VOLUME XXXIX, NO. 21
MAY 21, 1986

THE VISION OF KROPOTKIN

THE dreams of the Utopians, when applied to the affairs of imperfect humans, fail continuously, yet ate continuously reborn, with new definitions of what must be done. The dreamers are accused by "practical men" of ignoring the facts of life, and the charge seems in many respects true, yet the practical men, the dreamers reply, close their minds to the underlying reality of human possibilities and the capacities of men and women to learn from experience. It is certainly the case that some institutions of a given society function as confinements which stand in the way of constructive change, and need to have their hold loosened, if not destroyed, while other institutions may serve as natural platforms for progress. History is, or ought to be, the study of human thinking about these matters and its consequences in the sequence of events. The documents to be studied in order to understand what ought to be done, and what should be avoided, form the curriculum.

For example, anyone who wants to understand American history ought to begin with, say, a reading of the *Federalist Papers* and Tom Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense,* both of which deal with the political and cultural institutions of the late eighteenth century. Paine set out, more or less successfully, to destroy the allegiance and loyalty of the colonists to the King of England, using for leverage the self-reliance and sense of freedom of the settlers in America. The *Federalist* writers used hard reasoning as a means of showing the need for a strong central government for the United States. We are likely to be persuaded that they were right, yet today, two hundred years after they made their arguments, we are equally likely to find that William Appleman Williams' case for the decentralist government of the Articles of Confederation applies very much to our time, when the national state has become a very different affair from the sensible vehicle of order it was for Hamilton, Madison, and Jay. It is the regionalists who today speak to our condition, not the nationalists. In key with what the bioregionalists are now saying is the historical perspective provided by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution.* In a chapter on "The Revolutionary Tradition," she points out that only Jefferson among the Founding Fathers realized that, after the War for Independence, the excitement and visionary fervor of the Declaration of Independence would be lost to the American people in the days of constitution-making, which required stability and no longer revolt.

> . . . he knew, however dimly, that the Revolution, while it had given freedom to the people, had failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised. Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of "expressing, discussing and deciding" which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom. And since the state and federal governments, the proudest results of revolution, through sheer weight of their proper business were bound to overshadow in political importance the townships and their meeting halls—until what Emerson still considered to be "the unit of the Republic" and "the school of the people" in political matters had withered away—one might even come to the conclusion that there was less opportunity for the exercise of public freedom and the enjoyment of public happenings in the republic of the United States than there had existed in the colonies of British America. Lewis Mumford recently pointed out how the political importance of the township was never grasped by the founders, and that the failure to incorporate it into either the federal or the state constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development." Only Jefferson among the founders had a clear premonition of this tragedy, for his greatest fear was indeed lest "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs."

Today, far more than in Jefferson's time, we are beginning to realize the practical effect on our lives of a "democracy" that lacks "concrete organs." The threat of and preparations for nuclear war, over which "the people" have virtually no control is but one among several practical considerations. The virtual bankruptcy of the nation is another. The ills of both agriculture and industry, the sickness of our system of education, the pollution of water, air, land and sea are others. It must be admitted, however, that only a comparatively small minority of people are exercised about these matters, while the majority, in Neil Postman's apt phrase, is "amusing itself to death." Only when people begin to lose their jobs and their homes is public opinion really aroused, and then it is far too late for any immediate remedy.

Jefferson's dream has certainly not become true for our generation. He thought we would be all right as a country as long as most of us were farmers and small landowners, but today the nation is farmed by big machines and about four per cent of the population, and many of the medium and small sized farmers are in trouble. It is notable that the most articulate and intelligent reformers of the present are calling, not just for better methods of farming, but for the return to a vital small-community life. This is still a dream, but it may be the one most likely to come true as the only alternative to both economic and financial and cultural collapse. Pessimists think that the collapse will come first, while optimists hope it can be mitigated by the use of common sense. But very nearly all agree that the kind of change we need can only be born from trouble, probably a lot of trouble.

