

2002-7

Holy Cross, St. Joseph's Farm, and
Agriculture in the Community

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Presented at the
Twenty-First Annual
Holy Cross History Conference

Washington, D. C.

June 17-19, 2002

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Notre Dame 1985

Holy Cross Associate-Chile, 1985-87

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How is it possible to summarize the history of St. Joseph's Farm in Granger, Indiana and the Congregation's larger relationship to agriculture in a few pages and a half hour conversation? I have searched through conversations, archive visits, and piles of documents for a galvanizing image..... some meaningful analogy for this story.

Brother Donald Dunleavy, CSC provided just the image. Brother Donald is the last director of the farm at St. Joe's and one of two remaining Brothers on the farm, together with Brother Adrian, a hermetic community companion. My second interview with Br. Donald on the farm had been brief, rushed by the fact that Father Hesburgh was in town and had assigned 3:00 pm as the time we could talk back on campus. The interview had been discouraging, if not depressing. Brother Donald gave copies of the March 14, 1995 Auction flyers which sold off most of St. Joe's remaining farm equipment. He spoke pessimistically of the future of both the farm, and more generally about the future for farmers in Indiana and the rest of the United States.

I tried to change direction remembering the advice of a person we will talk about later who loves St. Joseph's Farm. That person said, "Whatever you do, make sure you visit the chapel. The last time I visited the farm I went to the chapel and I could not believe how the same peacefulness still permeates that place as it did when I worked with the Brothers in the 1970's on the farm. So I ventured, "Brother Donald, your friend Marquita told me I must see the chapel." As it turns out the chapel she was referring to had been remodeled by Br. Donald, and was now living quarters with the altar space still discernable despite being a small but comfortable living room.

We had gone through much of the house and Br. Donald's comment about the reproduced painting was off handed enough, "We like this picture of St. Joseph holding the infant Jesus. Mary is asleep behind them. She must have been exhausted and it's only right that Joseph would help taking care of the infant Jesus."

The image is of a quiet, strong, and servicial St. Joseph doing his part with little fanfare, yet heroic in his relative obscurity compared to God's Mother, Our Mother, to whom Notre Dame is dedicated. The humble image of St. Joseph rang true to me in what I had heard and felt from those remaining community members who have worked at St. Joe's or one of the other farms Holy Cross has taken care of over the years.

With this image of St. Joseph undergirding the spirituality of the many Holy Cross community members who have worked St. Joseph's Farm and several other Holy Cross farms this chronicle will mention, I would like to cover three general themes, and hope there is interest to have a participatory conversation after touching these themes. First, I will look at the financial and economic components of the farming activities; second, I consider the farms as sites of vocation formation where working to produce and share food fit into the process of forming Holy Cross religious; and finally, I propose how these farms fit into the community life of the Congregation, both past and

present;.... And potentially future, if interest exists in the question and answer time at the end.

In terms of economics, Father Sorin purchased St. Joseph's Farm in 1867. As Brother Carl Tiedt's 1987 history, "The Peat Bog, St. Joseph's Farm", recounts, "The governance of St. Joseph's Farm went through various changes. The Farm, from the beginning, was the property of the University of Notre Dame, and thus was a means of providing peat, beef, milk and food stuffs for the university."¹

In 1966 Brother Kilian Bierne wrote the book, "From Sea to Shining Sea: The Holy Cross Brothers in the United States", from his rural vantage point of another St. Joseph's farm and juniorate in Valatie, New York, now a retirement home, where the agricultural land is rented out to neighboring farmers. Br. Kilian refers to St. Joe's in Indiana in his chapter "Real Estate Bargains and Their Problems." He writes, "Lastly, we have Father Sorin's gamble on a real estate bargain when he bought St. Joseph's Farm in 1867 for ten dollars an acre. The farm lies on what is called Harris Prairie, about nine miles northeast of Notre Dame. At that time much of it was waterlogged, and was considered little better than marsh. Probably the owner, Edwin Irvin, who sold it to Father Sorin, was happy to unload these 1320 acres of bog for the magnificent sum of \$ 13,200. Later more land was bought to increase the holdings to 1,650 acres. The chronicles state that Father Sorin purchased the farm to serve as a pasture for beef cattle and as a source of turf to be used as a fuel for the heating plant at Notre Dame."²

Br. Kilian opines, "The purchase of a farm as a source of turf has always seemed to us a most unlikely reason or rather a wildcat scheme." While unclear how much peat actually heated Notre Dame, we do know that by 1878 the Farm was supplying turnips, beets, carrots, parsnips, cabbage, celery, tomatoes, rhubarb, squash, corn, citron, pumpkins, beans, lettuce, cucumbers, onions, peas, potatoes, fruit, in addition to milk and meat."³

