

The Beginnings of Biodynamic Agriculture at Threefold Farm in Spring Valley, New York (and in the U.S.) by David Adams

With appreciation to Constance Ling for photographs

First, we have to set the stage for our story about the beginnings of biodynamics at the Threefold Farm in Spring Valley (Chestnut Ridge). In June 1923 a 25-year-old American concert pianist in New York City, Gladys Barnett (later Hahn), sold her grand piano in order to visit the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. While there, she saw a performance of eurythmy (a new art of movement



First year of farming at Threefold Farm (Ralph Courtney and unidentified man on tractor)

created by Steiner to present visible speech and music on stage, also with therapeutic and educational applications), had several conversations with Rudolf Steiner, and even played piano for him and others at the conference that August in Penmaenmawr, North Wales, titled *The Evolution of Consciousness as Revealed through Initiation Knowledge*. Gladys had been studying music with and serving as piano accompanist for anthroposophist and accomplished teacher of singing Herbert Wilbur Greene (former founder and director of the Metropolitan College of Music) at his studio on the seventh floor of Carnegie Hall in New York City. She was introduced to the work of Rudolf Steiner both through Greene's reading of Steiner lectures at his summer music school in Brookfield, Connecticut and through the regular Tuesday evening meetings at Greene's

Carnegie Hall studio of the St. Mark Group, the first anthroposophical study group in the U.S. (founded in 1910). Unfortunately, a growing loss of hearing soon put an end to her short career as a concert pianist.

Journalist and early anthroposophist Ralph Courtney also attended these meetings at Greene's studio and there met Louise Bybee, another pianist associated with Greene. This studio was very near to a third-floor apartment with various rooms at the corner of Sixth Avenue and 56th Street that was rented in 1922 by Ralph Courtney and Louise Bybee, and where Gladys had rented one of the rooms. Later in 1923 an additional street-level apartment down the street at 135 West 56th Street was leased and individual rooms rented out by these same three and also by Charlotte Parker and others. Ralph began reading aloud Steiner lectures there, and in November the Threefold Commonwealth Group was formed with seven initial members. After another move to 207 West 56th Street, they began a kind of private dinner club, which soon grew to 25 members. So in January 1924 they leased the basement rooms of the same building and opened in it the Threefold Vegetarian Restaurant, reportedly the first vegetarian restaurant in New York City. This soon attracted many artists, musicians and actors from theaters and schools in the area and expanded to offer lunches as well. Needing



Threefold Vegetarian Restaurant in New York City, ca. 1929 with furnishings designed and built by Fritz Westhoff

more space as the number of customers expanded to sixty, a hundred, and more, by 1929 the group purchased the 318 West 56th Street building and reopened the restaurant, apartments, and a few other small businesses there – all of which were eventually closed by 1942.



Grape arbor at Threefold Farm ca. 1927-1928

In early 1926 some of the group began looking for a rural farm to purchase, to grow produce for the restaurant, to use for vacations and weekend retreats, and as a setting to hold national summer anthroposophical conferences. In April of 1926 the first land of the Threefold Farm was purchased outside of Spring Valley: a 30-acre property with an old farmhouse, small barn, and apple orchard – as well as considerable acreage for sale around it for future expansion. In the spring of 1926 Courtney hired a young local farmer to start a vegetable garden and bought a cow to help keep the grass down on the extensive lawns.

G l a d y s volunteered to repaint the interior of the house before she and Elise Stolting (later Courtney) left in early May for Dornach, Switzerland, to study eurythmy at the Goetheanum. While in Dornach, the two girls attended



The first biodynamic garden at Threefold Farm in 1927

a biodynamic agriculture conference at the Goetheanum at Christmastime 1926. Having been made aware of Steiner's contribution to a new agriculture and knowing the need for a farmer back in Spring Valley, Gladys and Elise approached Aki Keyserlingk to come and

start biodynamic farming at the Threefold Farm. It was at the estate in Koberwitz (near Breslau) of his uncle Count Carl von Keyserlingk that Steiner had given the Agriculture Course a little over two years before. As reported by Martha Bosch in 1982 (based on interviews with Gladys) he laughed at them and said, "How can we send a farmer to America? We don't have half enough farmers for Europe." He suggested members of the Threefold Group should begin studying biodynamics and operate the farm themselves until they could attract a farmer. "He invited the two girls to join him in Pommern where he was managing an estate, but he had to have

their answer by the next day! Overnight they decided to go. Instead of eurythmy, Gladys found herself and Elise stirring fertilizer during the day and studying the Agriculture cycle with Keyserlingk at day's end."

