Working at Tunbridge
THE GENESIS OF CAMP WILLIAM JAMES
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THE GENESIS OF CAMP WILLIAM JAMES

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[Note: This account, based upon an article in the Dartmouth Pictorial, describes the first stages in the building of a new work service for American youth. It is intended for young men who may wish to serve, for citizens who may wish to give their active support.]

THE PROBLEM of rebuilding morale is at once the most immediate and the most permanent problem facing America. We have the men, the money, and the materials to produce what we need both for the national defense today and for the national well-being tomorrow. What we lack is the will to work, to pull together; we lack faith in ourselves and in our way of life.

In the rugged hills of Vermont it may be that the new generation is finding itself. For there a group of college men and the people of Vermont are building functional units to discover the values by which American youth will live — values wrought out of the whole man’s existence, muscle, brain, heart and hand — and to give them a permanent place in our social system.

The discovery that must be made is that we are a common people, that each of us is organically bound to the other, and that this can be felt and understood only through work and service and community life. In this way alone can we remould America into a more sincere unity.
Into the rural and rustic town of Tunbridge, located in the White River Valley of central Vermont, went six Dartmouth men early this summer. Some were there to make a sociological survey, some to have fun farming a month or two; some were there because life was empty and they were searching for fullness.

These men are still in Tunbridge today, working as hired hands on farms, as they did throughout the summer months. They are Al Eiseman, Bob O’Brien, Jack Preiss, Art Root and Bud Schlivek, all members of the Class of ’40. Bill Uptegrove ’42, who was with the group during the summer, has returned to College. The writer of this article, a year out of Dartmouth, joined the group in the latter part of September. And recently others have come to Tunbridge: Enno Hobbing, Harvard ’40, Phil Bagby, Harvard ’39, and Roy Chamberlin, Jr., Dartmouth ’38.

Today these boys are not only farming and living in a rural Vermont community, gaining untold values for themselves in terms of experience and understanding. They are fighting for a concrete idea which will do for larger groups of young people what this rural life has done for them, and more besides. They propose that the federal government authorize a new type of youth work service, a service which would include all the elements of American society and which would carry out projects directly meeting the needs of local communities and regions.

But it must be understood that this plan has not been developed along pre-organized lines and that the life of the group in Tunbridge has not been lived along a predetermined course. The project has come into being through a deep process of growth, at times coincidental but always organic in the sense of being lived rather than organized. It is essentially a story. Let the Tunbridge boys tell it in their own words:

No one reason brought us all to Tunbridge. Some of us had studied problems of flood control and wanted to continue this study by work on some specific project. At the suggestion of Mr. Phillip Shutler, Vermont State Planning Commissioner, who visited us at Dartmouth, we planned to make a report of the effects of the proposed Tunbridge dam on the life of the town. Others of us simply desired the experience of farming, feeling that such an experience, quite for its own sake, would make for a healthy and interesting summer.

But regardless of why we came, our plans were all alike in at least one respect. None of us looked beyond the summer, none of us expected that we would be in Tunbridge today. We are here today because, coming from four years of classroom work and out of city homes, we were unable to foresee just what life on a farm would mean to us. For the whole summer we did the chores, we pitched hay, we helped at odd jobs, we had fun learning to square dance at the Grange. For the first time we felt the thrill of getting close to the land, of building our bodies, and of sharing the good times and the worries of the sturdy folks of the Vermont hills. And because we shared this life so fully we began to see it in a different light.

Through our work we made our friends, and from our friends we came to see that our work was much more than simply the means to a healthy summer or a chance to study flood control. Work was much needed. Our
work was important to the farmers with whom we lived. Moving off the highways into the back hills, talking to the folk, we learned of the tremendous need for labor in this area, labor to improve rural roads, to build and repair houses and barns, to do painting, and to work on the farm itself. We were six. We might much better have been sixty.

College men from the city, who had never before done manual labor, worked and lived with Vermont farmers, and both groups enjoyed a profitable experience. Because we actually lived this experience together, because it came to us first-hand and unexpectedly, it seemed much more real and much more important than any of the original plans that brought us here. And through talking over our life here with local citizens and with one of our teachers at school, we came to realize how the benefits of our experience, both to us and to the townsfolk, could be ensured for the future on a much greater scale.

This was the birth of the Tunbridge work service project. The plan which the boys conceived had as its immediate objective the establishment of a work service camp under federal auspices which would enroll as members young men of all social groups. These men would work on community projects of benefit to the area in which the camp was located. The Tunbridge group hopes that their plan may eventually gain nationwide significance as an effort to reconstruct and revitalize the rural areas of the United States.

But we are getting ahead of our story. What lies behind this new youth camp idea is not only highly interesting but essential to its understanding.

Professor Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy teaches Social Philosophy at Dartmouth, a philosophy which is full of blood and vigor and meaning for our time. It is this man who is the intellectual leader and chief adviser of the Tunbridge project. It was this man who founded the pre-Hitler work camps in Germany, who tried to provide for German farmers, workers, and students a democratic and cooperative means of group effort.