We come now to a book that has come to MANAS from England, from the Freedom Press. It is Peter Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, and the editor, Colin Ward, has added "Tomorrow" to the title in acknowledgement that this work embodies a dream that has not yet come true, although the author believed it was on the way and gathered evidence in support of this hope. Kropotkin, incidentally, was a member of the Freedom Group which in October 1886 produced the first issue of the anarchist journal, *Freedom*, which is still published, now as a weekly, and Colin Ward is one of the editors. Ward says in his Introduction:

> The author of this remarkable book was born of aristocratic Russian parents in 1842, served as a boy in the Tsar's Corps of Pages, and as a young man travelled widely in Central Asia and the Far East, gaining a reputation as a geographer. He became involved in populist agitation, was imprisoned for two years, and made a sensational escape from a prison hospital in St. Petersberg. In Western Europe, he found his home in the anarchist movement and, after imprisonment for three years in France, settled in England. . . where he earned his living as a writer on scientific, social and political subjects. Apart from two journeys to the United States and Canada, and brief visits to Europe, he remained in Britain until 1917 when he returned to Russia. There he died in 1921. . . . One of the fullest biographies of Kropotkin is *The Anarchist Prince*, by George Woodcock.

Fields, Factories and Workshops began as a series of articles Kropotkin wrote in the 1880s and later made into a book (1899). He argues for "revolutionary changes in the direction of industry and agriculture." As an anarchist he was uninterested in invoking the power of government to bring about these changes. He believed that human intelligence would be enough to bring about the desired conditions. He has, Ward says, four points:

> The first was that there is a trend for manufacturing industry to decentralize throughout the world, and that production for a local market is a rational and desirable tendency. The second was that this implies that each region of the globe must feed itself, and that intensive farming could meet the basic needs of a country like Britain. The third was that the dispersal of industry on a small scale and in combination with agriculture is also rational and desirable, and the fourth is that we need an education which combines manual and intellectual work.

There are various reasons for reading this book, all with substantial importance. First of all, one is inevitably impressed by the number of

dreams the modern reader finds himself sharing with Kropotkin. His idea of small-scale agriculture and industry in combination fits with the best thinking of the post-industrial age. Like so many others, including, for example, Simone Weil, he recognized that the electric motor frees factory production from the necessity of obtaining power from a single drive shaft in a large factory, making small-scale production in rural areas entirely feasible. The problem of small producers, he shows, is not production but sales, and this can be overcome by cooperative marketing associations, and has been in many cases. The "bigness" requirement of industry, except for a small number of undertakings which need to be large, is more a habit and a state of mind than anything else. Colin Ward says:

> The very technological developments which, in the hands of people with statist, centralizing, authoritarian habits of mind, as well as in the hands of mere exploiters, demand greater concentration of industry, are also those which could make possible a local, intimate, decentralized society. . . .
>
> And how have Kropotkin's decentralist and regionalist ideas fared? Once again the evidence is equivocal. On one side, we have a stream of advocates of decentralist planning: Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford, who have had some influence on official policy. But on the other, we have the "natural" movements of capital and labour which have contradicted the trends which he predicted. Howard's immensely inventive and influential book was first published under the title *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in the same year as Kropotkin's book. When it was re-issued as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1902, Howard made use of Kropotkin's findings. His disciples, from Thomas Adams, first Secretary of the Garden Cities Association (later the T.C.P.A.), through Lewis Mumford, to Paul and Percival Goodman, have acknowledged the fertile influence of Kropotkin's work. Howard's book was a creative synthesis of decentralist ideas which, as Mumford declared, lay the foundation "for a new cycle in urban civilization: one in which the means of life will be subservient to the purposes of living, and in which the pattern needed for biological survival and economic efficiency will likewise lead to social and personal fulfillment." Kropotkin's similar vision can be traced in an American, a Russian, or a Chinese context. In Israel the importance of Kropotkin's ideas on the decentralization of industry (in a context which has nothing to do with Zionist nationalism) can be seen in the work of a variety of thinkers from Martin Buber to Haim Halperin.

If one takes the trouble to read Woodcock's *Anarchist Prince*—as exciting as any novel—one begins to realize how and where this aristocratic youth obtained his ideas and arrived at his convictions. Too many people still suppose that anarchists are people who go about with bombs and who shoot at the wealthy and eminent. There was a time when such things happened, but they were a few in number and exploited by the conventional press. If you read Kropotkin, you find little else but both practical and moral common sense. A great many people nowadays are anarchists without knowing it. Anarchists are against coercion by official political power; they oppose the State, and who, among those who have minds, do not, a great deal of the time? Those fortunate enough to have the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* might turn to the article on Anarchism, which Kropotkin wrote, along with the accounts of the Altai and Amur regions of Siberia, which he was the first to explore.

