

# COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE FORTNIGHTLY

VOL. X., No. 16

MENA, ARKANSAS, August 15, 1934

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## MERRILL, QUARTERLY EDITOR, JOINS GROUP

Fall Number of Magazine to Contain  
Work of Well Known  
Writers

Irene Merrill, half of the editorial staff of the Windsor Quarterly, arrived at Commonwealth recently, bringing with her Anne Maxham, aged three months, Fredrick B. Maxham, Irene's husband and the other half of the staff has been at the school for some time.

Both Fred and Irene are writers. He has contributed stories and poems to Story, Panorama, Contact, Tone, and other magazines.

Irene has written for The Outlander, The Literary Arts, etc.

Like other members of the Commonwealth staff they are young, both being under thirty.

### QUARTERLY OUT SOON

The first Commonwealth issue of the Quarterly will be out some time between September 15 and October 1. It will contain approximately ninety-six pages, and forty-five thousand words of fiction.

Stories and poems scheduled for publication include:

"What's a Guy Gonna Do?" by Benjamin Appel, a story of two minor gangster-bootlegger's employees and the impact of the repeal of prohibition upon them. Another story by Appel, "Winter Meeting," which was the first story in the first issue of The Windsor Quarterly, is being reprinted in *The Best Short Stories of 1934*, edited by Edward J. O'Brien. And his novel, *Brain Guy*, has been favorably received by critics.

### POEMS BY RICHARD LEEKLEY

"This Native Place," by Richard Leekley, a group of seven poems. Leekley is probably the most promising of the newcomers among American poets. "This Native Place" is, with Mr. Anderson's permission, dedicated to Sherwood Anderson.

"Xmas Tree," by Meridel LeSueur, a narrative of a young man and a young

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## Farmers Near School Organize For Relief

Commonwealth's neighboring farmers are organizing to get relief—especially drought relief. "There's many of us that can't live more'n a month," the farmers say. In one township a relief committee of five was elected at a meeting attended by more than a hundred farmers. Farmers in three other communities are calling meetings. "We've got to spread this thing over the whole county," they say.

The move to get relief, started when a Commonwealth neighbor told a student, who had just returned from activity in the farm field, that the farmers were ready to organize. This student and other Commoners sent out an invitation to leading farmers for a conference on relief. Plans were made at this meeting. It was decided that Alder Springs community should take the lead and then invite other communities to join them in a united attempt to get relief.

A resolution adopted at Alder Springs asks for *work* rather than relief. It provides for a Committee of farmers to represent the community at the relief office. It pledges that all farmers in the community support their relief committee. Demands are made for seed, free medical care, and adequate relief for those who need it. "We have paid our taxes as long as we were able, and worked hard. Now it's only right the government help us out,"—this is what the farmers are saying.

"We feel that there is something wrong with the way relief is being run," a farmer said at the Alder Springs meeting. "We all know that seventy cents out of a dollar is spent on administering relief. The relief bunch in Mena is responsible for Polk County not getting drought relief. Other counties are on it. Those fellows in Mena have been getting showers right along. We gotta stick together and make our wants known."

Commonwealth needs several bolts of strong muslin to use for mattress covers. Funds are low. Donations of this article will be appreciated.

## 'CROPPERS UNION TO GROW KOCH PREDICTS

New Deal Has Reduced Farmers to  
Serfdom, He Reports  
after Visit

"If the present mood prevails, thousands of share-croppers in Eastern Arkansas will be organized within the next few months." This is the prediction of Lucien Koch, director of Commonwealth, who recently returned from a 1300-mile trip through Tennessee and Arkansas.

"These share-croppers live under circumstances worse than those prevailing in feudal times," Koch declared. "The cropper is so completely subjugated and at the mercy of the planter that he is unequivocally the most exploited worker in America."

### DRIVEN FROM LAND

"Before the cotton program of the New Deal was put into operation his plight was very bad but additional exploitation has been imposed upon him. According to a survey of 500 share-cropper families, made by the Memphis Chapter of the L.I.D. and the Tyronza Socialist local, the New Deal program among other things has driven from fifteen to twenty percent of the croppers from the land; it has tended to eliminate share-crop work and replace it by day labor which is on a lower economic plane.

"It is because of this situation," Koch declares, "that the share-croppers are banding together in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Active organization work has just begun, but thousands will join unless the planter-inspired open terror makes such action for the moment impossible."

