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The Pioneers of Biodynamics in USA: The Early Milestones of Organic Agriculture in the United States

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Abstract

Biodynamics has played a key role in environmental and sustainable development. Rudolf Steiner founded the *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners* at Koberwitz (now Kobierzyce, Poland) in 1924. The task for the *Experimental Circle* was to test Steiner's 'hints' for a new and sustainable agriculture, to find out what works, and to publish and tell the world. Ehrenfried published his book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in New York in 1938, fulfilling Steiner's directive. In the interval, 1924-1938, 39 individual Americans joined the *Experimental Circle*. They were the pioneers of biodynamics and organics in USA, and finally their names and locations are revealed. Of the 39 members, three received copies of the *Agriculture Course* in both German and English, while other copies were shared (n=6). Of the 35 *Agriculture Courses* supplied to American *Experimental Circle* Members, over half were numbered copies of the German edition (n=20), and the rest were the English edition (n=15). A majority of members were women (n=20), along with men (n=17), and undetermined (n=2). Members were from 11 states: New York (n=18), New Jersey (n=5), Ohio (n=4), Hawaii (n=3), Connecticut (n=2), Missouri (n=2), California (n=1), Florida (n=1), Maine (n=1), Maryland (n=1), and Pennsylvania (n=1). The revelation of the earliest pioneers of biodynamics, and thus organics, in USA provides 39 starting points for further research that their stories and achievements may be told.

Keywords

Biodynamic (BD) Farming, Biodynamic Agriculture, Organic Agriculture, Rudolf Steiner, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Koberwitz

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1. Introduction

Biodynamics (BD) has played a key role in environmental and sustainable development. It was a biodynamic farmer who coined the term 'organic farming' and wrote the original manifesto of organic agriculture [1, 2]. Biodynamic practitioners were the secret informants for Rachel Carson when she wrote *Silent Spring*, the book which prompted the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [3-5]. Biodynamic practitioners were founding members of the global umbrella organisation of organic farming, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), founded in 1972 [6, 7], and recently rebranded as

IFOAM - Organics International.

A recently published listing of 'milestones' of the organic sector in USA begins with the year 1946 [8]. However, the present paper reveals that biodynamics and organics have been a presence in USA beginning nine decades ago, and it pushes the seminal date for organics in the United States back to 1926. Dr Rudolf Steiner founded the *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners* at Koberwitz (now Kobierzyce, Poland) [9], (Figure 1). It was a stepping stone to Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* published in New York [10]. And that was a stepping stone to Jerome Rodale's journal *Organic Farming and Gardening* [11] which has been America's

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leading organics advocacy journal for many decades. These were three steps in the path to USA developing as a leader in global organic agriculture. The US reports 2.03 million hectares of certified organic land. That ranks USA fifth in the world of organic agriculture, based on certified hectares, after Australia, Argentina, China, and Spain [12].

In his *Agriculture Course* delivered at Koberwitz in 1924, Rudolf Steiner told his audience of 111 farmers, gardeners and others, that the farm is an “organism”, that the move towards chemical agriculture is misguided, and that the “hints” that he delivered for his vision of a more environmentally sound agriculture should be put to the test. They should find out what works, and then publish the results [9]. At Koberwitz, sixty of the attendees joined Steiner’s newly founded *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners*. It was the world’s first organic agriculture research group [13].

At the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum, at Dornach, Switzerland, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer coordinated the work of the *Experimental Circle* of testing Steiner’s agriculture ideas. In 1938, Pfeiffer published his book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening*. Pfeiffer wrote in German, it was his first language, and his book was translated into English by Fred Heckel and published in New York. Pfeiffer oversaw the evolution of ‘Anthroposophic farming’ through to ‘biodynamic farming’, in the years from Steiner’s course of 1924 through to 1938 [14]. Pfeiffer’s biodynamics book appeared in five languages, English, German, Dutch, French, and Italian [10, 15-18]. It was a major publishing achievement and Pfeiffer would have viewed his work as fulfilling Steiner’s injunction to ‘tell the world’.