In his chapter on Small Industries and Industrial Villages, Kropotkin says toward the end:

> The scattering of industries over the country—so as to bring the factory amidst the fields, to make agriculture derive all those profits which it always finds in being combined with industry (see the eastern states of America) and to produce a combination of industrial with agricultural work—is surely the next step to be made, as soon as a reorganization of our present conditions is possible. It is being made already, here and there, as we saw on the preceding pages. This step is imposed by the very necessity of *producing for the producers themselves;* it is imposed by the necessity for each healthy man and woman to spend a part of their lives in manual work in the free air; and it will be rendered the more necessary when the great social movements, which have now become unavoidable, come to disturb the present international trade, and compel each nation to revert to her own

resources for her own maintenance. Humanity as a whole, as well as each separate individual, will be gainers by the change, and the change will take place.

However, such a change also implies a thorough modification of our present system of education. It implies a society composed of men and women, each of whom is able to work with his or her hands, as well as with his or her brain and to do so in more directions than one.

One could say that Kropotkin was the champion of intelligent self-sufficiency, for the spreading of industry in rural areas, for farmers to combine agriculture with small-scale production, a combination of mechanics with artisanship. He pointed out that the major inventions of the eighteenth century, which led to the industrial revolution, were the work of craftsmen and mechanics, not scientists. The inventions grew out of the intimate knowledge they had gained by working with their hands. Both Gandhi and Schumacher were of essentially the same view. Colin Ward says:

Dr. Schumacher identified the economic needs of the poor countries thus:

"First, that workplaces have to be created in the areas where the people are living now, and not primarily in metropolitan areas into which they tend to migrate.

"Second, that these work places must be, on average, cheap enough to be created in large numbers without this calling for an unattainable level of capital formation and imports.

"Third, that the production methods employed must be relatively simple, so that the demands for high skills are minimized, not only in the production process itself but also in matters of organization, raw-material supply, financing, marketing, and so forth.

"Fourth, that production should be mainly from local materials and mainly for local use."

He observed that these four requirements can be met only if there is a "regional" approach to development, and if there is a conscious effort to develop and apply an "intermediate" technology. When he started the Intermediate Technology Development Group, the kind of request that the Group received from Third World Countries was: "Some twenty years ago there existed a bit of equipment which one could purchase for £20 to do a particular job. Now it costs £2,000 and is fully automated and we cannot afford to buy it. Can you help us?" And he comments: "These are the requirements of the poor people for whom nobody really cares. The powerful people, who are no longer poor are more interested in nuclear reactors, huge dams, steel works." His colleague George McRobie told me of the evolution of the Group's ideology. They began by considering the needs of the poor countries. Then they realized the importance of the principles they evolved for the poor areas of the rich world. And finally they came to see that in a world faced (as it is certainly going to be) with a crisis of resources and scarcity, and a superfluity of labor, these principles are of universal application. This is the point where they join hands with the advocates of "alternative" technology, who seek the satisfaction of human needs through the use of renewable resources: wind-power, water-power, tidal energy, solar energy, human energy, rather than through the reckless exploitation of finite mineral resources.

Kropotkin's demonstration that English farmlands, used as the Belgian and French farmers cultivate, could easily feed the entire English population has been verified by other researchers in recent years, while the observations of an American, added in his commentary by Colin Ward, are of particular interest. He quotes Sheldon Greene:

We know that each year 100,000 farms are abandoned and that rural America has sustained a population loss of 40 million people in the last fifty years. Concomitant with the abandonment of small farms and the migration to the cities of a heretofor agriculturally dependent rural population has been the increasing entry into agriculture of multi-purpose business interests, bringing with it an increase in farm size and absentee ownership of the land. Once-populous areas occupied by independent small land-owners interspersed with small rural service communities are being transformed into feudalistic estates—possibly one of the most significant economic and social transformations to be experienced in our history.

Fields, Factories and Workshops is one of the great humanitarian documents of European literature. It represents the considered optimism and hope of a revolutionist who believed in voluntary cooperation, in return to the land, and a

balance of widely distributed industry and agriculture. Colin Ward says in his final summary:

> Kropotkin sought a society which combined labor-intensive agriculture and small-scale industry, both producing for local needs, in a decentralized pattern of settlement in which the division of labor had been replaced by the integration of brain-work and manual work, and he was optimistic enough to believe that the trends current in his day were leading to this kind of society. His picture of the future appealed to his fellow-anarchists as the kind of economic structure which would suit a worker-controlled federation of self-governing workshops and rural communes. It appealed to the ideologists of decentralist planning like Howard, Geddes and Mumford. It appealed to the advocates of small-holdings: those who wanted to see a highly productive intensive horticulture provide a good living for a new kind of sophisticated peasantry.