### HILANDER CONFERENCE

Koch attended a conference on workers' education in the South, held at the Hilander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee. Representatives from several educational enterprises were present, and after each delegate had reported upon the project with which he was familiar, problems of general interest

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## MY DEAD BROTHER COMES TO AMERICA

By ALEXANDER GODIN

When we arrived in New York Bay it was already winter, and the ground was covered with a hard brittle coat of snow. The whole harbor, as far as our eyes could reach, seemed to have been enameled with one vigorous sweep of the brush; standing on the deck, the sun high overhead, it hurt our eyes to look upon so much whiteness.

Near us the water was green and transparent, and farther away it was very blue and seemed dirty. The tugboats maneuvered noisily about our ship, belched smoke from their chimneys, and sent soot flying up the deck and into our faces. It was foggy in the bay, and other boats roared distractingly.

As the city came to meet us, as the greyness of its aspect became greyer still, and its skyscrapers towered all the time higher and higher above us, we felt small, frightened, cowed. The New World breathed a chill upon us and this chill, we felt, was not due entirely to the season.

When the ship came as near to the shore as it could, the tugboats disengaged themselves and steamed quickly out of the way; afterwards there was a rattling of rusty chains, the huge anchor hit the water with a booming sound, sending spray in all directions.

There were shouts from the water below; small boats drew up alongside the ship, and their occupants tried to attract the attention of the immigrants on board. These shouts were followed by frantic yells of recognition on both sides, and a package containing oranges was hurled up from below; the paper tore and the oranges went rolling over the deck, pursued by screaming women and children. Other packages were aimed too low and fell back into the water with a splash, and the occupants of the small boats instinctively covered their faces with their hands.

A shout, followed by another, calling mother's name. It was shrill and seemed to come from far off. We all crowded to the railing of the ship, but mother was the only one who could look over it and into the water below. My oldest sister was fourteen, I was thirteen, and the youngest girl was nine; but our hard life had left us too short and thin for our ages.

We climbed the railing till our knees touched the topmost beam, and we could see the skyscrapers and all the rest of the harbor hanging head downward in the water. But mother was too moved, too agitated to take

*Editor's Note: By way of introducing The Windsor Quarterly to readers of the Fortnightly, this story from the Quarterly, summer 1933, is here republished, with permission of the copyright owners, Frederick B. Maxham and Irene Merrill. It will appear in The Best Short Stories of 1934, edited by Edward J. O'Brien.*

*Alexander Godin was born in the Ukraine in 1909 and came to New York in 1922.*

care we should not fall overboard. She waved, and we followed the sweep of her hand; we strained our eyes.

It was father.

I was the first of the children to recognize him and, with an unhappy instinct, tried to gauge my feelings towards him. He had left me a five year old child, and now I was a growing boy. But this moment did not have the same meaning for me that it had for the others.

My oldest sister was wild with joy and cried freely; she remembered the good side of father because he had been kinder to her than to all the rest. I remembered nothing but a child's bitterness and frustration and pain. The youngest child was still in the cradle when he had sailed, and now she tugged mother by the sleeve and said:

"Which one is my father, mother?"

While the remains of my dead brother were rotting somewhere beneath a low mound across the sea. The earth which covered the mound was hard and cold and the young aspens shook in the wind, helplessly.

He had died so suddenly, and his very old and wise eyes had looked up to us at the moment of death and had seemed to say: "I know I am going to die; you need not trouble. It is useless to cry over such a trifle as death!"

Eight years had passed since father sailed to America. My brother who came after me had died during the War. But either through negligence or fear, mother had all the time kept father in the dark about my brother's death.

We had lived through a period of history without having anything of the heroic in our natures, and many things had happened to us during that time. Our lives had been broken into many shards and, standing there, I felt we should never be able to piece those shards together again. And the uselessness of it all could not break my

indifferent heart; nothing, I felt, could ever break my heart again as the death of my only brother had left it broken, the first and most terrible death I had ever witnessed.

They told me afterward that I had wept as if my whole world had collapsed; and I believed them. But when they said that the grief of this loss would pass, and my heart would become clean like the vast fields of the Ukraine after the grain and the rest of the harvest had been stored, I was silent.