They worked both on the Keyserlingk estate at Koberwitz in East Germany and on another Keyserlingk estate farther to the north in Prussia until they learned the new biodynamic methods. They were allowed to sign for and bring back to America still restricted copies of the Agriculture Course – first a copy in German to Gladys, (#285 of 432 copies printed in 1924); then later



Elise Stolting, Pauline Fella, and Gladys Barnett, ca. 1927-1928

the 9th copy of the first, 1928 English translation by George Adams Kaufmann in 1928 to Elise (first copy to America on 7/4/1929). In May of 1927 Elise returned to the Threefold Farm and immediately took up the gardening. When Gladys also returned at the end of the summer, they made compost piles, made their first biodynamic preparations, and bought bees and bee hives. An upper back field overgrown with brush and small trees was cleared by Elise, Gladys, Ralph, and a hired man with a tractor, although Elise broke her leg in the process. Louise Bybee, Charlotte Parker, and other community members helped with the weeding and other tasks, mostly during weekend visits from the city. However, the first person to make and use the biodynamic preparations in the U.S. was Henry Hagens (who met Rudolf Steiner when he was a soldier in the U.S. Army during World War One), “soon after 1925” in his gardening on a city lot in Princeton, New Jersey.

In 1927—1928 for the first time a group including Gladys, Elise, Margaret Peckham, and Alice and Kees Jansen overwintered at the Threefold Farm. Gladys recalled Kees climbing the apple trees in the orchard with a pruning saw while Gladys, stamping her feet in the snow below, held an open pruning manual in one hand and with the other hand pointed to which branch or twig Kees

was to cut next. That year their cow was tended by New York City baritone Richard Parks during the week and by a eurythmist and/or a mathematics teacher (A. B. Chase) on the weekends.



Gladys Barnett (later Hahn) at first biodynamic garden in 1927

The “farmers” – Elise, Gladys, and a man of the Masdasdan (Persian) sect hired to work with them – lived in the so-called “Summer Kitchen” building constructed in 1927 behind the farmhouse (“Main House”) and designed by Ralph Courtney (the first attempt at exterior anthroposophical architecture in North America). This Masdasdan always stepped very lightly on the soil in bare feet and regularly watered the gardens at daybreak. Besides the farming there were informal weekly eurythmy classes on the lawn led by Gladys. While the farmers continued their work that summer, Ralph Courtney, Louise Bybee, and Charlotte Parker went to an anthroposophical “world conference” in London and then attended the formal opening of

the second Goetheanum building in Dornach, where they first met Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. They were joined by Minerva Brooks from Kansas City, who reported that Pfeiffer gave them a fast automobile ride through the Swiss countryside, during which he accidentally ran into a bull (See *Biodynamics*, Autumn 1946).



Paul Stromenger and Charlie, ca. 1928-1929

Also in late 1928 the Threefold Farm was able to secure an experienced biodynamic farmer, Paul Stromenger from Worpswede, Germany, who began larger scale farming. He soon acquired a horse, Charlie, to help him with the plowing, and constructed a “streamlined” greenhouse in 1929. Reportedly, Minerva Brooks donated the cost of the metal and glass parts of the greenhouse. The cow had a couple of calves, and bushels of vegetables began to be sent to the New York restaurant. Stromenger stayed until fall of 1933, when he had to return to Germany. Traveling on that same ship to Germany was



Paul Stromenger and Burke

Evelyn Spieden (later Gregg), where she visited several biodynamic farms and also Dornach on December 15, 1933; there she met several Pfeiffer collaborators at the original Biochemical Research