Figure 1. The manor house at Koberwitz, venue of Rudolf Steiner’s *Agriculture Course* of 1924 (photo: J Paull).

In the intervening years, from Steiner’s course of 1924 to Pfeiffer’s biodynamics book of 1938, the *Experimental Circle* continued to grow from the original 60 foundation members. This growth was facilitated by the publication of Steiner’s *Agriculture Course*, first in German, and shortly after in English. The English version was issued as typescript. The Anglo version was translated by George

Kaufmann (he later changed his name to ‘George Adams’) and the copies were typed by Marna Pease, the Honorary Secretary of the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation, Bray, Berkshire, England, until a printed edition appeared in 1938.

Steiner declared that: “the lectures should be considered first of all as hints, which for the present should not be spoken of outside this circle, but looked upon as the foundation for experiments and thus gradually brought into a form suitable for publication” [19, p. 10]. The confidentiality agreements signed by the US pioneers of biodynamics stems from this directive. These confidentiality agreements are a primary data source for the present paper.

From 1938 onwards, the *Agriculture Course* in English was finally available as a printed book [20]. The text was still not typeset, instead it was printed from a typescript. The frontispiece bears the inscription “Printed for private circulation only. This copy is intended for the sole use of the person here named. It is issued on the understanding that no copy is taken, and that the contents are not passed on to others, either in whole or in part, without the express permission of the Natural Sciences Section of the Goetheanum. English Copy No. for”. The 1938 copies that I have sighted and checked (n=3) each bear a signature (of the recipient) but are not numbered. Finally in 1958 a typeset *Agriculture Course* appeared, and this time without the encumbering frontispiece text of name and number [21].

2. Methods

Each member of the *Experimental Circle* submitted a signed confidentiality agreement and was issued with a numbered copy of the *Agriculture Course* at the time of joining. The original records were located in the Archives of the Goetheanum, and enabled the identification of the earliest pioneers of biodynamics in USA, that is, those who joined Steiner’s *Experimental Circle* from 1924 to 1938, the years of omertà, the gestation years from Koberwitz through to the publication of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer’s *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* [9].

Two separate sets of documents provided the data: (a) The Agreements, the originals of the confidentiality agreements signed and submitted by each incoming member of the *Experimental Circle*, and (b) The Directory, the ongoing tally of issued numbered *Agriculture Courses*, a loose-leaf compilation, *Verzeichnis der Besitzer des landwirtschaftlichen Kursus der von Dornach ausgegeben wurde*, (tr. Directory of the owners of the agricultural course issued by Dornach).

The Directory is a progressive register, compiled by many

hands over decades, some typewritten and some handwritten, It begins on 28 May 1926, with a record of the destinations of the first 88 copies of the Agriculture Course, beginning with the record that Dr Steiner received copies Nos. 1-3. Neither document series is perfectly complete; some of the names identified appear in both the Agreements and in the Directory, others in one or the other; the Directory appears to be missing the destinations of No. 89-No. 149 entirely (perhaps a single missing page). Since some of the English editions were issued from England and some from Dornach, both the Agreements and the Directory may be more prone to omissions of English data than German data. There were only German and English *Agriculture Courses* issued in the period under examination. The details of the US biodynamics pioneers were transcribed, and reconciled where possible between the Agreements and the Directory, and are now revealed (Table 1). The English language editions were

suffixed (or sometimes prefixed) with the letter 'E'.

3. Results and Discussion

Americans joined Rudolf Steiner's *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners* beginning in 1926 (Table 1). The Agriculture Course, as delivered by Rudolf Steiner in Koberwitz, was transcribed in shorthand by several course attendees, including by Dr Lili Kolisko [19]. This enabled the spread of the *Experimental Circle* beyond the group who attended his course at Koberwitz, and then beyond Europe. Those at the Koberwitz course were from Germany (n=61), Poland (n=30), Austria (n=9), Switzerland (n=7), France (n=2), and Sweden (n=2). From the outset it was an international undertaking, but no Americans, nor Anglophones from elsewhere, attended at Koberwitz.