During the 1870's and 1880's the farm had a personnel of 19 Brothers, 12 Holy Cross Sisters and 6 hired men. The Sisters cooked and helped in the dairy. From 1900 to 1925 a period of decline followed because of lack of help. Br. Kilian notes, "Then as vocations to the Brothers increased, more help was available for work on the farm. In 1931 Brother Bernard (Gervais) was appointed superior, the first Brother to be named superior at St. Joseph's Farm. Since then a Brother has always been superior.

The 1930's represented a time of growth for all branches of the Holy Cross Congregation. In 1935 within what later became the Eastern Province, a 193-acre farm was donated by Mrs. Margaret Brady-Farrell and became St. Joseph's of Holy Cross, Valatie - the place from where Br. Kilian Bierne did much of his writing, including a fictional story based on the semi-monastic life of the Holy Cross Brothers at St. Joseph's (Valatie), entitled "White Birch Abbey". With the purchase of an adjoining 45 acres in 1957 and 178 acres in 1962, the original property increased to about 400 acres. Unlike St. Joseph's in Indiana; in New York "there was no lay help employed. All the farm labor and housework were done by the Brothers on the house staff with supplemental help from

¹ Brother Carl Tiedt, CSC, "The Peat Bog, St. Joseph's Farm", January 1987. p. 10.

² Brother Kilian Bierne, CSC, *From Sea To Shining Sea: The Holy Cross Brothers in the United States*. 1966: Holy Cross Press, Valatie, New York. Page 182.

³ Schedule VIII, Receipts and Expenses of St. Joseph's Farm -Garden Produce for 1878.

the postulants and novices. At those times when the number of novices might be twenty five or thirty this supplemental help was considerable.”⁴

Both St. Joseph's Farm, Indiana and New York, started primarily as dairy farms, meeting with some degree of financial success. Both changed from dairy to meat production at different points in their history. In Indiana, the dairy was a large source of income until its sale on October 17, 1957. According to the South Bend Tribune, “One of the nation's oldest, largest and most prized dairy herds went out of business today. This St. Joseph's Farm, owned by the University of Notre Dame, today sold 170 Holsteins, a herd dated from 1867 and that was praised by national farm leaders at the auction block. Dairy herdsmen, about 1,500 from 19 states and Canada – ranged from New York to California and to Texas – attended the auction of cows, bulls and equipment on the drizzled farm. There was a carnival atmosphere with a huge circus type tent, a barn, filled with concessions and farm salesmen hawking their associations wares.... It was an emotional experience for Brother Joachim Reiniche, CSC, St. Joseph's Farm hedsman. By the end of the day he would be a man without a charge. He welcomed the crowd with the statement, “I'm happy to see all of you here”; then dropped the microphone as he broke into tears.”⁵ The sale brought in \$ 69,185, an average of \$ 489.26 per cow.

According to Br. Carl Tiedt's history, “The reason for the sale was the increasing difficulty of hiring men to milk and care for the herd seven days a week. The cafeterias at Notre Dame had discontinued the use of milk from St. Joseph's Farm in 1947 because the military groups on campus required cartooned milk, and St. Joseph's Farm could not compete in this kind of individualized milk serving.”⁶

Br. Killian's fact based fiction, “White Birch Abbey”, takes up the topic of switching from milk production to beef production, “The original farm program was principally a dairy one – small but profitable on a modest scale. The new program got rid of the dairy herd and adopted instead a beef cattle project. This new up-to-date farming at White Birch Abbey was supposed to be a notable improvement on the former program. It would be more profitable than the dairy farm, we were told, and it would require less work.”⁷

Br. Killian's chapter 7 goes on to debate the financial merits of this change; and the economics of a religious community engaged in farming. In the case of Valatie, the sale of beef and other agricultural production was limited to the houses of the religious community. This meant that a truck was employed to deliver meat and vegetable products to Bennington, Vermont, the location of a Holy Cross Seminary.

The reason sales were limited to the other Holy Cross locations was due to it's tax exempt status as a religious organization. This was a policy which was much debated, as Br. Killian's characters discussed the pros and cons of tax exempt status. Fictional Father O'Day says, “The neighbors will be talking. They will be asking, ‘Why don't those Brothers pay taxes like the rest of us.’”