Paul Stromenger, Greenhouse 1929 (photo from 1981), destroyed 1990

Laboratory, including Erika Sabarth, Dickie Vibber (then Mathilda von Fragstein), and Erika Riese, who taught her how to make the preparations.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1929 Gladys left the group to start her own biodynamic farm upstate at Dover Plains, NY (called Lossing Manor), with new



Greenhouse ca. 1929 with “Summer Kitchen” by Ralph Courtney 1927 behind

husband Bill Hahn, where they also worked with children with disabilities using Steiner's insights. Gladys only returned to Threefold about 1961 after she had offered two of their later farm-based homes for the disabled to the Camphill Village movement, providing the original basis for today's Camphill Villages at Copake, N.Y. and Beaver Run, PA. Elise Stolting returned to New York City and married Ralph's brother Joseph (Jo) Courtney – to return some years later to help teach at the Green Meadow Waldorf School. She became the mother of Ann Pratt and Charlotte Dukich, both Waldorf school teachers, and Charlotte with her husband Peter Dukich supported and promoted the biodynamics movement in southern California for decades.



Alice and Fred Heckel with goats in 1946

Around this time Charlotte Driggs, who managed the Threefold guest house in the winters, took over tending the straw beehives, and soon the apiculture equipment was stored in the small hexagonal "Bee House" built for that purpose.

The farming work then was assumed in 1934 by Fred and Alice Heckel, both graduates of the Columbia School of Journalism and newspaper journalists in New York City, who left their jobs to fill the need at the Farm – after visiting both Holland and Dornach that same year and bringing back Pfeiffer's lab assistant Erika Reise to work with them for a while. Additional higher acreage (called the "New Land") was purchased in 1935 that included the large red barn still in place today as well as two more



Laying the cornerstone to the Heckel house in 1934, Fred Heckel standing in front with overalls; house designed and built by Fritz Westhoff (third from right standing)

cows and a mule, Toby (who was kept in what is now the Threefold Educational Center administration building). Fred used to say that Toby knew more about farming than he did and taught him what to do, stopping at the end of each row plowed and then turning to the right for the next row. Richard Jones, a young neighbor, with his brother and father helped

look after the cows, which soon expanded to ten to twelve milking cows in that new, larger barn.

Fred studied biodynamics philosophy and methods, and used his and Alice's journalistic training to disseminate information to the American public about biodynamics. In 1938 Fred translated Pfeiffer's book *Biodynamic Farming and Gardening: Soil Fertility, Renewal, and*

Preservation and in 1942 Alice translated Pfeiffer's *Grow a Garden and Be Self-Sufficient*. Also in 1938 Fred became the first Secretary/Treasurer of the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association (whose initial incorporation signers on February 2 also included Threefold Group members Ralph Courtney, Richard Kroth, and Charlotte Parker). At the Association's first official meeting on March

1, the new Board declared all 21 persons present to be the charter members of the Association (which included Threefolds Louise Bybee, Ralph Courtney, Esther Eaton, and Fred Heckel).

The first, somewhat informal, specifically biodynamics conference in the U.S. was held at the Threefold Farm April 10-11, 1937, largely to take advantage of a visit from Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, whose public lecture there was “Bio-Dynamic Agriculture, a World-Wide Need.” Earlier in 1933 Pfeiffer had been one of the three main speakers at the first anthroposophical summer conference at the Farm (his lecture topic: “Making Visible the Formative-Forces in Nature”), and he had given further lectures in 1935. When Pfeiffer again came in early 1938 and the third (or second?) national Bio-Dynamic Conference was held, the large group of 175 attendees was too large to be accommodated at the Farm, so the meetings were held in a nearby American Legion Hall. The last conference before the war



Ehrenfried Pfeiffer at Threefold Farm

temporarily slowed down B-D Association activities took place in November of 1940 at Threefold, again featuring Pfeiffer’s lectures. In 1938 Pfeiffer had accepted the invitation of the Hahnemann Medical College of Philadelphia to develop a laboratory there using the “sensitive crystallization” qualitative testing technique he had developed to evaluate the blood of cancer patients. That same year his research partner in Dornach Erika Sabarth came over to do the laboratory work in Philadelphia as Pfeiffer traveled back and forth between Europe and America.

