



A BLOW FOR TRADITION: Did thee read that Harry Helmsley, husband of embattled real estate tycoon/skinflint Leona Helmsley, is a Quaker? Alas, tis true. That whole business is not doing much to advance our Reputation for fair dealing, or the Testimony of Simplicity. But as the Ohio elders would say, that's what comes of marrying out. Friends are advised.

A Friendly Letter

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NINTH MONTH, 1989

Dear Friend,

How unique is the Quakerism of Ohio's Conservative Yearly Meeting? Well, in what other Yearly Meeting's publication could you expect to find a respected minister's matter-of-fact descriptions of some of his many encounters with angels? But there it is, in the *Ohio Conservative Friends Review*. Usually, he writes:

My experiences of seeing angels have not been clear images, just enough outline to know they were there....[But] One day I was pruning in the top of an apple tree. Feeling the Lord's presence, I sat down on a limb to wait on the Lord and pray. As I sat there, angels seemed to come and take my heart out, and they were holding it in front of me. I said, "Wait a minute, what's going on?" It was a long way to the ground, and without a heart, I figured I would soon fall. The answer that came was, "I am giving you a new heart; a heart of love." I have not been the same since, and I praise the Lord for a heart of love."

This past month, at Yearly Meeting time, the same minister was coming to a business session, when he felt a sudden leading to go instead to speak to a visiting Friend. Sure enough, the visiting Friend turned out to be greatly in need of his counsel.

That's only one example of Ohio Conservative uniqueness. A special atmosphere surrounds the campus of its Olney Friends School in Barnesville, Ohio. The school stands on a ridge at one end of a long brick sidewalk; at the other end of the walk is the huge Stillwater Meetinghouse, home to Stillwater Monthly Meeting and, in Eighth Month, the Yearly Meeting.

At first glance, especially in summer, Olney and Stillwater strike many a visitor as the very embodiment of Quaker Quietism and peacefulness: They are set amid lovely rolling farmland, with woods and cornfields on one side and a small lake, dotted with

Canada geese, on the other. The buildings themselves have a quiet, homely dignity that is stately but modest, with a distinctly handmade look, which, in fact, they mostly are. Add to this the quality of worship there, where members still kneel to pray, and where on a recent morning eight bonnets and three broadbrims were counted. The quietness also pervades the Yearly Meeting business sessions, in unhurried periods of silence between each item, while the recorded ministers wait patiently on the facing benches, and everyone listens to queries that are not only read but actually answered.

To many a visiting Quaker, this idyllic setting is irresistible; I return as often as possible. Over the past generation, a steady trickle of pilgrims has come here to settle, seeking the authentic, original Quakerism, and convinced that in Barnesville they have finally found it.

But few if any of these pilgrims have ended up staying very long. Within a year or two, sadder but hopefully wiser, each has packed up and moved on. They have learned, the hard way, that for all their magic, Olney and Ohio YM are human places, facing much the same outward problems and inward struggles that afflict people, and Friends, elsewhere.

Ohio YM's internal struggles reached a crisis point last month; and that's the subject of the report on the following pages. I hope it conveys some of the fascinating uniqueness of Ohio's Quaker way, as well as its commonality with the Society elsewhere, a commonality that has persisted sometimes in spite of Ohio Friends' best efforts.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

Since 1837, the Olney Friends School has been the centerpiece of Ohio YM, its glory, its monument—and its burden. The school has been their main witness, to itself, to its children, and through them, to the world. That is why its present extremity represents not just an institutional problem, but a full-blown crisis of identity for Ohio Conservative Quakerism.

In Ohio YM this identity struggle is complicated by the Wilburite heritage Olney was built to preserve. John Wilbur was a Rhode Island farmer and travelling minister of the 1830s and 1840s, who preached the primary importance of rooting Quaker ministry entirely in the immediate leadings of the Spirit. While Orthodox in theology, Wilbur was loudly opposed to the evangelical "innovations" of such leaders as Joseph John Gurney. Gurney's "innovations" later led to pastoral Quakerism, of which a major center, the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region, is but a hundred miles away in Canton, Ohio.

A TENDENCY TO SEPARATION

Wilbur's crusade against "Gurneyism" finally got him disowned by New England YM in 1843, through a shameless misuse of Quaker process which split the Yearly Meeting and evoked similar splits in several other Orthodox YMs, including Ohio. (Philadelphia YM only avoided a separation by cutting off communication with all other YMs in the world for a number of years.)

The two New England bodies reunited in 1945; but in Ohio, Iowa and North Carolina, Conservative or "Wilburite" YMs still persist; and of these, Ohio is the largest and, in some ways, the most traditional. Of its traditions, the most troublesome is what historian William Taber calls their passion to be right.

