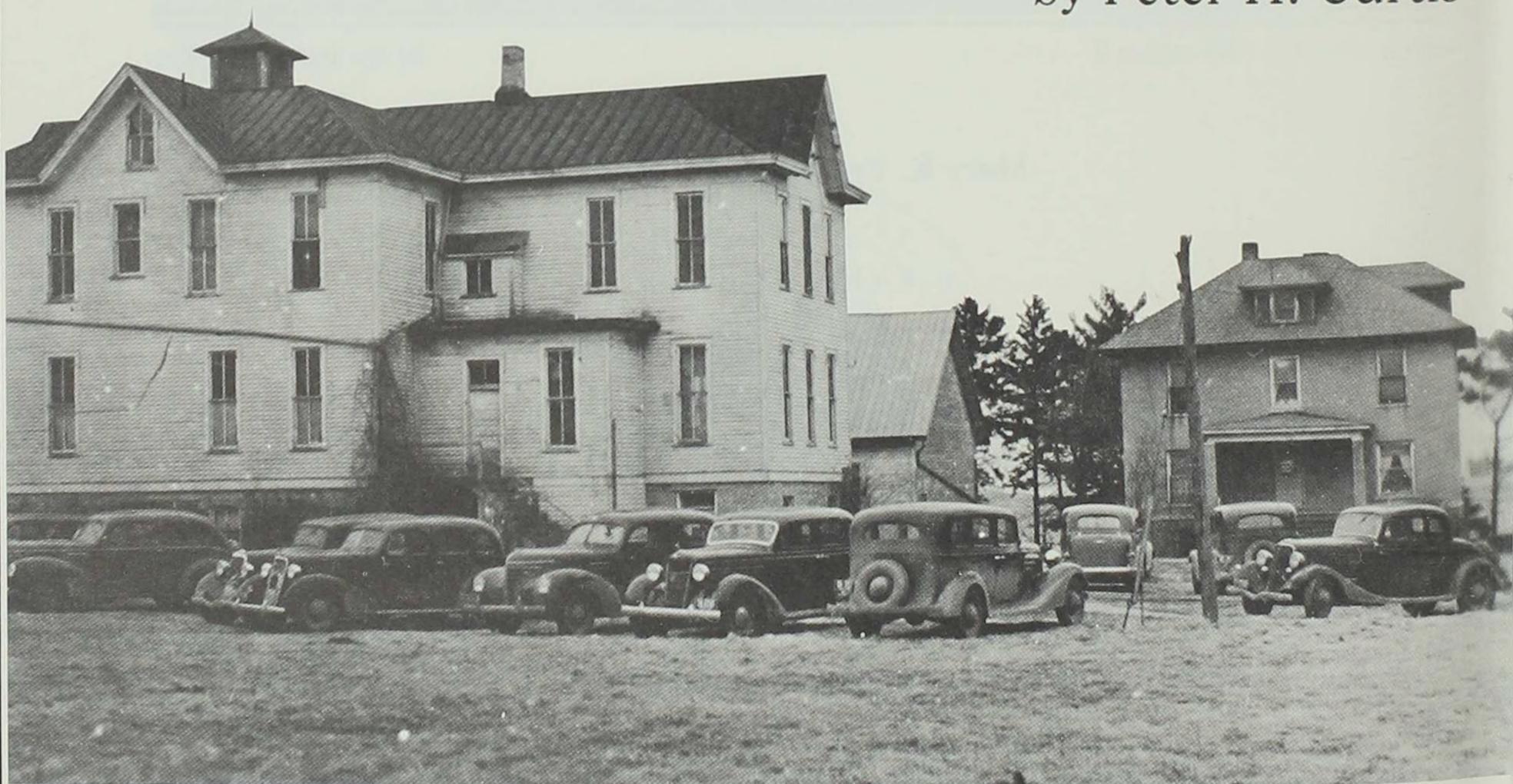


# A Place of Peace in a World of War: The Scattergood Refugee Hostel, 1939 to 1943

by Peter H. Curtis



*The Scattergood property included a three-story school building, a gymnasium, a caretakers' home, farm buildings and twelve acres of land. (SHSI)*

In January 1939, as much of the world waited anxiously for the outbreak of war, a group of Iowans met in West Branch "to find some tangible way by which [they] might further the cause of peace." They were members of the Society of Friends, and they were concerned with expressing the Peace Testimony for which Quakers are well known. The way these Iowa Quakers chose to express their beliefs was unusual. It resulted in the Scattergood Hostel for refugees from Hitler's

Europe. During the next four years, about two hundred people of all ages from several European countries spent time at the hostel near West Branch. The story of the Scattergood Hostel is a remarkable chapter in Iowa's history, an intercultural, interreligious social experiment set in an isolated, rural environment.

