

How Red is America?

AMERICA FACES THE BARRICADES.

By John L. Spivak. New York: Covici-Friede. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALFRED M. BINGHAM

THE capitalist is likely to sit in his ivory tower on Wall Street, and fondly imagine that the American people are really well-off and contented, even under the depression. The communist is likely to sit in his ivory tower (figurative) in Union Square, and fondly imagine that the American proletariat has been brought by the depression to the verge of revolution. Both of them would do well to read what Mr. Spivak has to say.

Mr. Spivak passionately hates the status quo. But he hates wishful thinking almost as much. And in this book he has set down—as honestly as a good newspaperman who is looking for a particular story can do—just what Americans in every part of the country are thinking about. He found out by the simple process of asking them; and for asking questions—impertinent, embarrassing, disconcerting, soul-searching questions—John Spivak has no peer. As Ben Timmerman, one of his victims, a good union man in the Mesaba Range, profanely put it: “Jesus, haven’t you any cheerful questions?”

The questions begin among the Mexican cotton pickers of the San Joaquin Valley, California, where whole families earn \$2.50 a week. A girl of fifteen working between the rows is asked what she hopes Roosevelt will do for her; her dearest wish is that he will arrange it so that she may have electric light in the hovel where she is soon to bear a child. Next is a North Carolina Negro, dying of a disease usual in asbestos mills, and now unable to work. “What do you expect to live on now?” “I don’t know.” Next is a relief director in Tulsa, bewildered by the question, “How can a family live on \$1.25 a week?” A Massachusetts shoe manufacturer is balked by the query, “But suppose things don’t get better?” Workers, ranchers, politicians, down-and-outers, all answer “I don’t know,” when the brutal question finally comes, “What are you going to do about it?”

For Mr. Spivak does not often get the answer he probes for. As he admits in his preface, “After talking with all kinds of people throughout the country, I am convinced that the American worker does not want to overthrow the government. All he wants is food.” Uncertainty, fear, confusion, and sullen discontent are there in plenty, in every one of the forty-eight states. And because they are there, no doubt is permitted to exist in Mr. Spivak’s mind that America’s destiny is the barricades. On one side will be the fascists, on the other probably the communists. Mr. Spivak is an authority on both. (His series of articles on Fascism and anti-Semitism

in the *New Masses*, of which a little appears in this book, was the most brilliant feature of magazine journalism last year.) Nevertheless one may wonder whether he is an authority on the subject in hand—how America is getting ready to act.

With the conclusion that there is vast unrest, and as yet no clear notion of revolt, there can be no quarrel—though one suspects Mr. Spivak was not at the beach last Sunday to see how many million people are still able to enjoy themselves. A national income that is about half what our productive capacity would entitle us to is dynamite which will sooner or later blow up a system absurd enough to perpetuate it. But that it will be blown up at the barricades—whether literally meant or not—is not indicated by Mr. Spivak’s survey, though his hopeful guess may be as good as another’s.

Revolutions do not start from below, as George Soule has made clear, but they develop when deep social maladjustment becomes apparent to those near enough the top to understand it, and they may then draw more or less strength from the depths of the oppressed. Mr. Spivak is inclined to see only those depths. He does not see the middle-class radicals of the Far West. He passes off Farmer-Laborite Governor Olson in partisan fashion as a “strike-breaker.” America may be closer to revolution than Mr. Spivak thinks. But he might not recognize it when it came.

Alfred M. Bingham is one of the editors of *Common Sense*.

American Cross-Section

MY OWN. MY NATIVE LAND. By Thyra Samter Winslow. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

AMONG American short story writers Mrs. Winslow has already staked her claim, and it is an enviable one. In her latest venture into fiction she presents forty separate stories as a unit. They are all bound together by the fact that they concern inhabitants of the same town in the American Southwest, that which the author calls “my home town.” In this book there is every variety of human experience and deeply shrewd observation of human nature. All the curious characters, well-known from childhood in one’s native place, emerge from a fusing of memory and imagination, introducing humor, irony, tragedy, pathos, and combinations and permutations of all these. When one has finally laid down the book one feels richer for acquaintance with a vividly real locality, a certain section of the United States put on paper with definition and exactness.