“That's just it,” declared Br. Timothy, “If we were paying taxes, we'd be better off. As it is, our hands are tied. Freedom from taxation is supposed to be a privilege, but

⁴ Brother Kilian Bierne, CSC, *White Birch Abbey*. 1973: Novitiate Press, Valatie, New York. Page 56.

⁵ South Bend Tribune, Thursday Evening, Oct. 17, 1957, p.1.

⁶ Tiedt, p. 30.

⁷ Bierne, *White Birch Abbey*, p. 83.

under our circumstances it is a handicap. I'm sure the state never meant it to deny us the right to earn enough to pay our bills."

"Well," countered Father O'Day. "I've consulted a lawyer, and he says we could get into trouble if we sell farm produce without paying taxes."

Brother Killian wrote about such tax issues in 1973. Perhaps one of the most interesting legal, financial, and tax stories associated with the farms that Holy Cross has owned and managed revolves around an IRS court case involving St. Joe's Farm in Indiana. In November 1979, Brother Bernard Wiesler, the Farm's bookkeeper, was visited by the IRS in relation to Form 990, a "Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax". The IRS was unimpressed with the response from Holy Cross's initial lawyer on the case, as they had already made a ruling against a Cistercian monastery, stating that their income was unrelated business income, and therefore was taxable. The IRS asserted that St. Joseph's Farm should be similarly qualified as not tax exempt. Holy Cross developed a plan in response to the IRS, which would give away profits or surplus production to aid other farmers and alleviate hunger among the needy. This plan was entitled, "The Farming Apostolate", and summarized much of the brothers' lives on the farm. In addition, Holy Cross submitted a "Testimony of Farming Apostolate" which recounted responses from neighboring farmers about the apostolic presence of the brothers in the surrounding community. In December 1980 the challenge by the IRS was in the process of appeal. On August 30, 1982 "A Request for Trial Status" by the U.S. Tax Court was filed. A key person in this story is Holy Cross's lawyer, and former dean of the Law School at the University of Notre Dame, Dean David Link. On March 1, 1983 he responded to 19 questions from the IRS to explain the apostolate of Holy Cross at St. Joseph's Farm.

Dr. David Link's efforts led to successful results for Holy Cross. The judge in the first trial ruled in favor of St. Joseph's Farm. The IRS chose not to appeal to a higher court, in fear that if they lost at the Supreme Court level, the St. Joseph Farm case would become a legal precedent which others could use to sue the IRS. Dr. Link had donated all legal services and was thanked by Holy Cross at a celebratory Mass for the General Chapter members of the Congregation, which was given on July 6, 1986 at St. Joseph's Farm.

The Brothers of Holy Cross continued farming at St. Joseph's Farm until 1995, when they sold off much of their farming equipment in an auction on March 14, 1995. Since then, like most of the agricultural land the Congregation still owns in the United States, income has been generated by renting the land to neighboring farmers.

Farms as Sites of Religious Formation

My first knowledge of the farming history of Holy Cross came in reading Father Hesburgh's autobiography. He writes, "Between my first year as a postulant at Holy Cross Seminary on St. Mary's Lake and my sophomore year as a "professed religious.. at Moreau Seminary on St. Joseph's Lake,.... I spent a year at Rolling Prairie, along with twenty-nine other novice Notre Dame seminarians and twenty other brother postulants who came from elsewhere to become Holy Cross brothers... Most Notre Dame graduates have probably never heard of the place, but if you were a Holy Cross seminarian of my era, you got to know it very well. It was where you discovered that there was more to

becoming a Holy Cross priest than tending to your religious and intellectual development. In many ways, Rolling Prairie was our boot camp, complete with rigorous physical training and a hard-nosed drill instructor. Its purpose, we learned much later, was to indoctrinate the incoming class... to the discipline and rigors of priesthood by exposing them to hard physical labor.... The Holy Cross brothers wanted to make Rolling Prairie into a working, productive farm, capable of supporting those who lived there."⁸ As I surveyed priests and brothers from the East, Midwest, and South West provinces, their most significant farming experiences were during novitiate time spent primarily at the Rolling Prairie farm which Father Hesburgh describes.

Virtually all describe the same component of hard work on the farm. Father Hesburgh ended his novitiate year concluding, "I felt pretty good about myself at the end of that year at Rolling Prairie. I was in the best physical shape of my life, weighing 145 pounds without an ounce of fat on me. And I had learned one thing for sure: Whatever life held for me, I would never be a farmer." While Father Hesburgh's vocation led him away from farming, others have contributed a majority of their Holy Cross vocations to farming and service related to food and agricultural.