The roots of this experiment lay in the tragic events taking place some four thousand miles from Iowa. By early 1939 some Americans were becoming aware of the desperate situation faced by a number of Europeans. Jews,

political democrats, socialists, and a variety of "non-Aryans" were finding Germany and Austria increasingly dangerous and hostile places in which to live. As Hitler relentlessly expanded his empire during the next few years, the number of these people rose proportionately. Just as they had done in previous wars, American Quakers responded to the international conflict and its victims with various forms of assistance. Friends' delegations visited Germany, financial and material aid was sent to the victims of oppression, and assistance was rendered in finding new homes for refugees. The American Friends Service Committee [AFSC], based in Philadelphia, was the primary agency through which Quakers carried on these activities.

It was to the American Friends Service Committee that the Iowa Quakers turned in their search for a way to tangibly express their religious beliefs. The AFSC was looking for places where refugees "could go for a few weeks or months to recover from the effects of their recent experiences, regain their confidence, improve their English, learn to drive a car, and if need be, start re-training themselves for some new line of work before seeking a permanent place in American society." Iowa Quakers owned such a place, and it was that fact that brought Homer Morris of the AFSC to West Branch to meet with more than sixty Friends on January 7 and 8, 1939.

The place in question was Scattergood School, a Quaker boarding school established in 1890, two-and-a-half miles southeast of West Branch. Always a small institution with a limited financial base, the school had been unable to continue operating in the face of the Great Depression and had closed its doors in 1931. Since then it had been used only occasionally for Quaker religious and social gatherings. As a possible site for a hostel, Scattergood School had many advantages. The buildings and facilities to support a residential center for

forty to fifty people were already there. Land around the school could support crops and livestock which would provide part of the food for the hostel. And, most important, the rural, isolated site provided the kind of peace and quiet the AFSC believed refugees badly needed.

After full consideration of the AFSC's proposal, Iowa Quakers agreed to cosponsor a refugee hostel at Scattergood School. The Scattergood property was leased to the AFSC by Iowa Quakers for a dollar a year for the duration of the hostel's existence. Following the meetings of January 7 and 8, 1939, various committees were set up to raise funds, arrange for cleaning and fixing up the school buildings, and oversee the operation of the hostel itself. Friends from both the "Conservative" Quaker meetings and the "Progressive" Friends churches raised funds for the hostel, and the AFSC made several sizable loans to get the project off the ground. Painters, carpenters, and repairmen worked hard on the buildings in the late winter of 1939. Their work was assisted and overseen by West Branch area Friends. A new furnace was installed in the main building, and the plumbing and wiring were extensively repaired. Furnishings were purchased and installed, rooms were partitioned to change school dormitories to private quarters for families and individuals.

It was well that work progressed rapidly, for on April 6, 1939, a telegram from the AFSC in Philadelphia informed West Branch Friends that "six young men [were] to arrive [at] West Branch either the 14th or 15th. . . . Two of party Americans[,] four Germans." This was something of a shock to the Iowa Friends, who were still getting things in order at Scattergood. Sara M. Pemberton, secretary of the Scattergood executive committee and a moving force behind the hostel during its entire existence, wrote to the AFSC, "Where will you get the money for running expenses? food for the six young men? potatoes for garden plant-