Table 1. Americans who joined the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners, in chronological order of joining (1928-1938) (Frau = Mrs; Frl =Fräulein=Miss; Herr=Mr).

Name	Address	Date (dd.mm.yyyy)	Number
Henry B Monges	30 West 72nd St, New York City, NY	<28.05.1926	88
Henry Hagens	Princeton, New Jersey	c **.07.1928	164
Ralph Courtney	New York	22.08.1928	196
Herr Dr W M Hildebrand	504 E 39th St, Baltimore, Maryland	c. 29.1.1929	221
Elise Stolting	15 Gramercy Park, New York City, NY	07.04.1929	9E
Miss Cladys Barnett	Box 30, Spring Valley NY; Lossing Farm, Dover Plains, NY	21.12.1929	285
Mrs Ulivera Brooks	170 E 78th St, New York City, NY	13.03.1931	20E
Miss Mary Dinsmore	Dept of Public Instruction, Territorial Building, Honolulu, Hawaii	15.04.1931	22E
Miss Louise Russell Bybee	318 West 56th St, New York City, NY	26.07.1931	13E
Dr S Streicher	905 Lake St, Newark, New Jersey	11.02.1932	514
Harold S Richmond	48 Sterling Ave, White Plains, NY	10.03.1932	521
Hugo Johanning	480 W 22nd St, New York, NY; Threefold Farm, Spring Valley, NY	04.07.1932	539
Mrs Earl Midkiff	1930 Judd Hillside, Honolulu, Hawaii	c. 24.08.1932	**E
Phyllis Midkiff	c/- Hawaiian Trust Company, Honolulu, Hawaii	16.10.1932	39E
Burkhart Endres	Threefold Farm, Spring Valley, NY	16.01.1933	***
R B Bowler	Mintley, Noroton, Connecticut	27.01.1933	42E
Evelyn Speiden	3305 Burnet Ave Apt 5, Cincinnati, Ohio	04.08.1933	44E
Melrose Pitman	3305 Burnet Ave Apt 5, Cincinnati, Ohio	04.08.1933	44E
Miss Evelyn Speiden	3305 Burnet Ave Apt 5, Cincinnati, Ohio	29.12.1933	574
Frau Josie Burkhardt	Nixon, New Jersey	12.01.1934	576
Frl Leonie Burkhardt	Nixon, New Jersey	12.01.1934	576
Adolf Burkhardt	Box 184, Nixon, New Jersey	12.01.1934	576
Fred Heckel	318 W 56th St, New York City, NY	15.02.1934	57E
Fred Heckel	318 W 56th St, New York City, NY	15.02.1934	57E
Alice Heckel	318 W 56th St, New York City, NY	15.02.1934	588
Alice Heckel	318 W 56th St, New York City, NY	15.02.1934	588
Robert B Bowler	Norton, Connecticut	24.9.1934	598
Willhelm Schmidt	27 Cedar St, Brooklyn, NY	07.01.1935	601
Frau Emma Schmidt	27 Cedar St, Brooklyn, NY	07.01.1935	601
Herr Ignaz Poetzel	27 Cedar St, Brooklyn, NY	07.01.1935	602
Frl Else Felle	167 East 53rd St, New York, NY	30.01.1935	605
Fritz M Scharff	Lorain, Ohio	18.03.1935	609
Henry Monges	230 West 59th St, New York, NY	12.09.1935	53E
Roger D Hale	Vanceboro, Maine	30.12.1935	**E
Miss Evelyn Speiden	Red Oaks Farm, Pleasant Hill, Missouri	29.04.1936	58E
Ruth White Lowry	6435 Indian Lane, Kansas City, Missouri	01.09.1936	59E
John Fentress Gardner	c/- Rudolf Steiner School, 20 W 73rd Street, New York, NY	01.09.1936	61E
Carol Hemingway Gardner	c/- Rudolf Steiner School, 20 W 73rd Street, New York, NY	01.09.1936	61E
Ernest R Daniel	Stahlstown, Pennsylvania	24.05.1937	656
Ernest Gilbett	555 Sylvan Drive, Winter Park, Florida	19.06.1937	67E
Erna Kaufmann	209 Columbus Ave, New York, NY; 144 W 57 St, New York, NY	02.11.1937	663
Miss Susanna Kingsley	c/-Mrs Brooks, Hyampom, Trinity County, California	14.07.1938	674