This attitude goes back to the assertive self-righteousness of Wilbur himself, and has produced its own monuments in Ohio YM which, though less visible than Olney are almost as important:

One was a meetinghouse near Salem, Ohio built by Joshua Maule in 1870, after he had separated from Ohio YM, and then split from his own followers, known as "Primitive" Friends; worship there was attended only by Maule's family; no one else qualified. Perhaps even more extreme was the case of Mary Knoll, who along with her husband led yet another separation from the "Primitives": For ten years after her husband's death, she met for worship every week in her home, alone, before finding her way back to the "mainstream" Wilburite Salem meeting.

The perceptive English Friend Caroline Stephen took the measure of this tendency in her book *Quaker Strongholds* almost a century ago:

Too much "inwardness" seems to develop an extraordinary bitterness and spirit of judgment, under the shadow of which no fresh growth would be possible. It is obviously dangerous to sanity.

GUARDING THE RIGHT TO BE RIGHT

And one wonders, reading of other Wilburites who bore firm "testimonies" against things like standard time, baseball and the reading of novels, how often their quaint peculiarities shaded over into something not unlike a kind of pious madness.

In any case, this passion to be right has embroiled Ohio YM in repeated wrangles; and one could even say that many Ohio Conservative Friends have been fighting a noble if futile battle against the twentieth century ever since it began. In 1989, with barely a decade of it left, the combat is still intense.

Olney Friends School is no exception to this trend. Once it was part of an almost self-contained subculture: Ohio Wilburite children attended meeting primary schools, then Olney, and then returned to the farms or small family businesses; attending college was rare and considered risky. But today the meeting schools are long gone. Most Ohio Quaker kids go to public

schools, and then to college; to replace them, and the Ohio Quaker teachers who have also gone public, Olney has recruited from all over the country and outside the Society.

But with outsiders have come the world's values and challenges, which Olney was designed more to avoid than to cope with. For that matter, the truth is that even most Ohio YM youths have been largely assimilated into mainstream culture.

Most other vintage Friends schools have trod a similar path. All were originally intended to offer a "guarded education" to Quaker children. Those that survive from the last century, however, now tend to guard most carefully the pursuit of high college board scores. Their Quaker character ranges from a kind of Friendly atmosphere and some social action to barely a memory. They have also generally become autonomous, or completely independent.

AFTER THE HEDGES ARE GONE

Not so Olney. Its governing Corporation and committee are still drawn almost entirely from Ohio YM Friends, and these are mostly indigenous Ohioans. And here the ideal of a guarded education for their children has been steadfastly held aloft, against all obstacles and ever-increasing odds.

Olney's present crisis has been building for years. It involves such troubling questions as these: How do you provide a "guarded education" for Ohio YM youth when most of them now go to public high schools instead? For that matter, what is a guarded education after most of your old peculiarities have in fact been given up? And how do you sustain a school founded as a hedge against the secular world once it has been drawn willy-nilly into the secular educational marketplace, where it is poorly equipped to compete?

Where other Quaker schools its age have found their answers to similar questions in a successful drive to survive in the marketplace, no such clear-cut transition has ever

been possible for Olney because of its close ties to the yearly Meeting's membership. And particularly over the last generation, since the Sixties, the clash between the memories and visions of committee members and the realities of life on campus has deepened year by year.

Through the last decade headmasters and staff have come and gone in quick succession, and the school atmosphere has veered from strict to lenient and back again. Further, as the national baby bust has reduced the pool of potential students, Olney has been raiding its endowment to subsidize more students more heavily, filling seats while hoping for a turnaround in enrollment to stave off the day of reckoning.

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

But the turnaround hasn't come, now the reckoning is in sight, indeed it is imminent. This hard news was delivered to the Yearly Meeting, gathered as the Olney Friends School Corporation, last month in joint reports from the headmaster, Mark Ocker, and the School's Executive Committee.

Their message was simple and chilling: after 152 years, Olney is at the end of its rope. The endowment has been depleted to the point where it will last only another 18 months, if that; then the school will be forced to close.

With their reports came a proposal for the school's future: Replace the present boarding school with a scaled-down program of self-instruction for no more than twelve students, and use the facilities primarily as a conference center.

This is an intriguing proposal; but will OYM's membership will ever be able to agree on it? The question arises because, although it has less than 700 members on its rolls—with most of these nonresidents—Ohio is still dogged by the consequences of the Wilburite passion to be right, and to see what is right from sharply different perspectives. This, plus many older members' strong sentiment-

cism making difficult. In his fine history of Ohio YM, *The Eye of Faith*, Bill Taber notes that sixty years ago, the YM could never agree to let go of its primary schools, which faced similar problems. Instead, members wrung their hands in dismay and exhorted each other to renewed support; in the meantime, one after another the little schools closed down until all were gone.

Today, in shaping Olney's fate, the YM has to find unity among no less than four distinct, and often clashing tendencies or parties:

A SPIRIT UNEQUALLY YOKED?

There are the new "Primitives", convinced Friends who have adopted plain dress, strongly Orthodox theological views, and a separatist attitude toward other Friends groups. Allied with them are the "scattered remnant" of Friends around the country who look to Ohio YM as their spiritual home.