Standing upon the deck with the others, I felt thankful that the ship was so high and father could not see that one was missing. I felt, at that moment, that mother had done well in not writing him about the death of his younger son. It was not out of charity to the feelings of my father that I thought these thoughts and felt as I did. I did not like my father; he meant less than a stranger to me.

But I envied him his suffering, if he should learn, and I was fiercely jealous of his pain. Rightly perhaps, I felt I was more entitled to grieve for my brother than he.

That night we slept aboard the ship, symbol of all the suffering we had endured in crossing. We could still feel the vomit and ammonia smell of the sea in our nostrils, and see the emptiness of water unrelieved by anything but cheerless birds of the sea, and masses of weeds. But from the new way some of the sleepers snored it could be seen that assurance had partly, if not altogether, returned to them; others, however, tossed and moaned upon their bunks.

I dreamt that my dead brother was standing over my bunk. His face was sadly-wise, and he stroked my shoulder with his bony fingers. I tried to move but could not, watching him with horror and fascination. I awoke clutching desperately at the dream, and gazed hopelessly upon the floor, which was strewn with filth.

After breakfast we were all herded together like sheep. Pale, frightened ghosts that we were, hovering between two worlds: one which had castigated us with rods of steel and afterwards cast us out, the other, rigid, indifferent, before which we had to cringe and weep, and which would admit us only after it had drained our hearts of all hope.

Our will or our pain did not matter, for we were all very tired; and, like most very tired people, we knew that

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Editors, particularly of labor and farmer papers, are welcome to make free use of material appearing in these columns. A line crediting the Commonwealth College Fortnightly will be appreciated.

when we reached the point of exhaustion we would fall asleep while standing up or being led about; and we would do, while sleeping, what we had done while awake.

A gang-plank was lowered to the terminus of a ferry boat, which took us to Ellis Island.

Ellis Island was as grey and heart-breaking as a third-class cabin; all the buildings were of grey stone, bitten with greenish mould and overgrown with lichens and moss. Some windows were barred with twisted pig iron, others framed heavy nontransparent glass interwoven with fine wire. Through the bars we watched the seaweed float leisurely up the bay.

The doctors who examined us were as cruel as the power which had set them to this task; they pawed us over gingerly, obscenely, with the conviction in their eyes that we were no longer capable of either shame or pain.

Then, with our bundles in our hands we were questioned in turn by many clerks sitting on very high stools. These clerks all wore black alpaca coats with shiny buttons, and tall starched collars. The desks on which they wrote were also tall and inclined at a curious angle, like the wooden stands on which Jews rest their prayer books in the synagogue; all of them even smiled the same sour way into their sheets as they in turn wrote mother's answers to their questions.

On the other side of the partition was father; he, too, was being questioned, and the answers of both were compared.

Suddenly something stopped; the machinery of procedure jumped out of gear and could not go on. Mother grew panicky; she looked as if she had lied. The clerk stuttered in his anger, because the unusualness of the situation threw him back on his rusty brain; he perspired heavily. He tried to be helpful in an official way, his confusion arousing his sympathy and bringing

his humanity to the surface. But it was clear that he did not know how. There was the brutal statement:

"Your husband says he has four children, madam, and you have only three. How do you explain that, madam? What are we to think of it, madam?"

Mother stammered; her lips grew white. Tears streamed from her eyes, and she began to explain things to the clerk in a halting manner.

The clerk looked frightened. He bent his head lower, as her increased sobbing made mother's explanation harder to grasp; his stool swayed dangerously, and he held on to his desk with his thin nervous fingers. A pained smile appeared upon his face; and whether he suddenly understood or did not care to listen any longer to this story which affected him in a painful manner, he said we could go. We all ran after mother like newly hatched chicks.

And father on the other side of the partition, what did he think of at that moment? How did he feel?

As soon as he saw us he cried out: "Bessie—my children!"

His face was lined with weariness and his eyes were red. There were two distinct grooves running down his cheeks from his eyes where his tears had fallen. He looked very helpless and broken.

He embraced each of us passionately and protectively. At that moment I had a feeling of love, drawn forth by compassion, for my father. But when he drew me to him my head and legs bent back like a runner's, and my muscles grew taut as a string. He must have felt my resistance, because he did not try to force his affection upon me.