In total, 39 Americans joined the Experimental Circle in the gestation period of biodynamics (1924-1938). Of these, 24 received the German text of the Agriculture Course and 18 received the English version (3 members received both language versions). All copies issued in this period were numbered. Some copies were shared so that 20 German texts were supplied (3 were shared), and 15 English texts were supplied (3 were shared). The German versions were issued in chronological order from the Goetheanum. The English language versions were issued from the Goetheanum and from England, and hence they were not always issued in chronological order (Table 1).

The number of new *Experimental Circle* members joining in USA (up to 1938) peaked in 1934 (n=8), and then trailed off (Figure 2). Members were from 11 states: New York (n=18), New Jersey (n=5), Ohio (n=4), Hawaii (n=3), Connecticut (n=2), Missouri (n=2), California (n=1), Florida (n=1), Maine (n=1), Maryland (n=1), and Pennsylvania (n=1). A majority

of members were women (n=20), along with men (n=17), and gender undetermined (n=2).

Henry Babad Monges (1870-1954) was the first American to receive a copy of the *Agriculture Course* (Table 1). He appears in the *Verzeichnis* listing as the final recipient in a list of the first tranche of *Agriculture Courses*, of numbers one through 88, in an unsigned compilation dated 28 May 1926, which nominates the destinations of numbered copies up to that time. That list includes: Dr Rudolf Steiner (Nos. 1-3), Dr Guenther Wachsmuth (Nos. 4-6), Dr Ita Wegman (No. 7), Dr Elisabeth Vreede (No. 10), Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (No. 12), and Dr Lili Kolisko (No. 17). Later, Monges also received a copy of the English language *Agriculture Course*, No. 53E, (Table 1). Monges was a keen Anthroposophist and he translated some of Rudolf Steiner's books into English, including: *Karma* [22], *Theosophy* [23], *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment* [24], *Practical Training in Thought* [25], and *Occult Science - An Outline* [26].

