

The O. D. Foster Collection

M. THOMAS STARKES

Ora Delmer Foster (1877-1965) left as part of his legacy to The University of Iowa a collection of personal diaries (from 1941 to 1953), over seventy notebooks relative to his work and travels in Spain, Italy, and Latin America, some 200 slides, correspondence with such world leaders as John J. Pershing, Henry A. Wallace and José Vasconcelos, and numerous volumes from his personal library. This collection reveals a career of almost unbelievable variety and fascination as it parades before the researcher the life of a little-known worker for Christian unified endeavor.

Born in a rural area in Indiana to German Baptist Brethren parents, Foster attended Mount Morris (Illinois) Academy, which was sponsored by that religious denomination. From there he went to Zanerian Art College in Columbus, Ohio, where he became a master penman and artist. Because of ill health, Foster returned in 1904 to his parents' Indiana farm. The small church there issued to him a "call" to the ministry, which he accepted reluctantly, but with determination. To become a better minister, Foster attended and was graduated from North Manchester College (B.A.), Oberlin College (B.D., M.A.), and Yale University (Ph.D. in New Testament).¹

Upon graduation from Yale in 1911, Foster became University pastor of the Congregational Church in Madison, Wisconsin, where he stayed for two years. In 1914, he moved to Chicago, where he remained for two years. In 1917, Foster became interested in the war effort and volunteered to become Religious Director at Camp Custer, Michigan. There he conceived the idea of Comrades in Service, an organization which in some respects led to the American Legion.

¹ Foster's doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Literary Relations of the First Epistle of Peter," a copy of which is in the Collection, was published by Yale University Press in 1913.

The Comrades idea was carried to France by Foster and claimed half a million adherents at the time it was turned over to the American Legion in 1919. Upon returning to the United States, Foster conducted a survey of theological seminaries for the Council of Church Boards of Education.² In 1923, he formed the short-lived American Association on Religion to study the possibility of teaching religion in higher education.

Foster's most important gift to The University of Iowa is the School of Religion. In late 1923, he served as chief consultant to those who founded that school and offered the concept of religious groups co-operating to teach university students without the necessity of doctrinal debate. Today the School of Religion has a total enrollment of almost 1,700 students with a faculty of ten.

Leaving Iowa, Dr. Foster became Associate Secretary for the Religious Education Association for two years, during which time he founded the now defunct North American Board for the Study of Religion in Higher Education. In 1933, he conducted a study of the Oklahoma university system and wrote a bill (available in the Foster Collection) for the Oklahoma state legislature which coordinated that system of higher education.

From 1935 to 1940, Foster travelled in and out of Mexico, making notes on his third-class travel and consoling exiled Catholic priests. Upon returning to the United States, he gave a series of lectures for the Redpath Bureau and the Rotary Clubs. Dr. Foster returned to The University of Iowa in 1946 and for two years taught courses in Latin American history, religion and culture based on first-hand observations.³ Upon leaving Iowa again, he spent a year traveling in and studying Spain, Italy, and Portugal. His quest for religious and Hispanic unity ended in December, 1965, when he died at Pilgrim Place in Claremont, California.

This writer is currently using the Foster Collection and its excellent primary sources as a basis for his doctoral dissertation for the School of Religion at Iowa. He has chosen to explore four problem areas of "O.D."s life.

The first is Foster's founding of the Comrades in Service and its relation to the American Legion. The organization was based on the

² Dr. Foster wrote the text for *Theological Education in America* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1924) although his name does not appear on the title page.

³ The notes Foster used for his lectures at Iowa are in the Foster Collection.

principle conceived by Foster of "Cooperation Without Compromise," by which religious service organizations as diverse doctrinally as the Salvation Army and the Jewish Welfare Board tried to improve the educational, moral, and religious life of the serviceman without becoming involved in heated doctrinal debate. The concept proved itself workable, so much so that it is still used in the United States' military chaplaincy. The Comrades in Service movement is generally regarded as the forerunner to the American Legion, but it is this writer's conclusion that this is true only in a limited sense, primarily because the Foster-bred organization was only a looseknit movement built on high ideals to promote clean thinking, clean speech and clean living. On the other hand, the American Legion has been from the first a highly organized society less concerned with promoting clean living among veterans than was the Comrades movement. Comrades in Service proved valuable for its role in the beginning of the American Legion primarily because it was the largest previous serviceman's organization among the Allied Expeditionary Forces of World War I. The Comrades movement's chief worth was in its proving that "Cooperation Without Compromise" was a workable theory.