Br. Donald Hecox, Eastern Province, now living in Valatie, NY, originally worked on a 40 acre Holy Cross farm in Watertown, Wisconsin, then went onto his novitiate at Rolling Prairie in 1943-44, some ten years after Father Hesburgh was amongst the second class there. By those years there were sixty novices altogether: 20 brother candidates and 40 priest candidates. In 1946 Brother Donald was assigned to St. Joe's Farm and placed in charge of hundreds of hogs. His ministry has been one of farm work and physical maintenance for the community, returning to Watertown in 1950, and going where his superiors asked him to go amongst Holy Cross schools, farms, and now the Eastern Province retirement home at Valatie. When pressed, the soft spoken Brother will acknowledge, "Back then, we had a lot more prayer life with the novices than we tend to have today. In the morning we would have a "particular examine of conscious", and in the midday we would return for another examination of conscious before noon prayers. More than anything, like the monks, we understood that your work is your prayer, just like Father Greg, the Jesuit priest who was our chaplain at Valatie until last year when he died in a tractor accident."

Hard work and prayer went hand in hand on these farms. This was a formula for the spiritual formation of the community members, which was always seen as a higher objective than the amount of food produced or money made on the harvest. While hard driving novice masters and farm managers were not uncommon, most attempted to place the prospective religious in tasks they could handle. Brother Peter Goodman also resides at Valatie's retirement home, and explained how allergies to working with pigs, horses, and animals eventually led him to jobs related to tending to less hostile flower gardens.

While culling the archives at Notre Dame, Valatie, and St. Edward's University, I ran across another community member, Brother Phillip O'Dette, who is written about in a letter from Dr. BA Kamm, dated November 17, 1956. Poor Brother O'Dette loved farming as this picture can attest, but the letter explains what ultimately ended his farming ministry, "Read letter".

⁸ Father Theodore Hesburgh, *God, Country, Notre Dame*, 1990: Doubleday, New York. Page 15.

I guess one lesson from the letter could be that God's plans are not always our plans.... In this case Br. Phillip seems to have loved working on St. Joe's Farm, but allergies kept him from being able to continue this vocation.

Farming as Part of the Community Life of Holy Cross

Dr. Roland Chamblee attended to the medical needs of Holy Cross religious, both at St. Joseph's Farm and Notre Dame for several decades. His daughter, Marquita Chamblee, is an agricultural educator now at Michigan State University, and retains a close friendship with Brother Donald Dunleavy, who still lives at St. Joe's Farm. Marquita worked four summers at St. Joseph's Farm (1976-79) during her time of undergraduate studies. She helped out the Holy Cross priests and brothers who worked and lived in community on the farm.

I asked her about the spirituality of the farm, "I still feel a mystical sense of spirituality at this farm. There is a spirit to the place related to the energy of the holy men and women who have lived on this land. Such land is sacred. Every day the community would gather around the breaking of bread at noon "dinnertime". Everything you can imagine grew in the garden area, so we would just grab all the fresh vegetables we could and make the meal from there. People from all over would just show up and be invited to share in the meal. My Dad was doctor to many of the Holy Cross religious, so he would often stop by from his office to see people and stay for this sacred time of community... The farm was a place where many came to rest and renew their spirits while working their bodies hard on the land. Those summers included severe droughts. I remember how awed I was to participate in a Mass and prayer service for rain. Here were holy men of God having a rain ceremony and prayerfully saying, "We are dependent on God for our Life."

While the parameters of a brief presentation on the history of Holy Cross on these farms does not allow for as deep an historical analysis as could be made with more time, I would put forward the thesis that these farms did represent a significant component of the religious formation of Holy Cross community members. It is a component that has often times gone unacknowledged or possibly even under appreciated, and in that respect, me be profoundly accurate in taking on the unsung spiritual characteristics of St. Joseph. I would also contend that the religious community life of Holy Cross was significantly deepened at these farms, in part, for the work that was done producing food in a sustainable fashion, but more deeply in sharing communal prayer and community life, which went hand in hand with the physical labor of working the land. I feel these are relevant conclusions with regards to the future of religious life in the Holy Cross tradition, and we feel that these rural spots hold an important place towards the cultivation of both healthy food and religious vocations. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference has a list of "Religious Communities on the Land", and as Eastern Province Holy Cross Brother David Andrews is the Executive Director of this organization, both of us would be glad to engage the community in a more detailed research of the farming history of Holy Cross. At this point it would probably be most interesting to open up the forum for people's comments or questions.... Thank you for your interest and attention.

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