A reading of Woodcock's *Anarchist Prince* amplifies understanding of Kropotkin as a man, shows his extraordinary cultural background, and above all the respect he commanded among all the thoughtful men and women of his time. Very nearly all the good ideas of change and reform which are now taking hold have antecedents in Kropotkin's writings.

Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow may be purchased for £3.50 from Freedom Press, in Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7AX.

REVIEW
A NUMBER OF BOOKS

READING the articles by Helena Norberg-Hodge on Ladakh, a cold, high province of India, adjacent to Pakistan and Tibet, was sufficient reason for getting hold of a copy of *A Journey to Ladakh* (Houghton Mifflin, 1983) by Andrew Harvey, an Englishman born in India, a poet and a Shakespearean scholar at All Soul's College, Oxford. Harvey returned to India from time to time, and found an interest in Buddhism developing in him. Then, people he ran into suggested he visit Ladakh, which has a Tibetan culture. A young Frenchman he met in a travel agency office in Delhi pressed him to go.

> "Don't forget," the Frenchman had said. "It is essential you go by bus. It takes two days to Leh from Srinagar. You will be tempted to fly there. Don't. I have been down the Amazon, I have walked across the Kalahari, I once spent five weeks in the Sahara . . . and they are *nothing* to those two days going up from Srinagar to Leh, up the Kashmir valley into the mountains of Ladakh. Find a patron saint and pray to him; don't look too closely at the side of the road or you'll faint or be sick; pray you don't get the same drunk dishevelled unshaven Kashmiri driver I did who swigged from a bottle of gin and sang and giggled to himself the whole way. You'll be all right. You're British, you have the stiff upper lip, you'll be all right. Take opium if you can get some. It helps. The greens and purples and browns in the mountains sway and tremble and sing if you do and you giggle with the driver and do not mind that on that corner the bus was an inch from a three thousand foot drop."
>
> I did go by bus, but without opium. On one side I sat next to a fat German lady in her forties who kept clutching my knee and screaming, "I can't look! I mustn't look!" On the other side there was a young green-faced Frenchman reading Kierkegaard . . .

This gives something of the mood of the book, although at the same time the author is on a somewhat serious quest. In any event, he is a good writer and you do get a feel for this strange country. And readers with an interest in the diversities of culture available in India, who are curious about Tibet, and have an interest in the daily life of people in a Buddhist country are likely to enjoy at least parts of it very much. The author says in his introductory chapter:

> What did I know about Ladakh? I knew facts only—that it was the highest, most remote, most sparsely populated region in the Republic of India; that its climate was extreme even in summer, when hot days were followed by freezing nights; that it was cut off from the world from November to May by snow; that it was of great strategic importance, bounded on one side by Tibet and China and on the other by Pakistan; that it was a part of Jammu and Kashmir State and had been the focus of political controversy and strife for twenty years between Central and State Government, between Muslim and Buddhist. . . . I had noted with relish this sentence from Cowley Lambert's book of his trip to Kashmir and Ladakh (1877): "The prevailing features of this country are bare rocky mountains, bare gravel slopes, and bare sandy plains, with not a green thing, not a tree, not a bush, not even a blade of grass, excepting a kind of grey prickly grass that crops up here and there."

Yet there are visitors who declare that the Ladakhis are about the most cheerful people in the world. One reviewer called Harvey's book "a singular blending of the wondrous and the commonplace, the sacred and the hilarious." That seems about right.

* * *

We have read three of Chaim Potok's five books written in the past. The first was *The Chosen*, which we liked best and have been unable to forget. The others are good too, but we barely remember them, except in general idea. What does he do? He makes you feel at home with the everyday life of the Jews of today—Jews who are religious—and to understand how they feel and the intensity of their belief. Reading Potok is part of a general education in the constituents of the culture of America. Jews have a faculty of becoming an essential part of any culture in which they participate and Potok gives you a feeling of respect for why this should be.

