

# AMERICAN FARM SCHOOL • THESSALONICA, GREECE

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NEW YORK OFFICE: 17 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

## *News-Letter*

JANUARY - 1948

Dear Friends of the Farm School:

When Mrs. Shepard asked me to write the News Letter this month as a report of my recent visit to Greece, I was really delighted to have the chance to share with you, as far as can be done in writing, the experiences of my memorable month in Salonika with Charlie and Ann House. There are so many of you whom I know and would like to talk to directly that I am going to ask the others to forgive the familiar tone of a personal letter from someone they do not know, so that I can tell the story as I should like to do, if I could write to each of you individually.

My trip took me, by air via Cairo, to Lebanon for a summer vacation with my brother and his family, then a visit in Turkey, and then Greece. I flew from Istanbul to Athens in two and a half hours, and then on up to Salonika on September 8. That last lap is only about an hour's flight, and like all the flying I did, across the ocean, across Europe, over the Mediterranean, I found it full of interest and beauty, and a miracle of comfort to one cursed with seasickness on ocean voyages. The airport in Salonika is very near the Farm School, so a telephone call brought Ann and Charlie and the jeep to meet me in a few minutes. After traveling thousands of miles to get there, it was fun to call up as though from a shopping trip in New York, and have the family car run down to pick me up.

You can imagine what an absorbingly interesting time it was to be in Greece, when AMAG (American Mission for Aid to Greece) was getting under way, and hope was raising its head in the midst of fear and despair. The tales you hear of guerrilla action are all too true, but it is amazing also how ordinary life goes on without much interruption. News we had in Turkey made me dubious about going to Salonika at one time, for the reports had it that Macedonia would soon be cut off from the rest of Greece. After living there a few days in a normal everyday atmosphere, I laughed at my hesitations. As a matter of fact, that atmosphere is one of the outstanding benefits of a place like the Farm School and our other permanent American institutions in Greece; they give a tone of assurance and normal living which is invaluable in a fear-ridden situation. For that reason, if no other, support of the School seems to me to be a sound contribution to peace.

There were three lines I tried to follow during my stay in Greece: one was to get as well acquainted as I could with the School itself and its personnel; another was to see something of the Macedonian countryside from which most of our boys and girls come, and the



third was to try to find my way around in the general situation. I succeeded well enough in the first, so that I was qualified to act as guide to parties that came to see the School; considering the fact that every trip outside Salonika could be taken only by police permits, I had more opportunity than I had hoped for in the second, and some most rewarding experiences; and the third would take a book to cover, a book which I am not going to write!

Beginning in reverse order, let me say that a month is both too long and too short for acquiring knowledge of things in Greece. In less time than that, one can get a kind of head-line familiarity, but it would take years of living in the situation to reduce its complexities and confusions to orderly understanding. Athens, for instance, looks outwardly like a prosperous western city; what wealth there is in the country is concentrated there and in the few large towns. Visitors who see only Athens could easily come away convinced that the stories of need are untrue. Outside Athens lies the village life of Greece, where terror stalks nightly, and violence combines with drought to shatter the heroic struggle of the farmer to build up the agricultural life prostrated by war. I saw the rich beautiful farm land of Drama and Serres in Macedonia which needs only peace to be flourishing; and I saw the impoverished villages of the mountains, and burned houses and pitiful refugees crowding into sheds and school houses in such numbers that many schools cannot open this winter. I heard tales of UNRRA waste and corruption, but I also saw the tremendous work it did accomplish in rehabilitation. Again and again, when we commented on well-dressed children or stores stocked with American canned goods, we got the answer, "UNRRA did it". In our own school it was cheap supplies through UNRRA that helped us last year, the lack of which is part of our problem this year. The ending of UNRRA help before the country was on its feet is one element in the ominous picture of returning starvation this winter.