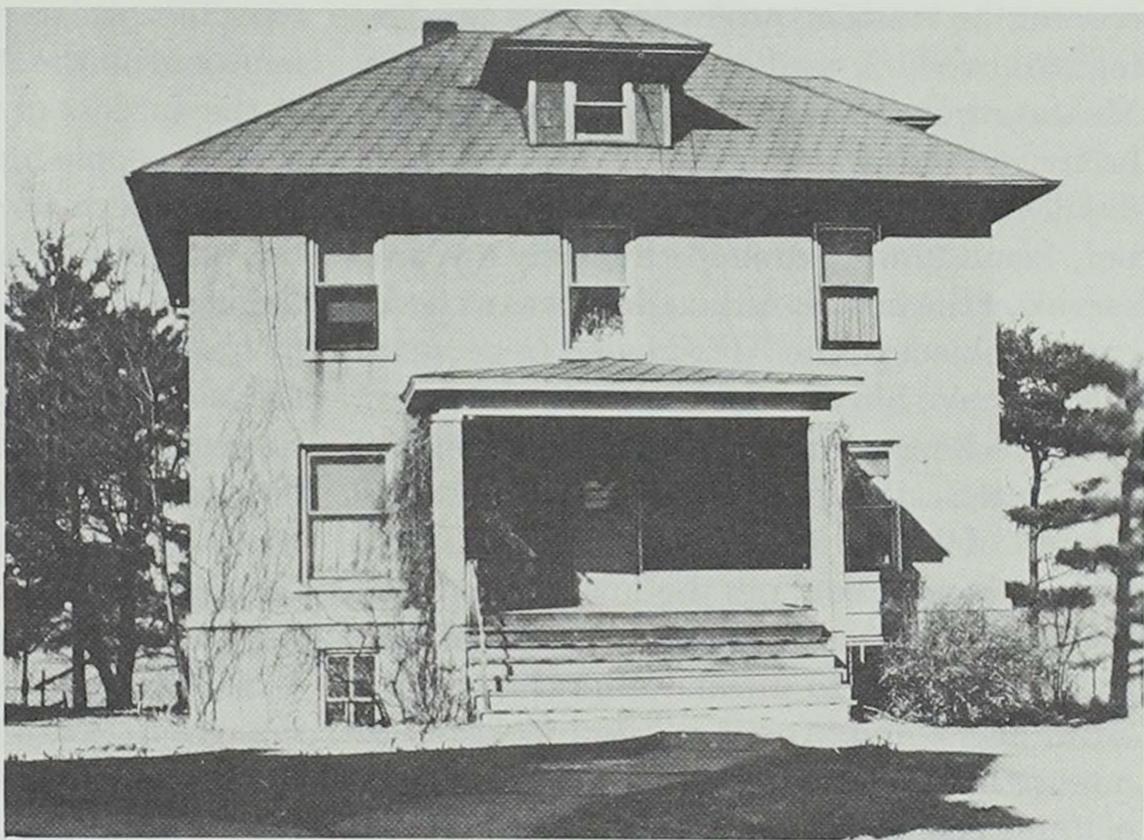
ing?" Quakers have a saying that problems can be dealt with "as the way opens," and these practical difficulties were quickly overcome. Loans from the AFSC, fund raising by Iowa Friends' organizations and individuals, and hours of volunteer work by West Branch Friends, many of them farmers, got the hostel into operation.

What manner of people came to this rural Quaker hostel? The first four were in many ways typical of those to follow. One was a German, two were Austrians, and the fourth was a Czech. All came from urban backgrounds, and all were professional men. They included a college professor of geography, a statistician, a goldsmith (who was also a trained lawyer), and a businessman. All were at least middle class, but, given the severe restrictions on taking funds from German-controlled areas, all had arrived in the United States almost penniless. While willing to talk of many other matters, they tended to be closemouthed about their experiences with Nazi authorities. One was quoted in the *Des Moines Register* as having told a reporter, "I have nothing to say, but wait until my relatives are out of Germany and I'll tell you a lot." All spoke some English, some better than others. Only one of the original four was a Jew, although Kurt Schaefer, the statistician, noted that shortly after he began to openly criticize Nazi policies the German government abruptly claimed that one of his grandparents was Jewish. He had promptly lost his job and subsequently fled the country. Tales such as this would multiply as scores of other refugees arrived during the next four years.

If the Quakers of West Branch were barely ready for the refugees, the same can be said of the larger West Branch community. From the very earliest suggestion that foreigners might be coming to the area there had been rumblings of concern in the community. During the first days of the hostel, Sara Pemberton

wrote to a friend, "[The refugees] seem to understand the situation and as far as we here know, have taken unfair criticism without too much resentment. Of course, it is hard for anyone to do his best work in such an atmosphere. When the first workmen came they worked up a friendly feeling among the people of the neighborhood toward the project. Of late, these same people are questioning what has happened." While the source of community resentment was not entirely clear, a number of factors doubtless entered into it. The strange languages and urban, European culture of the newcomers stood in dramatic contrast to their new neighbors' lifestyle. Many people in West Branch were themselves only a few generations removed from Scandinavian immigrants. They remembered their struggle to acquire land and jobs in Cedar County, and feared the competition that a wave of newcomers might bring. As it rapidly became clear that the Scattergood Hostel was merely a temporary residence for the refugees on their way to jobs elsewhere, the community resentment abated. Yet throughout its four years, the hostel remained somewhat isolated from the daily life of the West Branch community.