He has now written a novel about a Jewish girl, from childhood to womanly maturity. The mother is Jewish and beautiful, the father an Irish

(by descent) journalist, and both parents are communists. This book is called *Davita's Harp* (Knopf, 1985). The time is the period between the two world wars of this century, the setting the apartments in Manhattan and Brooklyn where the Chandals lived, moving about once a year. The girl—Ilana Davita Chandal—was born about 1930. Neither parent was religious. Communism was their religion, which the mother painfully outgrew, as a result of what happened in the Spanish Civil War, when the Stalinists killed anarchists, Trotskyists, and members of P.O.U.M., and later the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact. Her father, serving as a war correspondent, was killed by the air raid on Guernica—trying to rescue a wounded nun. He was hit by a bomb. When Ilana and her mother were living in Brooklyn they had Jewish neighbors and friends and the girl was drawn, without becoming exactly a believer, into taking part in their religion. Meanwhile, her father's sister, a fundamentalist Christian, a completely unselfish woman, helped both the girl and her mother. Ilana Davita was thus exposed to various religious beliefs and practices while she was growing up. She was an exceedingly bright girl and in the Jewish school she attended she was awarded two prizes. The teacher who informed her of this told her that she had the highest average in the class and should also have had the Akiva award, but that for a girl to earn it was awkward for the school, so they gave her two other prizes. "We would be the only yeshiva with a girl as head of the graduating class. Your name and picture would be in the newspapers. What would the world think of our boys? It would not be nice."

These were the circumstances of Davita's maturing years. Her mother married again, an orthodox Jew. This outlines the story, which tells about a deeply sensitive and intelligent girl who is growing up. The book is hard to put down.

* * *

Four months ago, in the lead article in MANAS for Jan. 22, the question of how America may regain its health was discussed. It was suggested that such a question leads us back to the time of our origins and to the remarkable men who had the most to do with the formation of our Republic. These exemplary individuals had been doing the kind of thinking needed to design the foundation of government for the thirteen colonies, to replace the Articles of Confederation, and within the past fifteen or twenty years several books have come out which focus on the Founders and their work. Twenty years ago, in 1966, Catherine Drinker Bowen brought out *Miracle at Philadelphia* (Atlantic, Little, Brown), telling the story of the writing of the Constitution, from May to September, 1787, when fifty-five delegates met at Independence Hall—among them some of the most notable names in America, all of them comparatively young save for Benjamin Franklin, then eighty-one—who, although they represented widely different interests, were able to draft a document that has already served the country for centuries without material change. As Washington wrote to Lafayette in 1788: "It appears to me, then, little short of a miracle that the Delegates from so many different States (which States you know are also different from each other, in their manners, circumstances, and prejudices), should unite in forming a system of national government, so little liable to well founded objections."

Then, as part of the observance of the nation's Bicentennial, the Library of Congress, in 1972, 1973, and 1974, published three small but seminal books—*The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality, Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution,* and *Leadership in the American Revolution.* A contributor to the third of these volumes, Gordon S. Wood, remarked that "the Founding Fathers still seem larger than life and, from our present perspective especially, seem to possess intellectual capacities well beyond our own." He goes on:

> Somehow for a brief moment ideas and power, intellectualism and politics, came together—indeed were one with each other—in a way never again

> duplicated in American history. There is no doubt that the Founding Fathers were men of ideas and thought, in fact were the leading intellectuals of their day. But they were as well the political leaders of their day, politicians who competed for power, lost and won elections, served in their colonial and state legislatures or in the Congress, became governors, judges, and even presidents. . . . They were intellectuals without being alienated and political leaders without being obsessed with votes. They lived mutually in the world of ideas and the world of politics, shared equally in both in a happy combination that fills us with envy and wonder. We know that something happened then in American history that can never happen again.

Last year, one of the contributors (mostly historians) to these Library of Congress volumes, Richard B. Morris, published his own book, *Witnesses at the Creation* (Holt Rinehart Winston, $16.95), on Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, and the Constitution. These three, authors of the *Federalist* letters, written for the newspapers and later made into a book, joined together as an alliance of men of principle and experience, to persuade the new nation to adopt the Constitution. When the first *Federalist* letter appeared, on Oct. 27, 1787, no state had yet ratified the Constitution and "its outcome was in grave doubt." Morris says:

> The pseudonymous collaborators on *The Federalist,* writers who kept their authorship secret and only signed their letters "Publius," were Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, aged thirty-three, thirty-seven, and forty-two respectively. Out of a total of eighty-five letters, it is now accepted that Hamilton wrote fifty-one, Madison twenty-nine, and Jay five.

