolls, home made, and the creamed spaghetti with cheese in the sauce, and the monumental salads where beet, tomato, lettuce, marched together with brilliant color and surpassing goodness, and the jars of old-fashioned cottage cheese, and—but why torture further the absentees? We must add, however, that there were frogs' legs fried in batter—a huge platter of them, caught in the Manlius marshes, offered for sale in the streets of Fayetteville, bought in a wholesale lot by a beloved physician of the town, cooked to a turn, and brought for this picnic.

The Reamons were there, four strong, headed for Ferry Beach. The man of the family had preached an able sermon that morning on "Faith—Hope—Love," and he now, down by the Oquago, was in his best mood for stories. Dr. and Mrs. Skinner, Dr. and Mrs. Rowland Gray-Smith of Boston, the editor, his wife and nephew, Mr. and Mrs. Young and their house guests, and of course the State Superintendent, were all at the festal board.

But now, before some saturnine Cassius comments about space wasted on eating, let it be made clear that this piece is about the annual meeting of the Central Mohawk Valley Association of Universalist and Other Liberal Churches, that it was held in the old Van Hornesville Universalist church July 12 and 13, that on Saturday afternoon Dean Skinner of Tufts College

made a clean-cut, orderly, honest and eloquent address upon "John Murray," and that the editor of the *Leader* spoke on "Early Universalists of New York State," and that a dinner followed at the Van Hornesville Central School. It was served by the Ladies' Aid Society of the Van Hornesville Universalist-Methodist Church, and was attended by 140 people.

Owen D. Young was toastmaster and Louis Annin Ames, president of the General Convention, Judge Abram Zoller, George Boyle and Dr. Leining were the speakers.

"My first word," said Mr. Young, "is one of gratitude to you for coming to Van Hornesville and to the old church of my father and mother. My ancestors, for several generations, were Universalists. It is a great satisfaction to have you here." Mr. Ames and Judge Zoller, who followed, both expressed gratitude for a Universalist background reaching through three or four generations. Mr. Ames said that he was a Universalist because that church is concerned with bringing heaven to earth rather than with getting folks into heaven. Judge Zoller remarked humorously that to be either a county judge or a supreme court judge in Herkimer County a man had to be a Universalist. He chose to be a Universalist, he said, because that church has a creed as simple as the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

George Boyle was characteristically witty and pungent. "I am a Universalist heretic," he said, "because all the time I meet people who I think ought to go to hell." Equally unorthodox was his high tribute to Dr. Sykes and Dr. Tomlinson, former pastors of his own church in Little Falls, "because they were such hard workers and did not pass the work over to committees to do it for them."

Dr. Fred C. Leining was enthusiastically welcomed. He expressed his joy at the success of the meeting. He commented on the satisfaction one has in great ancestors who were Universalists, but added, whimsically but pointedly, "The best Universalist is not a dead Universalist." Then he said: "To do our work in the next century, we must have more ambition, enthusiasm, consecration, efficiency. We have never made religion easy by taking creedalism, ritualism, 'post-mortemism,' as substitutes for Christianity. Universalism is an exacting, daring, all-consuming gospel, and we must give it all that we have. The need of the world demands this of us."

The speeches were brief, the mood was happy, the food delicious and the occasion enjoyable.

The Van Hornesville Universalist church is not especially good architecturally, but from the outside, against its background, it is a powerful symbol of religion, and inside, with all its associations, it brings a message of peace and courage. It dates back more than a hundred years and, like so many country churches of that period, it was a union church. In the files of the State Convention there is this record of Universalist pastorates: S. R. Ward 1878-95, A. D. Colson 1898-1900, DeWitt Lamphear 1901-1905. Since 1905 students usually have served the church in summer vacation.

The Universalists took over exclusive title to the property in 1895 after the death of Elder Ward.