Although the refugees tended to live apart from the surrounding community, the whole state of Iowa was aware of and interested in developments at the hostel. While newspapers in the area gave only limited coverage to the plans to set up a hostel, the arrival of the first refugees touched off a barrage of statewide media coverage. Four carloads of reporters and photographers greeted the first arrivals, and the results were headline stories in all the major newspapers of the state. Part of this was due to the simple human interest quality of the story and part to the fact that it was Iowa's first direct human connection with the dramatic and world-shaking events taking place in Europe. Doubtless part of the local interest was also due to the fact that several prominent



*First a men's dormitory for the Scattergood School, this building served as the caretakers' home until 1939, when it was remodeled for use as a dormitory for the hostel. (SHSI)*

Iowans were directly involved in the project. From the very beginning J. J. Newlin of Des Moines, vice-president of Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Company and a Quaker, was an active supporter of the project. He served as chairman of the Iowa Service Committee, the local arm of the American Friends Service Committee, and on the executive committee of the hostel itself. The *Des Moines Register* strongly endorsed the project with editorials and stories. Its editor, W. W. Waymack, was one of four individuals who later signed a fund raising letter which generated much financial support for the hostel.

The result of all the attention and publicity was that the small number of refugees often found themselves outnumbered by curiosity seekers during the first few months of the project. An article in the *Register* asked "curiosity seekers and visitors" to "temporarily refrain from coming to Scattergood." Staff members of the hostel reported that one afternoon more than fifty visitors had come to see the project, and explained that all the attention was interfering with getting the buildings in shape for the expected growth in the hostel's population. This interest abated very little. When an open

house was held to celebrate six months' successful operation, over five hundred people from all over Iowa attended.

By October 1939 the hostel operation was in full swing. At the heart of the hostel were two people, Walter and Sara Stanley. This middle-aged Quaker couple had served as caretakers for the Scattergood property since the school had closed. They moved quietly and effectively into the hostel staff, Walter remaining in charge of the buildings and grounds and Sara working in the kitchen. They remained at the hostel through its entire existence, bringing continuity and a large measure of human compassion to the work. For years Sara Stanley continued to correspond with many former residents of the hostel. The remainder of the staff was largely young Quakers recruited by the AFSC. They were volunteers who worked for essentially subsistence wages. Not surprisingly, staff turnover was fairly high. Mr. and Mrs. Albert Martin, first directors of the hostel, stayed just two months. By profession a German language teacher, Albert Martin had served for two years with the AFSC in Berlin. He returned to this country planning to

reenter the teaching profession when an opening occurred. A post was offered to him at McMaster University in Canada shortly after he arrived at Scattergood, and he left to take it. Similarly, Robert Berquist, a young staff member, found himself drafted after only a year of service at the hostel. Although he was a conscientious objector, the AFSC failed to persuade the Selective Service System to agree to allow men like Berquist to perform their alternative service at Scattergood. Hence, Berquist spent the rest of the war in a series of Civilian Public Service camps. Yet both the Iowa Friends and the AFSC saw this staff turnover as positive. It was clearly hard to maintain the level of idealism and commitment needed for such an intense human experiment over a long period of time. The presence of new, young, and idealistic staff members gave the hostel a steady infusion of enthusiasm to match the flow of new refugees.

The refugees came to the hostel — and left — in a small but steady trickle. By October 1939, for example, the old school buildings had housed thirty-five Europeans, of whom only eighteen were still in residence. From the very beginning all those in the hostel project had

seen the placement of its “guests” in permanent jobs in the American economy as crucial to the success of the experiment. One of the earliest people hired for the staff — and one of the most permanent — was Giles Zimmerman, the placement director. Although he lived at the hostel, he traveled a great deal turning up jobs for the refugees. Behind every placement there was a fascinating human story. Kurt Rosegg, the goldsmith and lawyer from the original group of four, found a position in the repair division of the Mastercraftsmen Jewelry Company in Des Moines. Another of the original four was placed as an office worker at Antioch College in Ohio. A third member of the first group, Kurt Schaefer, became a professor in the College of Commerce at the University of Iowa. Successful placement often depended on the willingness of the refugee to adjust to the realities of the American workplace. A brochure given to new arrivals at the hostel explained, “Your past experience and training will be very valuable to you, but it is not enough. You must be willing to use that training, adjusting it when necessary, to secure a position here. Your social position in America does not depend solely on your job. If a person