Mr. Morris, who teaches history at Columbia University, takes us back to those concluding years of the eighteenth century, with sketches of the life of each of the three writers, and helps the reader to understand what and how they thought. It is well to have handy a copy of the *Federalist* handy while reading this book, and to dip into it to see why the authors were of such great influence. Take for example the tenth letter, by Madison, on the need for the Constitution to deal with the problem of faction in a self-governing country. Reading Madison, one comes to see his capacity for thinking in terms of the behavior of interest-groups and how excesses may be controlled. The great majority of men think mainly of their own interest, allowing it to color all other thinking. It is a real education to study the work of a man—or men, because Jay and Hamilton also had this capacity—who had given attention to the behavior of groups throughout history and could weigh objectively how principles of order could be successfully applied. The authors of the *Federalist* were imperfect human beings, no doubt, but they were able to think impersonally and understood the value of measured compromise. This is what we can learn from them today.

COMMENTARY
PROPOSED: AN ACT OF FAITH

THE uses of history and of nature are central themes in this issue. In the work of the Founding Fathers, we need to know not only what they did, but why they did it. The remark in Review by Gordon Wood, that "the Founding Fathers still seem larger than life and, from our present perspective especially, seem to possess intellectual capacities well beyond our own," should be taken seriously, and if we do this we see that they were responding to facts and situations quite different from our present circumstances. Were they faced with our world, it seems almost certain that they would be responding more or less as Kropotkin responded to conditions of the modern world. They were too intelligent not to recognize that the central power they struggled for in the 1780s has become a universal vice of the nation-states of the present, that the technology of war, by reason of the impossibility of controlling its effects, has been made wholly obsolete, and that, at both the political and social level, the Jeffersonian view is the only one that will work in this or any other country.

How more people can be led to recognize this is the problem. Jefferson's sure instinct about the moral and social benefits of farming is now repeated by Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and others, but today only about three per cent of the great voting public still work on farms, which is hardly enough to make a dent in national policies, which have meant well in many respects—such as the effort toward soil conservation—but in others represent bad guesses about the conditions of the world grain market, which actually no one can consistently predict. We are continually spending enormous sums of money to prepare for nuclear war, and to do this we keep on borrowing, so we need more products for export to get money for foreign exchange. So, at instruction of government, the farmers over-produced, and then, almost suddenly, prices went far down and the farmers, who owed everybody for more land and heavier equipment, began going bankrupt.

Plainly, Jackson's rule, "Values run ahead of technology," is the one to adopt and follow, since from doing so "good ideas will eventually generate the mechanisms to carry them out."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
HOMESTEAD SCHOOLING

FOR more than ten years, David and Micki Colfax have been teaching their four boys at home. When they began, the boys were between two and eight years old, and "home" was 47 acres of a logged-over mountainside in northern California—remote and isolated—where the Colfaxes were bringing into being a rural homestead. David is a freelance writer, and both he and his wife, Micki, have credentials as college and high school teachers of English and the social sciences—which were a help in home-schooling, but far from all-important. They say:

> All parents, after all, are teachers; it is only the *formal* education of our children that most of us entrust to the presumed experts. In home schooling, the teachers are often the children themselves; the parents' job is largely one of pointing them in the right direction and being available when they have questions.
>
> Admittedly, parents who have had teaching experience probably have a clearer idea of why they are teaching their children at home, and as a result are probably more confident than parents without teaching experience. In many instances, parents who dislike the kind of education their children are receiving outside the home lack the confidence that they could do better. And confidence *is* crucial to the process.
>
> When parents take on the responsibility of teaching their children at home, they must be prepared to make mistakes. Sometimes the mistakes can affect their children's progress. Several years ago, for example, we were surprised when Grant [the oldest boy], who had been good at math, seemed to be having an inordinate amount of trouble with algebra. It was my fault; I had assigned a textbook that was used in a university correspondence course without examining it closely, and it employed the now discredited and abandoned "new math" concepts that were in vogue in the sixties. By the time I took Grant's complaints seriously, as he pointed out, he had lost several months of work in math. If we had not been prepared to make mistakes—and the boys prepared to have us make them—this kind of error could have seriously undermined our confidence in our ability to do the job.

This article by David Colfax, which appeared in the February 1983 *Country Journal*, seems peculiarly valuable for readers who are thinking about teaching their children at home. Articles filled with broad generalizations have their place, but accounts of what happened in one family, with a little detail, provoke the imagination. No home situation can ever be the same and teaching is the sort of activity that can never be done from the blue-prints prepared by somebody else. The art of life—which includes teaching—often amounts to no more than turning problems into opportunities for a particular kind of experience. Good biographies give illustrations of this, and books by parents who have taught at home, who tell what they did, and why and how, are doubtless the best.

The Colfaxes had decided to be homesteaders. In 1973, when they started out on the land in northern California, they were so far from "civilization" that "home schooling was almost unavoidable." Taking the children to school over muddy roads and swollen rivers was close to impossible.