When Fred Heckel enlisted in the air force in the fall of 1940, the B-D Association headquarters moved from Threefold to Kimberton, Pennsylvania, and Ernest Daniel, another charter B-D Association member from Pennsylvania came to Threefold about

1944 to take up the farming work for many years, also operating with his wife Margaret the Threefold Dairy on the “New Land.” But when the sale of raw milk was forbidden in New York (around 1972?), the Farm disposed of most of its cows, and Ernest Daniel began teaching gardening to the Green Meadow Waldorf School children. Then Lynne and Kundry Willwerth took over managing the Threefold

Dairy for about five years, accumulating not only cows but pigs, goats, chickens, and geese. In the meantime in 1971 Erling Anderssen returned to the Threefold Farm to resume larger-scale biodynamic gardening work. He continued this well into the 1980s, but now we have progressed too far beyond “the beginnings.”

After World War Two annual B-D conferences only resumed again at Threefold in 1946, with Pfeiffer giving the main address and Fred Heckel, back from the war, starting his own biodynamic homestead project and resuming managing the annual B-D Association

conferences. In 1949 Fred and Alice took over the editorship of the Association journal *Biodynamics* from Evelyn Spieden Gregg, continuing until 1973 (Fred died in 1971). The annual Association conferences continued to be held at Threefold, from 1949 on in the Threefold Auditorium, then later in the mid-1970s, as they grew larger, in the nearby gymnasium of the Green Meadow Waldorf School.

In the mid-1940s Pfeiffer had become too ill for heavy farm work on his 285-acre farm in Chester, N.Y. (about 30 miles to the west) acquired with the assistance of Peter Escher, his longtime colleague, just in 1944. Fortunately, he was invited to move to the Threefold Farm and re-establish his Biochemical Research Laboratory in a space above the garage behind the “Orchard House” (built 1938-1940 by

the apple orchard) and there continue his various lines of scientific research in agricultural, nutritional, environmental, and medical fields. His long-time assistant Erika Sabarth joined him from New York City. Margrit Selke (who had been studying singing) soon took over the work with manufacturing and



Mieta Waller Pyle and Ralph Courtney, des. Theefold Auditorium, completed 1949, aerial view

selling the Biodynamic Compost Starter Pfeiffer had invented by 1948 and continued this for many years in a new building constructed nearby in 1948 as the Pfeiffer Foundation. In 1949, when the Threefold Auditorium was

completed, Pfeiffer was offered a space in its lower right wing for the Laboratory. Even after his death in 1961, the Laboratory continued there for thirteen years to the end of 1974 operated by Erika Sabarth and Dickie Vibber (who had joined it some time after seven years of work in another related laboratory that Pfeiffer had helped establish at



Theefold Auditorium, focus on Biochemical Research Lab location

Roger Hale's Sunrise Farm in northern Maine), with other community members helping from time to time. I was lucky enough to visit the lab at Threefold shortly before it closed in 1974 and observe examples of the many telling observations that could be made from the radial sensitive crystallization patterns that visually expressed the conditions of the formative forces of different substances.

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David Adams holds a Ph.D. in Art History Education and has taught art history at state universities, colleges, and art schools for 26 years, including twenty years at Sierra College. He is Director of the Center for Architectural & Design Research and is a freelance writer and editor. He also taught and

administered in Waldorf schools for nine years, starting in 1973. He has written numerous published articles, essays, and art exhibition booklets. He is the Secretary of the Visual Arts Section of the School of Spiritual Science in North America and has edited and written for the international Art Section Newsletter since 1998. He began his first organic garden in 1969, progressing to biodynamic gardening by 1980. From 1979 to 1986 he lived at the Threefold Educational Center in Chestnut Ridge, NY, where he conducted most of the research for this history.



Small barn behind first BD garden 1920s