*Walter and Sara Stanley became caretakers of the Scattergood property in 1931 when the school closed, and supervised the refurbishing of the property for the European refugees in 1939. They stayed on as caretakers through the life of the hostel, 1939 to 1943, Walter supervising the buildings and the farming of the surrounding land and Sara working in the hostel kitchen. (courtesy Robert Berquist)*



does any job well, cheerfully and carefully, he is respected regardless of the nature of the position."

Life at the Scattergood Hostel consisted largely of a varying blend of learning and labor. Everyone — staff and refugees — shared the extensive manual labor required to keep the place going. Men were usually assigned the jobs requiring the most strength, such as drainage ditch digging or lawn care. Women shared cooking duties under the direction of a staff dietician. Both sexes did cleaning and washing work, a situation that did not always sit well with European men raised in a culture which rigidly defined such tasks as "women's work." A newcomer to the hostel commented, "An overwhelming impression was to see men doing jobs which in Europe were considered far beneath their dignity such as dishwashing, scrubbing floors, laundering, etc. Some of them worked with real skill and pleasure." Compounding these cultural difficulties were the effects of the traumatic experiences the refugees had been through, often including long periods of enforced inactivity in detention camps. Finally, most of the refugees were from middle- or upper-class backgrounds in which much household labor was partly or completely performed by machines or servants. Despite all these problems, however, most refugees adapted quickly to the heavy labor required to run the hostel. They realized, in the words of one of them, "we have to find a way to adapt ourselves to our new life. It is a vital condition of our living in a new country."

One requirement of living in a new country that all agreed to at once was the need to learn a new language, history, and literature. From the very beginning staff members taught classes in all these subjects. Coupled with them was an effort — often frustrated — to ensure that English was the predominant language used at the hostel. The minutes of one staff business meeting after another were filled

with exhortations to try to impress on the residents the importance of using the language of their adopted land in their daily conversation. That they were not doing so was clearly a matter of habit, not intention. The English language was taught primarily through individual tutorials, and such instruction was considered to be the most important at the hostel.

The refugees themselves had a role in setting their own curriculum. Writing in the hostel's *Monthly News Bulletin*, one of them commented, "Upon request of most of our residents here, there has been introduced a poetry class and one for public speaking . . . [I]n the latter topics range from 'My Impressions of Abraham Lincoln' to 'The Most Unforgettable Character I Have Met.' This kind of half entertainment, half instructive work, is worthy of imitation for everybody and it is easy to digest in an evening, too." Certainly the hostel's efforts to teach a new language and culture to its residents were tremendously aided by the fact that most of them were already highly educated, intelligent, and strongly motivated persons. This is hardly surprising, for it took intelligence, perseverance, and strong nerves — and, often, luck — to get out of Hitler's Europe in this period. People who had accomplished that feat were not likely to allow a small matter like learning English to hold them back.

Another skill most hostel residents lacked was that of driving an automobile. Living in crowded European cities with good public transportation, most of the refugees had never had any need to learn to drive. The great distances, the abundance of roads, and the availability of cars in the United States required that they do so. To fill this need the hostel pressed into duty a succession of second-hand vehicles of varying ancestry and quality. Some of these became beloved and remembered Scattergood institutions, acquiring names ("Suzy") and reputations. The roads around the hostel, while little traveled and thus ideal for beginners, were hard on the vehicles. The refugees



*A portion of each day was set aside for studying English, American history and geography, and American customs. The Scattergood guests were expected to remain at the hostel for at least four months, working and learning about American life, before going out to work for themselves in their new homeland. (courtesy Robert Berquist)*

learned quickly about car repairs and changing tires on their outings. Even so, more than one trip ended in a long walk home when a car shot off a muddy or icy road, or a breakdown defied amateur tinkering.