He was happy then and did not question mother about the dead boy; this raised him greatly in my esteem. And he was the same as he had always been, because when he was happy he was ridiculous, like an old man in love. He took some woolen caps from his pockets and fitted them on the heads of my two sisters and myself; the caps were warm and had red tassels at the top, like the Turkish fez, but because we felt that they were comical we were very uncomfortable in them. And again a moment of tragedy, the sometimes ridiculous but inevitable tragedy which enveloped the life of this man, my father:

He had brought four caps along with him, but had not found the time in which to hide the spare caps somewhere; when mother saw it, she grew hysterical, and father gazed at her helplessly and with twitching lips. He wanted to utter her name, but his thin cruel lips would not obey and the words vibrated in his throat, making a curious sound.

We took the ferry to Bowling Green, then the Elevated, and all the way to our new home people gazed at us as if we had descended from another planet; we wanted to remove our caps, but father pleaded with us in such a way that it was not possible to disobey him.

When we descended the stairs of the Elevated, father walked briskly ahead of us, as was his habit, and the cap intended for the dead boy stuck out of one of his pockets. We ran after him, as if fearful of being abandoned. The snow crunched beneath our feet, and the jagged cinders on the sidewalk punctured the thin soles of our shoes. All the time I kept my eyes on the cap which stuck out of father's pocket, thinking of my dead brother.

A postman, his mail bag hanging from his shoulder, passed us on a bicycle as we came to Brook Avenue, the tires of his machine squealing as they collided with the hard snow.

We entered our new home slowly and with shyness, as if into the house of a stranger. The flat was dark and airless, and for the first few minutes we huddled against the walls in fright. The furniture was old and hastily arranged, and a lot of rubbish was piled on the kitchen floor.

As soon as we passed the threshold, father began to sob helplessly.

Then he put the spare woolen cap on the table, and lit the little gas stove; it hissed sullenly, and slowly the frost began to dissolve on the windowpanes. We devoured the food he put before us with bulging, greedy, envious eyes, thinking that perhaps this was only a dream and the next meal was far away.

Afterwards he gave us all new clothes. He folded the suit he had prepared for the dead boy and put it away carefully into a drawer, as if he expected him to appear at the door one day and claim it.

Evening came, and a great stillness descended over our lives. We had been tired a long time, and now our tiredness was beginning to thaw; and as we swayed drunkenly in our seats, shadows of madness and grief began to invade the house.

We sat up and listened; our nerves were tense, and the eyelids fluttered like wounded birds over our eyes.

The unclaimed white woolen cap with the red tassel lay on the table and, for some reason, the eyes of all of us were turned towards it; in the darkness of the room it stood out like a single star on a foggy night. The rust in our blood was heavy and poisonous, sharpening our grief; and at that moment we became aware of the return of the dead boy into our shattered lives.

He, too, had come to America.

## Society Notes

The major social event of the current season at Commonwealth was an informal breakfast in the corn field on a recent Sunday morning. The program included corn cutting, balladry and philosophical discourse.

The farm manager acted as host. "It is apparent," he said when he issued the invitations, "that the farm crew cannot get the fodder shocked. Therefore we want all able-bodied males not otherwise engaged to volunteer their services from 5 a.m. till 12."

There were more volunteers than corn knives, so that kitchen butcher knives had to be pressed into service. Whacking began in the gray dawn. Breakfast, consisting of egg sandwiches, toast, jam and coffee, was served at eight.

This volunteer crew might have been divided roughly into three groups, according to social origin: proletarians, agrarians, and intellectuals (petty bourgeois). Of these, obviously, only the agrarians were conditioned to corn cutting, and even they had to make adjustments to fit local conditions.

Corn grown in the Arkansas hills never equals in grandeur and nobility the corn of Iowa and Nebraska. And this year, because of the drought, Commonwealth's nubbinless stalks were knee-high to shoulder-high.

In the land of noble fodder you march down the row with a swinging gait, seize each great stalk in the crook of your elbow, cut it off with a mighty downward swing of your flashing knife, hug it to your bosom, and on to the next until you have a man size load. But in the Commonwealth field this year, particularly in the weaker spots, you bend down, grasp the stalk just beneath its little tassel between your thumb and forefinger, whack it off and tuck it under your arm. Sometimes you pull it up by the roots.

The corn-belt agrarians had to learn this new technique. One of them tried a wise-crack which didn't get over very

well. He said what we needed was eye-brow tweezers and not corn knives. His remark was generally regarded as corn-belt chauvinism. "Well," someone asked him, "why didn't you bring your own eye-brow tweezers along?" That shut him up.