> Distances between neighbors with school-aged children precluded the organization of alternative backwoods schools. And then there were the religious, political, and philosophical objections to the local schools; they were too conservative or too liberal, too rigid or too informal, too academic or not academic enough, too fundamentalist or not fundamentalist enough. . . .
>
> Once we decided to teach our children at home, we tried to avoid any confrontation with state or local authorities. We called ourselves The Mountain School, registered with the state as a private school, established a checking account in the name of The Mountain School, ordered a ream of letterhead stationery, and as required by law, assembled a file containing daily attendance records, teacher resumes, and course outlines. Perhaps because our children had never been enrolled in the local schools, or because we asked nobody for permission to teach them ourselves (we just proceeded in a matter-of-fact way), we encountered no opposition whatsoever. Also, the local school system, which ranked as one of

> the worst in the state and was having problems enough with unhappy parents, may simply have been disinclined to look for a fight.

The article tells how they proceeded, what they used for texts, what good material is hard to find and what is easy. They thought they were doing fairly well, but—

> . . . it was not until Grant had run the gauntlet of college entrance examinations—and survived—that we had any firm evidence that our home-schooling efforts had measured up to outside standards. Although we had never doubted the quality of the home education we were providing, we were concerned about how the boys would do when it came time to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test and various standard achievement tests. We had emphasized creativity and the pleasures of learning; how, we asked ourselves, would our children do when matched against those whose educations were more conventional?
>
> Grant's performance on the various standardized tests, and the view of college admissions officers that his home-schooling experience was an asset that distinguished him from hundreds of more conventional applicants, answered that question. He is undecided about which college he'll attend—the availability of scholarships will be a factor—but he plans to go east, probably to a large, urban school. "It will be an opportunity for a whole new set of experiences," he says.

It is hard to think of a more ideal setting for home schooling than a homestead in the making. A friend asked Colfax: "What's it going to be like when they have to go out into the *real* world?" He comments:

> What she, and I suppose others, do not comprehend is that country living, home schooling, and the responsibility of helping to build a working homestead have provided our boys with an almost unimaginable variety of "real-world" experiences. And because they have learned to make good use of their time, they have developed skills that few children ever have an opportunity to acquire. Grant's years of working with dairy goats have earned him a national reputation as a breeder and a local reputation as the person to call when you are having trouble with livestock. Drew, on the basis of his work with plants and flowers around the homestead, found a job with a local nurseryman one day a week. And Reed, perhaps better than any of us, knows his way around the county seat, where he travels by bus every week to take guitar lessons. . . .
>
> As a rural family engaged in a collective effort to create a homestead, and with both parents teaching, we were able to integrate home schooling into the day-to-day efforts of building, clearing, planting, tending, and harvesting. The children were an integral part of this work from the outset and as such were an asset. Had they been obliged to spend their days in some distant school, it is unlikely that we would have been able to develop our homestead as fast as we did. Like farm families of the past, we need the help of the boys, and home schooling makes it available.

However, you wouldn't call the Colfaxes missionaries for home schooling. They say:

> It has worked for us and for our children largely because of a combination of unusual circumstances: our isolation background resources, and long-term commitment. Each helped to make the job easier than it otherwise might have been. Significantly, all of our acquaintances who began teaching their children at home back in the early seventies have long since given it up.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the home schooling of the Colfaxes is how seriously they took the job, and how systematically they tackled it.

FRONTIERS

Values Generate the Right Technology

ON January 10, *The Wall Street Journal*, regarded by businessmen as a newspaper on which they can rely for accurate reporting and sound judgment, ran a story about Wes Jackson's Land Institute near Salina, Kansas, and what Jackson and his colleagues hope to accomplish. The story quotes Jackson at some length, and also his friend, the well-known writer, Wendell Berry. Explaining what has been called "alternative agriculture," Jackson made clear to the *Journal* writer, Dennis Farney, that alternative agriculture "is challenging the central principles that most farmers live by."

> "We're not just talking about a different cropping system," he says with a laugh. "We're out to save the world from sin and death."
>
> He is only half kidding. Alternative agriculture, with roots in the environmental movements, weds ecology to agronomy. Its advocates believe that farming as most farmers now practice it is ethically, environmentally and economically destructive—based on concepts that led inexorably to today's rural debt crisis.
>
> "Conventional agriculture wastes land and it wastes people," asserts Wendell Berry, an author who champions alternative agriculture while farming with draft horses, a Kentucky hill farm. "What we're confronting is a failure, a way of farming that's manifestly destroying farmers."
>
> Conventional farming emphasizes high production and high tech: costly applications of fertilizers, herbicides and mechanization. The result, argue Mr. Jackson and Mr. Berry, is an "industrial agriculture" that erodes the soil, pollutes ground-water with chemical runoff and often bankrupts farmers in the process.