Trips were a regular feature of hostel life. The organizers recognized from the outset that total isolation would be as undesirable for the refugees as total immersion in American life. There were frequent trips to Iowa City to purchase supplies and do other errands, and hostel residents went along on a rotating basis. This opened to the refugees the opportunity to attend the University of Iowa. As most of them were educated persons with a deep respect for learning, a number of them took courses at the university. Another favorite excursion was to the Amana colonies. The food, the language —

indeed, the whole setting — was familiar, yet fascinating to the newcomers from Europe. “They speak low German, besides English,” said one refugee, and the “local bakery looks like an old German ‘Backstube’, one hundred and fifty years ago.” The same observer was impressed with the “community basis for work,” and commented “a high recommendation for the government of United States that it was and still is possible to realize such an experiment as . . . the Amana Villages.” Supplementing these group excursions were regular appearances by both hostel staff and residents before community groups all over eastern Iowa. They spoke about the hostel, world affairs, and related topics. As war engulfed the world during these years, there was never a shortage of requests to speak to

attentive audiences.

All of these activities took money as well as volunteer staff, and the hostel appeared to have always had a hand-to-mouth existence. Besides a steady trickle of small gifts from Iowa Friends' meetings, and banks and individuals, the organization received occasional support from other religious groups. The Brethren Service Committee, a relief group similar to the AFSC but sponsored by the Church of the Brethren, made a sizable contribution of funds and staff for about six months. Support was also received from Jewish groups and individuals, often funneled through the AFSC's national office. A surviving statement for January 1, 1940, shows donations to the hostel including an anonymous gift of \$2.00 from a West Branch resident, \$5.26 from a P.E.O. chapter in Des Moines, many donations from Friends' churches and meetings, and over \$1700 from the AFSC. After paying all the 1939 bills, the treasurer found himself with a balance of \$5.60. A year and a half later the situation was still the same. Sara Pemberton reported, "The budget situation is rather strained at this time. The American Christians are not contributing to refugee support." The result was a fund raising effort led by J. J. Newlin. A letter signed by Newlin, Martha Balderston, director of the hostel, W. W. Waymack of the *Des Moines Register*, and Dr. David Beach of a Minneapolis congregational church was sent to thousands of potential donors. The result was that by the end of 1942 the hostel was for the first time on a solid financial footing.

Yet it was at this very time that the need for the hostel was declining quite abruptly. Over the years, most of the hostel's residents had come to Scattergood via internment camps in the portion of France not directly occupied by the German army. The United States' entrance into the European war and the accompanying break in relations with Vichy

France had slowed the inflow of refugees to this country during 1942. Economic changes, however, soon sounded the death knell of the hostel. By the end of 1942 the American economy was surging out of the Great Depression, fueled by massive government spending as our military geared up for the war effort. The result was the virtual ending of unemployment. Indeed, as young men went off to war, the economy was suddenly short of workers. In a letter to Martha Balderston, director of the hostel, Mary Rogers of the AFSC explained the result of this new situation. "With the shortage of man-power . . . Americans in the lower-paid jobs are receiving better paid appointments; refugees are able to step into these less well paid positions. The majority of them are now able to find work, and their need for money is so great that they are unable to think of one, two or three months of additional unemployment, even though this is a period of preparation." Mary Rogers pointed out that this situation was made worse by Scattergood's distance from the cities most of the refugees arrived in, but doubted that even if the hostel were close to New York City it could find enough residents to keep going much longer. She closed her letter by expressing the AFSC's great regret that the hostel's days as a refugee center were coming to an end, and appreciation for "all that has been accomplished for our refugee friends. Those of us who have known the members of the staff personally feel even more keenly our sense of gratitude and admiration for the spirit which has made the hostel so warm and living an influence in the lives of the refugees and in the community."

Indeed, it was this spirit, intangible and yet intense, which so distinguished the Scattergood Hostel. In part it was simply due to the unique role of the place. Part school, part hotel, part vocational training center, it was a small and unique community with a strong sense of its own mission. Emerging from the idealistic, young staff and the scores of emo-



*Built by Scattergood guests, this wartime snowman sported a gas mask in addition to its more typical snowman facial features. (courtesy Robert Berquist)*

tionally scarred yet indomitable European refugees was a sense of an extended, intercultural family. At bottom, it was the people of the hostel — staff and “guests” — and their love and commitment to each other that gave the place its unique spirit. Children were welcomed — the few that passed through the hostel — and cared for by all. Community pets — dogs and cats — were enjoyed, cared for, and warmly remembered in later years by former

residents. Active groups of “graduates” of the hostel were formed and met socially for years afterward in Chicago and several other major cities. By any possible measure — the success in life of its former residents or the experience it gave to young Quakers expressing their religious testimonies — the hostel had surely succeeded in fulfilling the hopes of the Iowa Friends who created it. Writing to Martha Balderston, a former resident of the hostel aptly

summarized its role in the years between 1939 and 1943. It was, he wrote, a "place of peace in a world of war, a haven amidst a world of hatred."