The industrial workers were perhaps the first ones to get up a sweat. They were honestly bewildered, trying to employ the technique of a highly industrialized civilization to the rural task of corn cutting. But the intellectuals started immediately experimenting with technical innovations—for instance walking once down the row to cut the corn off, retracing their steps to collect and bunch the stalks, then on the third trip picking up the bunches and shocking them.

They tried also to save on transportation costs by flinging the stalks toward the shocks. Confusion resulted, until at last it was necessary to establish the hegemony of the agrariat—contrary of course to Marxian theory, but agrarian theoreticians pointed out that corn cutting was not, strictly speaking, revolutionary activity. There was some show of resistance to an agrarian dictatorship on the part of the intellectuals, but the latter group could get no mass support and turned its attention to speculation as to why the truck hadn't arrived with breakfast.

During breakfast a boy from Manhattan sang cowboy ballads. The class struggle was pretty generally ignored in the discussion. One worker, born in Austria, told of his first love affair, "wit a geezy girl wit fleshing eyes and wery yellow. If har fadder would ketch me he would keel me, but he did not ketch me."

An hour later the genuine Arkansas agrariat went past, carrying its young, on the way to church. It seemed to be amused at collegiate ways. "That there's what comes of bein' educated," it said. "Jist look at *that* shock, will ya!"

### HILANDER CONFERENCE

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were discussed. Special consideration was directed at the future status of workers' education and at the Negro problem, particularly as it relates to workers' education in the South.

### WHAT IS COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE?

Commonwealth College is a non-factional labor school which has as its function the training of young men and women for active service in some militant organization in the labor movement.

Its courses, which include economics, history, labor problems, proletarian culture, creative writing, public speaking, journalism, psychology, etc., are taught from a point of view partisan to the working class.

Most of the food consumed at the college is grown on the college farm. The school has its own laundry, cannery, print shop, etc. All work is done communally by members of the group. The school pays no salaries or wages. Teachers receive only their maintenance.

Students pay \$30 tuition per quarterly term (three months) and receive their board and room in exchange for 20 hours work per week during fall, winter and spring terms, and 15 hours per week during the summer term, on the college farm, in the garden, office, library, etc.

Commonwealth is located near Mena, Arkansas in the Ouachita Mountains, the southernmost range of the Ozarks.

### QUARTERLY EDITOR ARRIVES

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woman, crushed and starved by the economic depression, viewing the erection of a municipal Christmas tree. This is a story of unusual intensity and insight into the reactions of these individuals to the strain of their position. Meridel LeSueur is well known as a contributor of short stories to such periodicals as *The New Masses* and *Scribner's Magazine*. This is her second appearance in *The Windsor Quarterly*.

"The Blizzard," by Philip Stevenson, an ironic study of a petty bourgeois broker's clerk and his attempt to force drama into the feat of getting to the office on a stormy morning. Stevenson is an established novelist, as well as a fine short-story writer.

"Pond Pasture," by Frances Frost, an understanding story of Negro jealousy on St. Kitts in the Caribbean. While better known as a poet, Frances Frost has in the last years shown herself to be a fine story-teller.

There will be other stories and poems by established and unknown writers, including Albert Edward Clements, who has already appeared in *The Windsor Quarterly* as poet and short-story writer, Joseph Rodman Manch, as well as *Cinema Comment*, written by Lewis Jacobs, the leading American critic of the film as art, and a book-review department conducted by the editors.

Irene and Fred founded *The Windsor Quarterly* sixteen months ago at Harland, Vermont, and literary critics have given it favorable attention since its first issue. But literary excellence is not enough to keep a magazine alive in depression times. The *Quarterly* was forced to suspend for a few months, until arrangements were made for its publication at Commonwealth. Hereafter, it will appear regularly.

**WINDSOR QUARTERLY . . . \$1.50**  
**FORTNIGHTLY . . . . . \$1.00**  
**BOTH FOR \$1.50**

Because Commonwealth finances will be very low until the opening of the fall quarter, October 1, we are offering, until that time, a year's subscription to both the Quarterly and the Fortnightly for \$1.50. The Quarterly is rated by critics as one of the best literary magazines of the nation. The Fortnightly will keep you informed of the progress of an institution unlike any other in the world. Have you read "My Dead Brother Comes to America" in this issue of the Fortnightly?

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ADDRESS.....