There are some grand stories in the book. The one of the brothers—of the Rumfords and the Williamses—is beautifully handled. The account of Jim Peters’s



THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW

wives who were not good cooks combines the ludicrous and the hair-raising in remarkable fashion. A delicious irony is the acceptance of the Honeymans as the new poor. Tragic irony resides in Old Man Winkler. Mr. Rodman Redwin of “Southern Cooking” is a memorable character. In a few pages Mrs. Curran is made infinitely horrible. What possessed Lurine Morland and how Cora Dorrance got her husband, the lack of standing of Ruby Moon in spite of her pioneer forebears, the extraordinary aberrations of Leland Miller, the true story of the making of a popular moving picture actress, and the striking account of a confrontation with an old beau—these are some of the different strands that form the many-colored web of this book. Mrs. Winslow writes with admirable condensation, and in this one volume she has compressed a wealth of material that would have endowed several novels. She has also chosen an excellent pattern, for most of the stories both exhibit the viewpoint of youth and the later correction of maturity concerning the characters, made on a visit after some years to the old town. Many of us, in retrospect, will be led by this book into our own memories. Just such a variety of people walked and talked through our own earlier lives, except that we are not possessed of the ability to get them on paper.

This book has tenderness as well as wit, and its wisdom concerning human nature is profound. I do not very well see how it could be a better example of the kind of book it sets out to be. It is the kind of fiction whose roots are deep in real life. Perhaps that is the most important kind.

A descriptive bibliography of the Ashendene Press is in preparation, to include detailed descriptions of all books printed between 1895 and 1935, with specimen pages, showing of initial letters, etc., and reproductions of photographs of bindings. There will be 340 copies for sale at seven guineas.

The BOWLING GREEN *by Christopher Morley*

WHEN CROSSING Long Island Sound, to or from New England, I particularly like the ferry that runs between Stamford and Oyster Bay. On that route is an ancient little steamer whose name may not mean anything to most passengers, but gives a native Pennsylvanian a thrill. She's called *Tinicum*. She was built in 1905 at Chester, Pennsylvania, where the name *Tinicum* is familiar. It's an island in the Delaware, an island precious to me because it's really a kind of delta formed by the two creeks in which I did my earliest swimming—Cobb's Creek and Darby Creek, a few miles west of Philadelphia. I feel that I helped to form *Tinicum* Island. Other small boys and I, about the end of last century, went swimming in Cobb's Creek and Darby Creek and churned up that rich and plentiful mud. The mud went downstream and stuck on *Tinicum*.

You wouldn't believe it possible to find so unspoiled a stream so close to a big city as Darby Creek. If anyone is ever driving out of Philadelphia on Road Number 5, the Westchester Pike, turn off to the right when you come to the crossing of Darby Creek. If you'll follow leisurely along those quiet roads by the creek (crick, we used to call it) you'll very likely see small boys swimming there still—stirring up more silt for *Tinicum* Island.

As for the old ferryboat *Tinicum*, though only 320 tons and far from her native Delaware, she has a stout heart. I like the modest and understating brevity of her chief engineer's ticket, framed in

her cabin. It says he is licensed "for the following-described waters"—and then follows just one comprehensive and enormous word—"OCEANS."

MR. J. C. FREIDELL, of the Freidell Winery in Hammondsport, N. Y., replies encouragingly to the Bowling Green's inquiry about losses caused by the flood last month. He writes:—

"With reference to our local catastrophe we are pleased to say that none of the Wineries in this area were damaged by the flood, with the exception of the Georges Roulet Wines Inc., manufacturers of pumice brandy, that lost 1200 barrels of brandy and recovered all but 56.

"Incidentally the greatest loss was to the United States Treasury Department which would have collected a tax of \$150.00 per 50 gallon barrel."