Yet by one of those quirks that keep history from being as neat as fiction, the story of the Scattergood Hostel has a much less happy postscript. Not surprisingly, those who had overseen the hostel's life and success looked around for another use for Scattergood's buildings and staff. In the same letter in which she told Martha Balderston of the ending of the flow of refugees, Mary Rogers of the AFSC suggested another possible use for Scattergood. It could "be used as a placement center for Americans of Japanese ancestry. There are many well qualified farmers in the relocations camps." The United States government, she reported, would "be happy to have us take a group of Japanese Americans into a hostel and arrange for the placement of them."

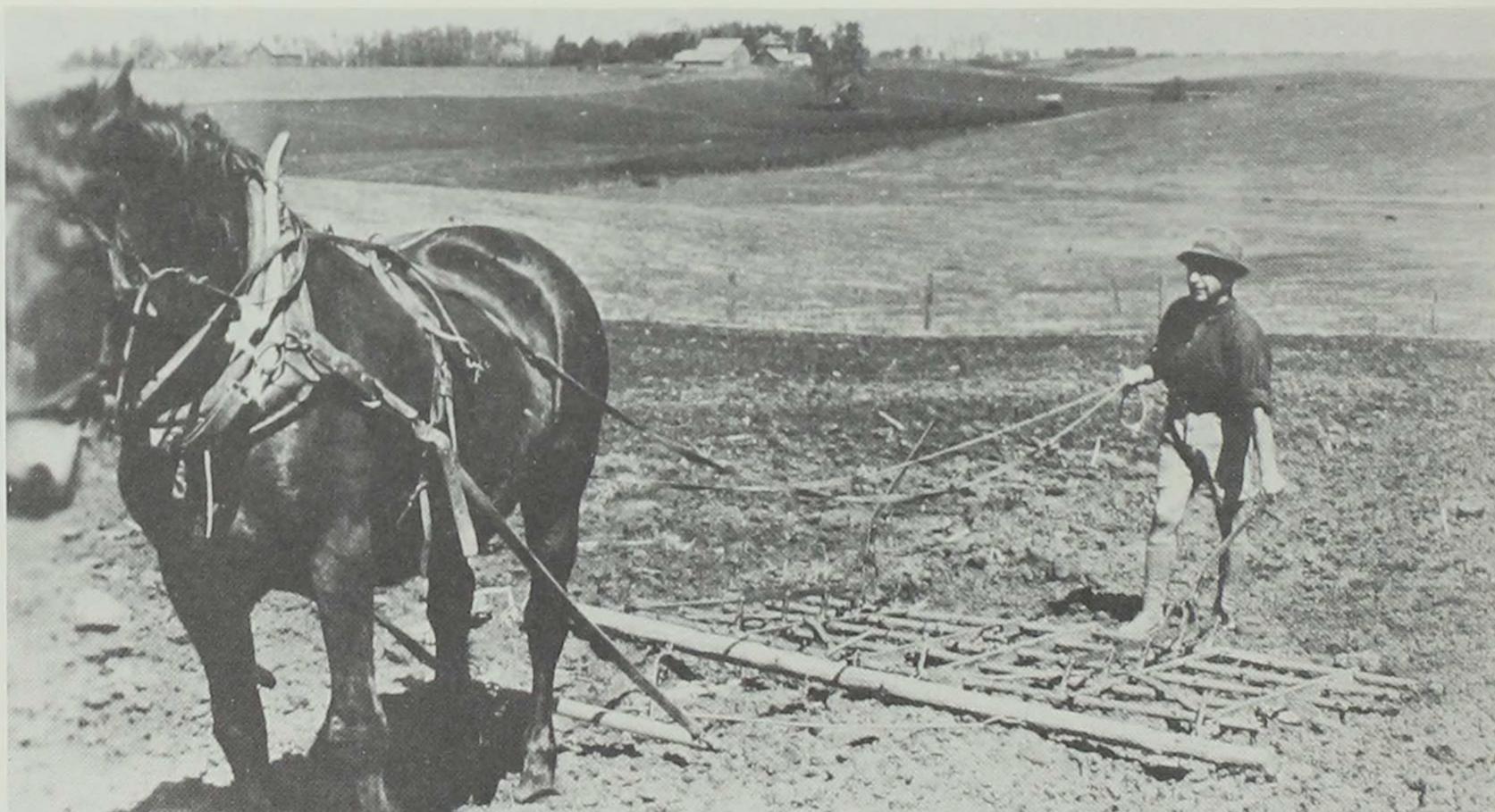
During World War II the United States government had "interned" thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent, fearing that they might aid their former homeland. This episode in American history was criticized by very few at the time; recently it has become recognized for what it was, an ugly example of racism — no German-Americans were "interned." Quakers had opposed the internment program, and it is not surprising that the War Relocation Authority turned to the AFSC when the government began to look for a way to funnel the Japanese-Americans back into the labor force. For its part, the AFSC turned naturally to Scattergood. Many of the Japanese-Americans had farming backgrounds, and Iowa farmers were seriously short of labor as the military draft expanded.