To Rosenstock-Huessy the great task of our time, of our generation, is to bring to pass through forceful and creative group living the true community of mankind. We must begin with discovering—or more properly, rediscovering—this community within our nation, our region, our town. Groups in America separated by economy, background, religion and geography must find themselves again as parts of a larger unity, must bind themselves together in unselfish company.

In the outside world the best friend the Tunbridge project has is Dorothy Thompson. Miss Thompson, speaking at Tunbridge a month ago, expressed this same idea when she blamed the downfall of democratic Europe upon the loss of "a sense of community, of each person belonging to every other person." We must achieve, she said, "a good neighbor policy towards each other": "If I contemplate what is wrong with our democracy, and I have thought about it deep and long, I am forced to the conclusion that we have become too separated from each other—the city from the country and the country from the city; the wealthy from the poor and the poor from the wealthy; the men who work with their hands from the men who work with their brains."

To both Rosenstock-Huessy and Dorothy Thompson,
one of the most practical remedies for this disunity is a youth work service. This is a concept which has its origin beyond them both, although Rosenstock-Huessy was a pioneer — probably going back to William James and his *Moral Equivalent for War*. The heart of the idea is that every able-bodied young man should give some small part of his life to the service of his country, working with other young men of different backgrounds on projects of value to the nation, the region, and the local community.

It is because the latter entity — the local community — bears the closest and most immediate relationship to the people, their homes, and the soil, that Rosenstock-Huessy, Dorothy Thompson and the Tunbridge group place the greatest emphasis upon it, and then upon the region, as the proper area unit for the youth work service project. It is an insistence upon roots at the bottom and an avoidance of organization and orders from the top.

Some may say that selective service for military training renders the work service idea useless, since in this way young men are devoting part of their lives to the national welfare. That is a misconception. In the first place, only a quarter of the nation's manpower between twenty-one and thirty-five years of age will be selected by the draft within the next five years. Secondly, the values to be gained from the youth work service are of a nature different from mere military training. Everybody should realize this difference. A soldier prepares for war. His training is merely a make-believe of a future possible war situation. Work is real. It is due here and now. Work camps do not prepare; work camps perform.

The closest approximation to the youth work service in this country is the Civilian Conservation Corps. There is little doubt that the CCC has efficiently served a purpose in canalizing the energies of youth along certain lines of national reconstruction, especially in our forests. But the CCC falls seriously short of the youth service ideal in several ways. It is undemocratically restricted in practice to the bottom economic levels of our young people; many CCC enrollees have their origins in the slums. There is either little or antagonistic relationship between the CCC and the communities in which it works. And frequently the projects on which the CCC spends its energies are relatively unessential.

Today there is a group of young men, composed chiefly of recent Harvard graduates, who have been attempting for some months to bring about certain improvements in the CCC with an eye to remedying those defects. Each of them has spent a term in the ranks of the CCC. Consequently they speak from experience. These men went into the CCC at the suggestion of Rosenstock-Huessy, to whom they had taken their idea for an American youth work service. The Tunbridge group came into contact with them, learned of their efforts to revitalize the CCC, and today as a consequence the two groups are working in conjunction toward a new type of youth service in the United States.

Not only through this group of former CCC enrollees, but also through their own experience in Vermont, the Tunbridge boys became aware of the deficiencies of the CCC. They learned that there had once been a thriving CCC camp near Sharon, a few miles from Tunbridge, but that it had been closed last spring. The official reason
was lack of work projects, when in reality, so the group asserts, “there was work crying to be done everywhere.” They discovered that the farmers around Tunbridge had little regard for the CCC, because first of all this camp had wasted its time on an unnecessary road project, and besides, this road after being built soon began to go to pieces. Furthermore, the townspeople and the CCC boys had little contact; each group distrusted the other. Under such conditions the camp failed to help either its own boys or the region.

As a remedy to meet the need for rural rehabilitation in the Tunbridge area, which is at a standstill because of the shortage of labor, and to establish closer contact between camp members and the area in which the camp is located, the Dartmouth-Harvard group has made the proposal for the new work service camp. It proposes that the Sharon camp be reopened by the government on an experimental basis, enrolling boys from all walks of life; that these boys, instead of working merely in state and national forests, undertake projects needed and suggested by the community and carry them out in consultation with the local authorities. In general the camp would attempt to accomplish essential tasks in the surrounding region which have so far been neglected.

Living and working as farmhands in the Tunbridge district since early this summer, the “college boys,” as they are called, have made themselves a part of local community life. In this way they have achieved status in Tunbridge as a group and as individuals. By a lucky accident the first Dartmouth man to arrive there, Bob O’Brien, found a place on a farm owned by the Master of the Tunbridge Grange, Lawrence Bowen, who became one of the most loyal friends of the group and its work. By his efforts the other men found their places on farms in the town, and through him the boys were introduced to the Tunbridge Grange, with whom they discussed the problems facing the community and the possibility of establishing a youth service camp in an attempt to solve them.