The second problem area is the defining of Foster's exact role in the founding of the Iowa School of Religion. The writer concludes that Dr. Foster was not the "founder" if the word is taken to mean that his role was that of initiation, preparation and implementation of a plan for religious instruction at Iowa. Accredited courses in religion were taught here as early as 1908 on a limited scale. These courses and the committee groundwork a decade before Foster's arrival at Iowa by such men as campus Y.M.C.A. director R. H. Fitzgerald, the psychology of religion pioneer E. D. Starbuck, and physics professor G. W. Stewart laid the foundation for "O.D." 's contribution.

Foster came to Iowa in late 1923 with four basic contributions which settled dilemmas that were faced by those persons interested in the teaching of religion at Iowa. He came with the conviction that "Cooperation Without Compromise" was as workable in state-inter-faith endeavor as it had been in Comrades in Service. Dr. Foster also came with the experience and ability of working with religious groups which enabled him to secure support for the proposed school by extensive correspondence with religious groups in Iowa. He came with a plan to involve the academic community in the School of Religion by hiring well-trained Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant professors and by an "interlocking directorate" of the school in which both university officials and religious leaders would have a voice in policy-

making for the school. Foster was also successful in securing financial aid from the Rockefeller Foundation for the first difficult years of the experiment and he recommended M. Willard Lampe to be the first Administrative Director of the school, two practical contributions which helped to start the religious experiment on a solid basis.

The third problem which this writer explored in the Foster papers is that of Dr. Foster's travels in and observations on Mexican politics and religion for the decade following 1934. He went to Mexico at the request of Bishop Francis C. Kelley to report on the plight of exiled Mexican clerics. His third-class travel afforded first-hand observation of religious persecution especially in Tabasco.⁴ Dr. Foster urged United States Ambassador Josephus Daniels to have Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas stop the persecution immediately, but Daniels disregarded the urgent plea, choosing instead to put slow but subtle pressure on Cárdenas. "O.D." called for increased dialogue between Catholic and Protestant missionaries to Mexico, but this plea was unfortunately twenty years ahead of its time. The recent dialogue between the two groups in Mexico is partly due to visionary leaders such as Foster who advocated better understanding earlier in this century. Particularly helpful in this project are over ninety Spanish titles in Foster's personal library, including an autographed copy of *Blood Drenched Altars* from the aforementioned Bishop Kelley.

A fourth problem area of Foster's life is the psychological and theological motivations behind his many-faceted career. Driven by a sense of mission compounded by a feeling of rejection, Foster was able to interest eminent men in his projects and ideas. He is open to the charge of being a "mystic" because he was immersed in New Thought, or that facet of religious philosophy which holds that God is immediately immanent and one should seek to serve his God and fellowman by being in harmony with Cosmic Being. Foster was influenced early in his career by a lecture given by Ralph Waldo Trine, author of the popular book *In Tune With the Infinite*. From the time he heard that lecture, O. D. Foster was caught up in a mission of trying to implement Divine will, a pattern he shared with Glenn

⁴ In the Collection is a detailed account of Foster's stay with five exiled bishops-in-hiding near Mexico City in 1935, telling of their clandestine seminary, illegal religious observances and underground counseling services. Also included is a propaganda pamphlet entitled "Abajo las Curas," which is fiercely anticlerical and indicative of the extent of the campaign against the priests in the state of Tabasco under the leadership of Garrido y Canabal.

Clark, George Washington Carver, Henry Wallace and Frank Laubach. It is this writer's contention that Foster was a mystic in the classic sense, i.e., successfully combining meditation and concrete social action, except when his individualistic drive for acceptance interfered with his theology.⁵

The Foster Collection offers ample opportunity for further investigation. A deeper analysis of Foster's concept of state-interfaith cooperation, an in-depth study of his findings in surveying theological seminaries, an evaluation of the worth of the Comrades in Service from a military point of view, and a closer look at Foster's unheeded observations and suggestions concerning Franco Spain are but a few of the areas which this writer has had to omit in choosing his topics. All of these areas merit further study.

⁵ Indicative of Foster's meditative side are over fifty original poems in the Collection which reflect his desire for oneness with Deity.

COMRADES IN SERVICE

CO-OPERATING WITH THE "AMERICAN LEGION"

Vol. I

PARIS, APRIL 19, 1919

No. 7

CO-OPERATION WELCOMED

Headquarters of the Executive Committee of the American Legion

The following statement of policy relating to the relationship existing between the American Legion and the Comrades in Service, the Divisional Societies, Army Societies, etc., is announced by the American Legion:

The American Legion is concerned solely with providing the framework for the After-the-War Association of those who served in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps of the United States, to perpetuate in civil life the comradeship and associations and spirit of service for the commonwealth developed during the war.

It aims at this time to bring to the minds of all concerned the fact that a spontaneous getting-together of those who so served and which is directed and controlled by them, is desirable in their own best interests and the best interests of the United States.