The executive committee of the hostel met several times to discuss the proposal, and all members believed that this would be a logical and positive way to continue Scattergood's usefulness. Others had their doubts. When a

Scattergood staff member sounded out the local FBI agent on the idea, his response was that "there would be no opposition from the FBI," but he went on to comment "you people certainly like to tackle the hot spots." J.J. Newlin of the executive committee did observe, "There is some reason to believe that the neighborhood is a little opposed" to the idea. That turned out to be something of an understatement.

By February 8, 1943, the executive committee of the hostel had gone as far as determining that a Japanese-American hostel would open on March 1. By then, however, vociferous opposition was building within the wider West Branch community. While some local residents had privately feared and opposed the hostel for European refugees in its first months, the prospect of bringing in Japanese-Americans stirred open public opposition. From the perspective of forty years it is difficult to determine just how widespread and deep the opposition in West Branch and Cedar County was. Some observers maintained it was just a few bitterly opposed individuals led by the local commanders of American Legion posts. Others sensed a general, deeper, and wider reaction against the hostel's new role. Whatever the reality, the executive committee felt the pressure sufficiently to hold two public meetings in West Branch in February. In those public meetings several local residents spoke strongly against the plan, claiming that local men in the military service "would not stand for it." In the end, the second community meeting urged the executive committee to defer any commitment to house the Japanese-Americans. At about the same time the local American Legion commander telegraphed Senator Guy Gillette to protest the plan, saying "It does not fit our war psychology."

Faced with active opposition, and little open and aggressive support, the Scattergood executive committee and the War Relocation Authority quickly reassessed their decision.



*By profession a stationer and by interest an amateur gardener, Fritz Treuer, of Austria, was surprised by the richness of Iowa's soil. (SHSI)*

After the second community meeting a WRA leader concluded that "in view of the strong opposition that had developed . . . it would be unwise at the present time to push the matter further." An AFSC observer concluded, "It is only an evidence of the increasing war tension which we are sure to encounter as the war progresses." It was one thing to house European refugees from Hitler in Cedar County; housing Japanese-Americans was something else again. Their color and culture made them highly visible in a rural community. Friends began to fear that the Japanese-Americans' presence would give "an opportunity for the pent-up war hysteria against Quakers . . . because they do not buy bonds and contribute scrap, [it would give local superpatriots the opportunity] to blow off steam and vent their spleen . . ." The plan to open the hostel to Japanese-Americans was abandoned. By the end of 1943, however, a relocation center for them was in operation in the less visible and more heterogeneous environment of Des Moines.

The end of the Scattergood Hostel did not mean the end of the usefulness of the Scattergood property, however. As any traveler today on Interstate 80 knows, the site is still very much in use. Encouraged by the success of the hostel, by returning prosperity, and by the prospect of the coming of peace, the Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) decided to return the property to its original mission. In the fall of 1944 the Scattergood School was reopened. It remains in operation today, a small but vibrant expression of the same Quaker testimonies and beliefs which gave rise to the Scattergood Hostel. □

#### Note on Sources

The records of the Scattergood Hostel, and a scrapbook of newspaper clippings accompanying them, provided the major source of information for this article. These records are now held in the manuscript collections of the Office of the State Historical Society, Iowa City. An interview with Floyd and Mary Helen Fawcett of West Branch helped to answer several important questions. The author especially wishes to thank Robert Berquist of West Branch for his advice, information, and encouragement. An annotated copy of this article has been deposited in the manuscript collections of the Office of the State Historical Society.