Then there are the charismatics, mainly people from around Barnesville who have been influenced by the Full Gospel Businessman's Fellowship and have experienced the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" including speaking in tongues; some have also assimilated elements of the religious New Right's social outlook. This shows up especially in hostility to any favorable mention of homosexuality.

A third group are liberal Friends, mostly in Cleveland Meeting, which holds joint membership with Lake Erie YM, part of Friends General Conference. There are those who regard Cleveland's as an interloper in Ohio YM which leaves it "yoked with unbelievers." (Cf. 2 Cor. 6:14) The fact that Cleveland Friends are discussing same sex marriage has added to this unease. But for that matter, some Cleveland Friends left the meeting when it joined OYM, and the split was not healed until the meeting gained joint membership in Lake Erie YM.

Last but hopefully not least, there are the traditional Wilburites. Quietists by temperament and

This is obviously a volatile mixture; and the tensions among them have contributed greatly to the policy confusion in which Olney has been mired for so long.

Yet this is not said to criticize Ohio Friends. If they have not been able to agree on coherent and consistent answers to the questions of the form and content of authentic Quaker education in our time, who has? The Quaker-founded prep schools have survived and succeeded in the secular academic marketplace; but along the way they have largely begged most of the hard questions of Quaker identity and connections to the Society.

THE HARD GRACE OF BANKRUPTCY

Fortunately, this time Ohio has the spur of Olney's looming bankruptcy to help concentrate its members' minds. So this time they are likely to act. There was talk at the School Corporation meeting of decisions before year's end.

Moreover, in the conference center scenario, they have what seems to me a very promising idea. Already, Olney's summer calendar is regularly filled with conferences and youth camps. A year-round Ohio YM Conference Center could potentially have even more appeal for adult Friends, especially if Wilburite culture and spirituality could be consciously made a part of its offerings. Ohio Quietism is focussed on issues—spiritual sensitivity, plainness as a discipline and witness, and the Society of Friends as a counterculture, that get lip service among other branches but not much more. It is unlikely that many other Friends would want to become traditional Wilburites; yet the potential for cross-fertilization and mutual enrichment seems large.

I wish Ohio Friends grace and courage as they make decisions which will set their course for decades to come, and I hope they open Olney to the larger Society. Perhaps non-Wilburite Friends could help in their final battles against the evils of the twentieth century; and maybe they could help us learn to

INSIDE: OHIO CONSERVATIVE FRIENDS--
FIGHTING THEIR LAST BATTLE?

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SOME MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson was preoccupied with wars. A Mexican civil war threatened to spill over the border. And the bigger war in Europe was getting ever harder to avoid: When a German submarine sank the British liner Lusitania in 5/1915, 128 Americans were killed. The newspapers had gone wild at this, and Wilson almost broke relations with Germany. He also faced a tough reelection campaign.

One morning, Wilson took time out to greet a series of visitors to the White House, who were ushered through in a kind of receiving line. Standing nervously among them was an oddly-dressed man, in a plain black suit and wide-brimmed black hat. When the man's turn came to be introduced, he asked if he might speak, and Wilson nodded. The man then took a deep breath and declaimed, in a strange sing-song voice:

Beloved President, greatly beloved for thy works sake, Thus saith the Lord God unto thee, O President, "I raised thee up and exalted thee to the Presidency of the Republic for a special purpose, even that thou mightst be an instrument in my hand for the preserva-

tion of the Nation in a time of trouble. And now, after having been so signally blessed by my Providence, why shouldst thou settle down in carnal security, relying upon the puny arm of flesh for protection? Thy plan of National defense, though apparently necessary in the eye of carnal wisdom (should it be carried into effect) shall be in my hands as though before the fire. No nation ever was saved by the multitude or strength of its armed forces, but by my own interposition on behalf of those who trust in and serve me. 'They that trust in me shall be as Mt. Zion which cannot be removed, but abideth forever.'"

The speaker was James Henderson, a minister of Ohio Yearly Meeting, who had been led to deliver this message and had obtained clearness from the Ohio ministers and elders to do so. Woodrow Wilson's reaction is not recorded; Henderson recalled that when he finished there was a pause, then the president thanked him and extended his hand. Henderson's prophecy was not heeded, of course; but much truth rings through it even now.

EQUAL TIME: QUAKER MALE PASTOR CHUCKLES

At least, they were *told* by male Quaker pastors, at the Friends Ministers Conference:

#1 It seems that Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart are collaborating on a new book, of which the title reportedly is, *TV Ministers Do More Than Laypeople*.

#2 Three male Quaker pastors and their wives died and found themselves lined up outside the Pearly Gates. When the first pastor told St. Peter who he was, the gatekeeper looked in the big book and then said: "Sorry, you can't come in. Our records show

that you had a consuming secret passion for filthy lucre. Why, you even married a woman named Goldie."

After the next pastor's introduction, Peter thumbed the book a second time, then thundered again: "You can't come in here either! We know you had a secret consuming passion for alcohol. Why, you even married a woman named Brandy."

At this point the third Quaker pastor turned to his wife and whispered, "We might as well leave now. There's no place for us here, Fanny."