This Elder Ward seems to have left an indelible mark upon people in this community. Mr. Young has had enlarged a small picture of the old elder with his long white beard, standing in the pulpit surrounded by flowers. This picture hangs on the wall of the schoolhouse with the pictures of other typical builders of the community. Elder Ward, then stationed at Richfield, drove regularly to Van Hornesville to preach. He began his work when Mr. Young was a small boy. He died shortly after Mr. Young had come out of St. Lawrence University and gone to Boston to study law. In those formative years, parents, college and Elder Ward had made a devoted Universalist of this boy. While still on the farm, he used to hand his mother the "Universalist Register" and ask her to stick him if she could on the names and locations of Universalist ministers. "When I met the men later," said Mr. Young, "I could place them." There was more involved of course than "placing" them. The total environment, home, church, farm and village, did something highly important for a growing boy, and Mr. Young is intelligent enough to know it and large-minded enough to be everlastingly grateful.

Across from the little church stands the village home of Ida Brandow Young, Mr. Young's mother, now enlarged and beautified. But the mother's living room, and the entrance hall where she hung her son's diplomas from institutions around the world, scores of them, are unchanged. The great change is a large combination drawing room and library at the back of the house looking out on a lovely flower garden made on terraces that were created by saying to the hillside, "Move back," and then giving it a shove with a shovel. But the hill is there still—all wooded—and the wood thrush sang there in the thickets from dawn till dark.

Up to this village in the gorge, up to this garden and home, up to this exponent of Universalist philosophy and his able, charming wife, came recently the warring groups of milk producers of New York State, and, by what the newspapers say, they went away with something accomplished highly important.

Mr. Young's home was filled with Universalist guests. The apartments of the teachers in the new buildings across from the school were likewise turned over to the speakers and their families from a distance. The great body of the people came and went and came again by motor car, and so did not need lodgings. And where did they come from? From Cedarville up at the head of the Ilion gorge, Salisbury

Centre, Cooperstown, Dolgeville, Binghamton, Syracuse, Hamilton, Herkimer, Fort Plain, Gloversville, Utica, Little Falls, they came to the Saturday session, and from many other places for the Sunday service. Besides the speakers mentioned, those taking part included the Rev. Howard Gilman of Little Falls, the presiding officer, the Rev. W. A. Haney of Fort Plain, secretary and treasurer, and the Rev. Clinton Moulton, vice-president, all of whom were re-elected. Assisting at the Sunday service were Haney, Moulton and Leining.

In this community now there lives a young woman named Margaret Harris, a New York University girl, who is the lay worker for the larger parish which reaches out beyond the boundaries of the Central School District. One hundred and seventy-five square miles are included. At Paines Hollow and Jordanville, Methodist, Lutheran and Baptist churches are under the pastoral care of a Baptist, and at Van Hornesville and Starkville Universalists and Methodists are under the care of a Methodist. Miss Harris works with all, but especially with the young people. "We try to find as many worth-while and pleasant things to do together as we can," she said. Bible study, forums, classes in current events, picnics, parties, camping trips, leadership training classes, are all part of a program in a region where the old settlers live side by side with Russians and Poles. Some of the isolated children had no chance for any religious education before this larger parish grew out of the vision and leadership of Owen Young.

Into the arrangements for the Universalist meetings at Van Hornesville, Margaret Harris threw herself with sense and enthusiasm. In the success of the meetings she was as happy as a dyed-in-the-wool Universalist. Miss Carrie A. Ritter of Utica worked with her, and where Miss Ritter is things usually happen, and happen when they ought to. The women who attended to the business of the Central Mohawk Association knew what they were about.

While most of the rich lands of central New York were held by the Iroquois Indians until after the American Revolution, the Youngs came up into these hills before our War for Independence. They faced all the terrors of border warfare. One great-grandmother of Owen Young with her three children hid in the woods when Brant and his warriors and Tories swept past. Perhaps we never should have had our meeting in Van Hornesville if she had not known what to do.