The meaning of "often" in this paragraph needs to be spelled out. It happens that this is done in the Jan. 1 *Washington Spectator*, in which the editor, Tristram Coffin, put together a few facts. We quote:

> The farm economy is suffering from the worst depression since the 1930s Rep. Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) told the House: "Over 43,000 farmers have gone bankrupt in the first six months of 1985. We are losing 1,600 farmers a week. Since 1981, over 200,000 people involved in agribusiness have lost their jobs. One-third of our family farmers are in deep trouble. Two out of ten could lose their land within two years." Literally, 93,000 mid-size family farms in the Midwest and Southwest are in or face bankruptcy.
>
> Reasons for trouble on the farms:
>
> The U.S. Government, to improve exports over imports persuaded farmers to grow more. Almost half the U.S. grain harvest is for export. A 15% drop in export sales since 1981 caused in part by the expensive dollar, has "devastated wheat farmers." (*New York Times*)
>
> The value of U.S. farmland dropped 12% since 1984, the steepest loss since depression days, and the fourth straight year of falling farmland prices. USDA economist David Harrington warns that "the land market has not hit bottom yet," and might go down an additional 30%.
>
> The return to the farmer from the food we eat is low. For example, the *U.S. Farm News* reports: "A pound and a half of whole wheat bread at the Rainbow supermarket in Minneapolis in late August sold for $1.35. The farmer received less than 5¢ a pound for wheat, which is the main ingredient in bread."
>
> While farmers are being driven off the land and huge surpluses of grain pile up in warehouses, more than 1.5 million Americans in 36 metropolitan areas are going hungry.
>
> *The American Medical News* reports an unprecedented number of stress-related medical problems among farmers, according to a survey of family physicians and psychiatrists. They include alcohol abuse, depression and accidental deaths. To make ends meet, some farmers are working as many as 20 hours a day, making themselves "vulnerable to heart disease, ulcer, anxiety disorders and clinical depression." University of Missouri sociologist Rex Campbell finds that the agricultural suicide rate is up 50% in two years, almost entirely among debt-ridden farmers under 40 years.

In contrast with conventional farming, the *Wall Street Journal* writer says, alternative agriculture stresses cost-cutting.

> Its tools are a battery of conservation practices, ranging from old-fashioned organic farming to state-of-the-art hybridization. The Land Institute, out on

> the cutting edge of the movement, is attempting something that most geneticists consider impossible: the development of perennial grain crops that can eliminate costly annual replanting and eventually replace corn and wheat on many farms.
>
> The alternative agriculture movement is still small. Its leaders claim only 20,000 to 40,000 of the nation's 2.3 million farmers. But it is rapidly institutionalizing. It has a headquarters, the Institute for Alternative Agriculture, in Greenbelt, Md. It has a magazine, the *New Farm*, and it is starting an academic journal. . . . It is also making inroads into the ag schools themselves. Charles A. Francis, a University of Nebraska professor, came to his post by way of the Rodale Research Center, a movement pioneer best known for its advocacy of organic gardening. Although he is surrounded by corn, millions of acres of it, Mr. Francis is urging Nebraska farmers to diversify into other crops. Wes Jackson is a hero to him.

Like other major reformers who work in gardening and farming, Wes Jackson believes in studying nature for a guide in what to do in agriculture.

> The institute seeks . . . to develop an agriculture that works with nature. The first step is to find alternatives to corn and wheat, which are costly, erosion-prone crops that must be replanted annually and then coddled with cultivation and chemicals. Researchers here believe the answer may be perennials that grow like weeds—because they *are* weeds, or not far from it. . . . Mr. Jackson's inspiration is the natural prairie a complex mixture of species that perpetuates itself without replanting, cultivation or fertilization. "That prairie," he says, "is running on sunlight instead of fossil fuel. And it's actually accumulating soil instead of losing it through erosion."

There is a lot more in the *Wall Street Journal* article, detailing some of the research projects going on at the Land Institute. The writer catches the spirit of Wes Jackson. "Values run ahead of technology," Jackson likes to say, meaning that "good ideas will eventually generate the mechanisms to carry them out."