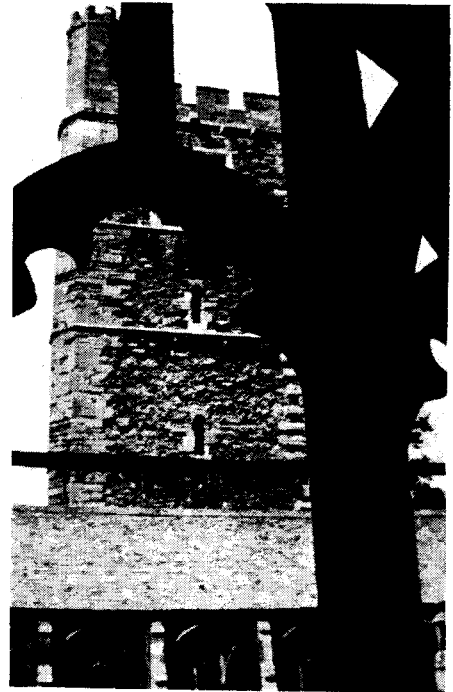
It may please Mr. Freidell to hear that the first wine opened in a Long Island woodland cabin dedicated to seclusion and work was a bottle of his New York State sherry.

WE WERE on the point of putting down some notes on Upstate scenes last month, particularly on the beauties of the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers in their Catskill youth. Then those rivers went into flood and merely picturesque memoranda would have been out of place. But I'm thinking particularly of a little junction called Harpursville (N.E. of Binghamton) where the traveler can choose between road 79 and road 7. Number 79, beautiful and unfrequented, leads across rolling ridges up to the Finger Lakes. Number 7, an old Indian Trail, runs along the stripling Susquehanna toward Fenimore Cooper's country. In Harpursville is a cool little ice cream parlor where you can deliberate your decision. It's called The Green Check, and the waitress is a friendly and rather homesick girl who came from Iowa a few months ago. I said "This is lovely country, isn't it?" and she replied loyally "I guess it's all right—but you ought to see the Mississippi at Davenport."

So I told her that I also admire Iowa, and when she discovered that I had actually gone through Davenport she put an extra ball of ice-cream in my root beer.

56 years ago this summer another homesick youngster was travelling along those upstate rivers, and in spite of his pangs and problems he was touched to the quick by their beauty. It's queer that the poem he wrote is so little known. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson and his stanzas have this refrain:—

Enough if, even so
My travelling eyes can go



BELL TOWER, NEW COLLEGE,
OXFORD

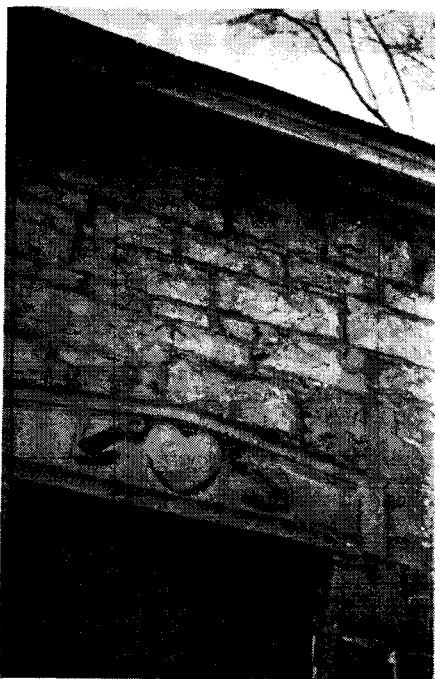
By flood and field and hill, by wood
and meadow fair

Beside the Susquehanna and along
the Delaware.

I'm always surprised that the advertising men of the Erie and Lehigh railroads have made no use of that poem.

GRANT WOOD, the Iowa painter, in his pamphlet *Revolt Against the City* (Clio Press, Iowa City) makes a strong appeal for the encouragement of non-urban and regional art. Privately I couldn't take altogether seriously Mr. Wood's anxious suggestion that the Rhodes Scholarships are just one more British "attempt to control our culture." But what I have in mind here is his allusion to the sturdy old village of Waubeek, near Cedar Rapids; one of the most thrillingly American places I have ever seen. It was first settled by families from the fishing villages of New England, and old harpoons and other maritime gear are kept as heirlooms. Jay Sigmond, the poet, who spends all his spare time in Waubeek, kindly sent me a snapshot of an old stone doorway where the carved anchors, so far from the sea, show the long memory of the New England race.

OVER THE DOORWAY of my workroom in the woods (tentatively called The Knot-hole) I have lettered an inscription; perhaps that also testifies to a foreign domination, for it's a line that I found years ago in the letters of Erasmus. I shall probably never bother with bookplates, think-



MEMORIES OF SEA—WAUBEK, IOWA