Gradually Tunbridge became interested, coolly at first but more enthusiastically as the boys stayed on through the summer. Art Root preached a sermon in the local church and spoke to a meeting of the Grange. The men talked with their own farmers. Frequently they would discuss the subject of a youth camp with influential citizens of the town such as the selectmen and the school directors. And through these people and the Grange they became acquainted with the leaders of other communities in the area.

By the first of September enough progress had been made to justify crystallizing local support into an effective organization. Sponsorship committees, whom the Dartmouth group could consult in making their plans and who could guide local support into effective channels, were set up in eight towns in the region—Chelsea, Hartford, Norwich, Randolph, Sharon, Royalton, Strafford, and Tunbridge. And at this time plans were laid for a rally to be held in Tunbridge later in the month in order to provide an opportunity to tell the community about the project and to put local backing into some tangible form.

The rally was held in the Tunbridge Town Hall on September 25. It was literally packed with over five hundred Vermont farmers and townspeople. Highlighting the meeting was an address by Dorothy Thompson, who had been interested for some time in the youth work
service idea, and who had become a fervent supporter of the Tunbridge plan. Preceding her speech, Nathan Dodge, a Tunbridge selectman, urged his neighbors to support the project; Enno Hobbing, Harvard '40, a former enrollee with 1130 Co. CCC, told about his experiences in the camp and the desire of himself and others to improve the CCC; and Arthur Root, as spokesman for the Dartmouth group, outlined the values to be gained by a college man in manual work on the farm.

Dorothy Thompson, addressing the assembly, called attention to the national and world implications of the work service program and asked for its adoption as a means of reinforcing American democracy in the present world crisis. A youth camp in the midst of Vermont hill farms, she suggested, by widening the experience of countless city boys, would give them “respect for the food they eat”: “This business of having respect for the labor of others — that is a great thing. When we have learned that, we shall begin to break down this snobbery that is separating human beings from human beings in the world.”

At the close of the rally a petition addressed to the President, calling upon the Chief Executive to give consideration to the youth service plan, was circulated through the audience. Some 320 persons signed the document, entitled Vermont Pioneers Again for America:

TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. President:

The State of Vermont is the first state of the Union in which manhood suffrage was made universal; one cen-
tury and a half have passed, and again we people of Vermont realize that something must be made universal: the opportunity for service.

For generations our State has sent out pioneers to innumerable farms in the west. Now, we feel, opportunity for pioneering may be discovered right here in Vermont.

Three hundred and twenty Vermonters at a rally in Tunbridge on September 25, 1940, have received reports of representative speakers for the farming communities, for the enrollees of CCC camps, and for the students of our colleges, about pioneering among our backhill farms. They have outlined a plan of cooperation among rural communities, college men, and city youth. The plan includes advantages for all three groups.

The main speaker of the rally, Miss Dorothy Thompson, has shown us the nationwide implications of this opportunity.

We have also ascertained that no one department of the federal or state government would be able to answer our request satisfactorily, because our plan is too comprehensive for any one of them to handle alone. You are known to favor a nationwide universal — not merely military — service. Since we nourish the hope that our scheme may show the way to a practical and popular realization of such a service, and since, through personal sacrifice and hard work, the service is already under way locally, we request that a delegation be received by you to bear our plan.

The people themselves acted, and their representatives had been consulted throughout the preparations for the rally and the petition. And so we may say in fairness
that the Tunbridge group has shown the same regard to cooperation of the community in originating and presenting its plan as the plan itself provides for the future.

The Tunbridge petition was presented to the President and received his wholehearted approval and commendation. It was difficult to find a place for the camp under the existing appropriations, but at last this has been done. The abandoned CCC camp at Sharon, Vermont, will be reopened under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture. About January 1st, 1941, the Tunbridge boys will move in, and start the difficult task of bringing reality to their ideals and to the hopes of the community.

Whatever the outcome of the Tunbridge petition might have been, the Dartmouth and Harvard men in the Vermont hills would have added stature to their lives. They have shown Vermont farmers that college men, intellectuals, mind you, can work with their hands in the fields and in the barns. In turn they know these farmers as real people, not knowing them in the sense of seeing how the other half lives, but knowing them as friends and neighbors and as part of a community embracing farmers, laborers, sailors, clerks, all people. Neither have they seen these people as objective statistics. They are flesh and blood. So likewise Vermont is soil and rocks and hills, not a mythical land. The Tunbridge boys have discovered that Vermont farmers are men. And in so doing they have become men themselves.

The work of the Tunbridge boys and the visions they shaped constitute a discovery that must be made by all American youth, in many ways, in many places. In order to set afoot a real program of service by young men,