In the midst of all this the Farm School sits on its hillside, turning brown dry earth into green trees and harvest crops, and uncouth village boys into men on whom Greece can depend for a sound agricultural citizenry. As Mother House once said, governments come and go, but the Farm School goes on. You would all be pleased to see how shipshape the place looked for the opening of school. One of the Congressmen who came to visit said, "This place looks as though someone had done a lot of work." (They stayed fifteen minutes, drank quarts of milk, and departed in a cloud of dust, so I should say their knowledge of the School was strictly limited, but at least that observation was a true one.) The growth of trees since Mr. Speers and I were there nineteen years ago is very striking; the garden below Finley Pool is green and productive. The fine-looking herd of cows sunning themselves in their yard, the tinkle of sheep bells as the flock goes to pasture, the look of the brown fields getting ready for their fall sowing, the hordes of little foundling children playing happily in the grove, all made a picture of normal living good to see in that harried country.



One of the spots I liked best was the big earthen dam built with relief funds to impound the water from the watershed of hills above the School to form a reservoir for irrigation. It was good to see water already collecting there from thunderstorms that are otherwise so destructive in erosion. A few such storms were the only rain they had had when I left in October since the first of February! That is what they mean by drought. After four months in that part of the world the feeling about water becomes greatly intensified, and seeing the flowing wells at Verria, not fifty miles away from us, gave me a consuming desire for something like it at our school. If we could sink our wells twice as deep as they are now, we might get it. Flowing wells would help us both coming and going, more water for crops to make us more self-supporting, and less money for pumping, and release of power for other uses.

It was a delight to get to know the School staff in the weeks before school opened. Some of them speak English, and a number knew Turkish. As I had come to Greece from a month in Turkey, where I resurrected and limbered up my childhood knowledge of that language, I was able to visit around in many of the homes by myself, and talk here and there with workers on the grounds. They began to change from names to real people, and then into friends. The long Greek names look very formidable on paper, but attached to real people doing things, they become filled with personality, and are easy to remember. As I watched them getting ready for the opening of school, Theo Litsas meeting parents and visitors, Demeter Hadjis planning classes and taking thoughtful stock of the whole program, Emmanuel Achilleos working patiently and indefatigably to make worn-out machinery do one more turn, Constantine Georgiades keeping the books and running the office, Heracles Iassonides struggling with the mounting problem of buying food and fuel for the big farm family, John Bodouroglu taking over some of Ann's work to leave her free to go with me on a trip, and all the supervisors with the fascinating names of Pericles Papadopoulos, Argyrios Dermendjis, George Spyropoulos, Theodosios Hadjichristou, and Constantine Partides, preparing for the influx of boys into the departments of Farm Crops, Dairy, Minor Livestock, Grounds and Buildings, Gardens, and Machine Shops, - as I watched all this, I was impressed by the self-reliant, capable way they were all going about their jobs and by the pervading good cheer and sense of comradeship in work worth doing, in spite of all the anxieties around them.

Being at the School in vacation time made it possible for us to take numerous trips out to the villages, where we could see the boys in their home surroundings. I think I enjoyed this more than almost anything else we did, wonderful trips in the wonderful jeep that could manage any kind of road or no road at all equally well, that would go anywhere under Pericles' skillful driving to follow my whims of picture-taking, and that unrolled for me an unforgettable scene of Greek life in villages in the mountains, villages on the plains, villages by the sea-side, harvest time in chestnut groves, and vineyards and sesame fields, and always the look in the faces of boys and the eager welcome of families as the Farm School jeep drove up. It's something I wish you could all



see for yourselves. It's what makes you believe in Greece. It's what makes your heart sick when you hear of violence descending on one of those villages you visited and destroying its livelihood.

I took pictures everywhere and have had a set of slides made for use this winter, showing both the country life and the School in action. They're not in color, but they are clear, and everyone has a story. If any of you who read this know of opportunities where such pictures and stories might tap some new income for the School, I wish you would get in touch with Mrs. Lawrence Shepard at the New York address, or with me directly. As far as time and strength permit, I should like to use my experience to make new friends or enthuse old ones. Our problem of finances is acute, and all of us who believe in the work are needed to meet the necessary monthly installments.

I keep thinking of the remarks of the Navy boys I took around one afternoon when they came out to sightsee and get a drink of real milk; "You mean to say we Americans are doing something like this over here? I didn't know there was anything like it. How did it get started? What's it all about? Do people in America know about it? Boy, they ought to come out and see! Gee, don't the pigs smell good!" (from a homesick farm boy from Oklahoma)

So, friends, let's tell America, and keep the pigs "smelling good" in Greece!

Yours sincerely,

*Hellie Dodd Speers*  
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