To this end the co-operation extended by the Comrades in Service was accepted by the American Legion, it being the general understanding that the two organizations were in no way rival organizations and that the Comrades in Service, an organization concerned with morale and good citizenship, would aid in every way the work of disseminating information concerning the American Legion.

The co-operation of the Comrades in Service, having been extended and accepted, is to continue during the presence of the American Legion in America, it being understood that the Comrades in Service ceases to function upon the return of the A. E. F. to America.

(Signed):

Milton J. FOREMAN, CHAIRMAN.

George A. WHITE, Secretary.

April 8, 1919.

RELATIONSHIP WITH AMERICAN LEGION DEFINATELY DETERMINED

Conference of Committees of Two Organizations Establishes Basis of Co-operation. Comrades in Service To Continue Company Club Formation and Citizenship Building

Solution of problems connected with the relationship which should exist between Comrades in Service and the new American Legion was reached at a conference between members of their executive boards on April 8. As announced in the last issue of *Comrades in Service*, the co-operation of our organization was tendered the caucus at which plans for the American Legion were adopted, as it was manifestly undesirable that there should be any duplication of effort, and leaders in the Comrades in Service movement felt that the caucus was accomplishing the same results contemplated in providing the machinery for the organization of a veterans' fraternity. Just how the practical details of this co-operation might be arranged and what would be the special functions of each organization were not; however, fully determined at this time.

Explanatory Statement Issued

On April 7, a meeting of the executive committee of the American Legion was held to consider future plans and, after statements from Bishop Brent and Captain Schwarz, who are members of that body as well as officers of Comrades in Service, as to the needs for a perfect understanding, the committee empowered its chairman and secretary to draw up a suitable statement covering the attitude of their organization. This was done after a further conference on the following morning and the statement quoted in the box above was issued.

The importance of providing clear cut spheres of operation was emphasized by Captain Schwarz in a communication which he submitted to the American Legion reading in part:

"The Comrades in Service Movement; with its present establishment and organization, and the further authorization of G. H. Q. just issued calling for the appointment of one line officer, one non-commissioned officer and two enlisted men from each major unit whose time shall be devoted solely to furthering the Comrades in Service Movement; is admirably fitted and equipped to carry on this work suggested, for and in co-operation with the executive committee of the American Legion."

"I beg, therefore, to make strong recommendation, as an officer assigned to duty with the Comrades in Service Movement, and as a Member of the Executive Committee of the American Legion, intensely interested in the proper presentation and success of both, and based upon my experience in the field in presenting one, and both, that at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the American Legion on April 7th, that there be a definite arrangement, with plain understanding, made with the Comrades in Service Movement in order not only for the purpose of avoiding conflict and misunderstanding, but for the special purpose of securing for the American Legion a cooperation, aid and publicity which will be not only invaluable and far-reaching, but which, I believe, will insure beyond peradventure, the success, without strife and misunderstanding of the American Legion."

Members of the Committee individually expressed their hearty endorsement of the work being done by Comrades in Service

(Continued on page 3.)

Features of Council Meeting

Plans for extending the field of operation of Comrades in Service and pushing the company club organization vigorously occupied most of the last meeting of the Central Council. The executive secretary reported on the work of the month and made some recommendations as to increases in personnel. He also reported that the financial arrangements had been so adjusted as to enable the campaign projected to be carried on successfully.

Other department heads and committee chairmen reported on their respective fields. In view of the increase of works involved, it was recommended that an associate executive secretary be appointed to assist Dr. Foster and Dr. Arthur W. Grose was elected to the position. Sergeant Irving Barnhard was added to the list of vice-presidents appointed from the army. Authority was given the executive committee to add four more members to its body, making in all nine members.

HALF MILLION MEMBERS AIM OF COMRADES BIG SPRING DRIVE

Club Organization To Be Pushed Throughout Second and Third Armies. Staff Representatives Authorized in Each Unit. Citizenship Lectures Provided for Embarkation Centers and Ports

Setting the goal for enrollment of Comrades in Service at not less than a half million men by the end of July, the central council at its meeting April 8, determined to direct every energy to the organization of company clubs wherever possible in the A. E. F. To encourage the discussion of citizenship problems among the soldiers who will shortly return to civilian life, the strongest lecturers available will be sent to embarkation points

and base section camps. Material will also be provided upon which forum discussion of such questions can be based.

Field Force Enlarged

Several additions have been made to the field force sent out from the head office and arrangements have been completed for the appointment of a commissioned officer, a non-commissioned officer and

Continued on page 2

An issue of the now-scarce newspaper *Comrades in Service*, published in Paris in 1919. From the Foster Collection.