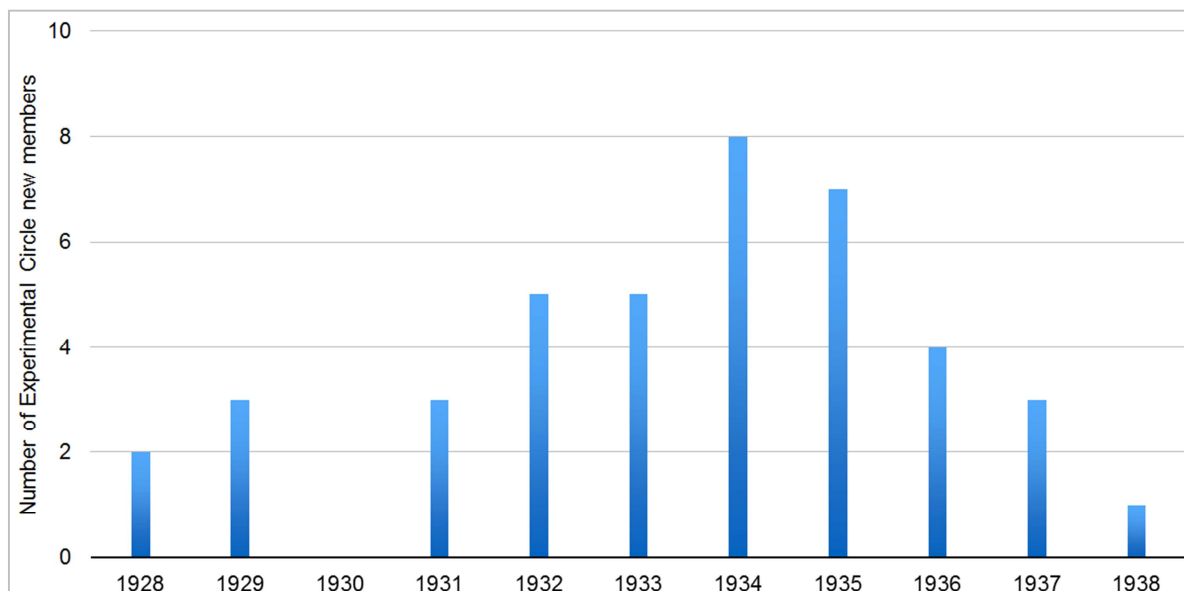


Figure 2. Annual number of members joining the Experimental Circle during the gestation period of Biodynamics.

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) emigrated to USA around the time that his biodynamics book appeared. He was never flush with funds, so it seems unlikely (for this and other reasons) that his biodynamics notes and the Experimental Circle notes (compiled at the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum) would have traveled to USA with him, and, more likely that they remained at Dornach. In any event, they do not appear to have survived. There was most likely some resentment of Pfeiffer within the Anthroposophical Society, headquartered at Dornach, firstly, for his publishing *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* (none of the five editions of 1938 were published by the Goetheanum), and secondly, for migrating to USA just prior to WW2. Switzerland remained neutral in WW2, as it did in WW1, nevertheless,

Dornach is in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and it was a time of high emotions and great devastation for Europe. The Anthroposophy Society had been banned in Germany in 1935 and the Waldorf Schools in Germany were closed down in Germany [27] by the time Pfeiffer, a German national, migrated from Switzerland to USA.

Pfeiffer spent the rest of his life in USA as an advocate for Anthroposophy and biodynamics. He advised Jerome Rodale and was a mentor for BD farmers and an informant for Rachel Carson when she was writing *Silent Spring* [3, 5]. After the war, Pfeiffer explored the prospect of returning to the Goetheanum, Dornach, but he was not made welcome there, and he returned, disappointed, to USA [28].

4. Conclusions

The revelation of these earliest pioneers of biodynamics and organics in USA provides 39 starting points for further research. Were they farmers or gardeners? What were their experiences of biodynamics? Did they fulfill their commitments to test and experiment? Were results reported back to the Goetheanum? Did the members continue on with biodynamics, the *Experimental Circle*, and/or Anthroposophy? Did these pioneers leave written accounts of their BD experiments and experiences? These are opportunities for further research.

What copies of the Agriculture Course of these pioneers have survived, if any? Were their copies of the *Agriculture Course* marked-up or annotated? The Agreement that they signed stated, of the numbered copy of Steiner's *Agriculture Course* that each member received: "I accept it on loan for my personal use in carrying out the experiments undertaken by <me> within the Agricultural Experimental Circle of the General Anthroposophical Society". Within the agreement, there was no explicit commitment to remit the results of experiments back to the Goetheanum (or elsewhere).

Whether the US *Experimental Circle* members recorded their BD experiments and sent the results to Dornach is unknown. By publishing his *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in 1938, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer arguably met Steiner's injunction that the 'hints', having been practically tested, were to be published and shared with the world - and at the same time extinguished Steiner's injunction to secrecy in the interim. Pfeiffer migrated to USA about this time. A collection of Pfeiffer's papers does not appear to have survived in the archives of the Natural Science Section nor of the Goetheanum, and it appears that Pfeiffer's papers surviving in USA do not include reports from *Experimental Circle* members.

The agreement of *Experimental Circle* members was that their numbered copy of the *Agriculture Course* was to be returned to the Goetheanum should the recipient leave the *Experimental Circle* or the General Anthroposophical Society, or on the death of the recipient. In this way, some returned copies were reissued by the Goetheanum, and it appears that later on, copies returned to the Goetheanum (under the terms of the agreement) were destroyed. So, it is unclear how many, if any, of the original 35 numbered copies issued to USA may have survived.

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