

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE OVERSTREETS BEFORE THEY WERE A TEAM

In a 1936 limited edition of a collection of poems, the Nobel Prize winning author, Robert Frost, inscribed the book, “To the Overstreets partly for being Californians but mostly for being my friends.”<sup>1</sup> The words “partly for being Californians” indicated a friendly relationship between fellow compatriots. Most people with a passing interest in poetry consider Frost to be the quintessential poet of New England, and yet he never forgot that he was born in San Francisco in 1875, a distinction he shared with Harry Overstreet. Even as late as 1946 in the book Inside U. S. A., John Gunther, who had covered the globe, would write that Californians “consider themselves the survivors of a great adventure” and “most Californians have a great state pride, whether they were born in California or not.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard the Overstreets were no different than others. Their roots were in California and throughout their lives they kept returning to the area around Mill Valley. From their home near Sausalito they had a good view of Mt. Tamalpais which rises from sea level and looks larger than it is. In their Falls Church, Virginia home they prominently displayed in their living room a large oil painting of the hills around Mill Valley.

#### **Harry Overstreet: The California Years**

Harry Allen Overstreet was born at 10 Ash Avenue in San Francisco on October 25, 1875. The San Francisco of his youth was not the charming cosmopolitan city that is celebrated in the popular songs of today. It was a rough western mining center that was generally described with good reason as one of the most corrupt cities in the country. The Work Projects Administration (WPA) Writers Program, in its book, San Francisco, wrote that “for 50 years San Francisco’s tenderloin had been a haven for criminals and prostitutes of every sort; and it had its own crude laws.”<sup>3</sup> (“Tenderloin” in this context is a city district notorious for its vice and graft.) Even by the time of the great earthquake of 1906, San Francisco was called “The Wickedest City in the World.”<sup>4</sup> In 1848, the year before the gold rush, San Francisco was a town of eight

hundred people. By 1880, it was the largest city by far in California. Its population was 274,000 and growing.

The Overstreet family had come to seek its fortune in the West from St. Louis, the proverbial “Gateway City.” Harry’s father was William Franklin Overstreet, born in the United States of Welsh background and heritage. His mother, Julie Detje, was born in the great port city on the North Sea, Hamburg, Germany. Harry’s father was a printer with the San Francisco Bulletin. There was a step-brother and a step-sister from his father’s first marriage which had ended with the death of his wife. An older brother, Lou, and Harry came from his father’s second marriage. Harry, as a young child, often would go to the printing shop where his father worked and help him count the inches of type that had been set – the determining factor in how much he was paid. Father and son would walk home through the streets and Harry had vivid memories of standing on barren lots listening to haranguing orators on soap boxes verbally attacking the Chinese.<sup>5</sup> These inflammatory attacks led to physical violence and the Chinese were “pelted with bricks as they ran up to Dupont Street, laundries were smashed.”<sup>6</sup> Oriental immigration and the violent anti-Chinese demonstrations in California led to the adoption of the anti-democratic Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 signed by President Chester A. Arthur when Harry was only seven years old. This was all to be an influence in developing Harry’s social consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

When Harry finished grammar school he felt that he should go to work to help with family expenses, but his father insisted that he attend high school. Instead of the vocational program toward which Harry was leaning, his father influenced him to take the classical program of Latin, Greek, and philosophy in order to prepare himself for attending the university. He planned to study literature and was influenced by the writings of Herbert Spencer, Emerson, Darwin and the novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of Mrs. Ward may seem a surprising one. Her novels were apparently short on style and character development but eloquent with regard to social commitment. In a letter written by Leo Tolstoy in 1891, Tolstoy allows that he was greatly influenced by the novels of Mrs. Ward.<sup>9</sup> If a mature Tolstoy could be influenced by these writings, it should not be a surprise that a teenage Harry Overstreet could also be moved.

After graduating from Vallejo High School, Harry entered the University of California at Berkeley, where he majored in philosophy. He was an excellent student and was greatly influenced by his philosophy professor, George Holmes Howison, and by the writings of Plato and Spinoza in philosophy; Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare in literature, and Leonardo, Beethoven and Brahms in art and music. We can surmise Professor Howison's importance to Harry by the fact that one of his three sons was given Howison as a middle name.

In Harry's sophomore year of college, his father was stricken with paralysis and, in order to meet expenses, Harry worked six hours a day in the college recorder's office. This delayed his degree until the year 1899. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received the Carnot Medal for excellence as a debater.

With the help and encouragement of his mentor, Dr. Howison, Harry received a fellowship for two years' advanced study in philosophy at Balliol College of Oxford University. He completed his work at Oxford in 1901 after writing his dissertation on "The Theory of Knowledge in Aristotle and Hegel."

Overstreet returned to the United States to teach philosophy at his alma mater for ten years (1901-1911). As a young professor at the University of California, he began to make a name for himself in the field of philosophy through his contributions to professional journals, his presentation of papers at meetings of the American Philosophical Association, and through lectures outside the university. His first lecture outside of the state of California was as the guest speaker for the graduation exercises of 1904 at the University of Idaho in Moscow. Among a number of monographs Harry wrote during this period were the "Principles of Truth Evaluation," (1904), "The American College Course" which appeared in the Education Review of February 1904, and "The Dialectic of Plotinus," (1909). Little light can be shed on the last paper except to note that Plotinus was a well known religious philosopher who lived in the third century A.D. but apparently had a wide ranging influence well into the seventeenth century. He was responsible for a revival of Plotinism in the Roman Empire. There are various aspects of Plotinism, but they all have in common a concern for the quality of human life from an ethical and sometimes religious point of view.

While at Berkeley Overstreet became interested in the growth of the American labor movement and the corresponding personnel movement which today has the more encompassing

title of human resources. He was especially interested in workmen's compensation and in labor education. The first grew directly out of an experience he had while enjoying his hobby of mountain climbing. Upon returning to a railroad station after a hike in the Santa Cruz mountains, he witnessed a Southern Pacific Railroad executive berating an employee who had lost a leg while on the job and was requesting assistance from the company to help retrain him for a position where he could still provide a useful service. The executive insisted that the company bore no responsibility for the employee's plight. To the employer, loyalty was a one-way street.

Harry returned to the campus determined to add the problems of the working man to his course in Social Philosophy. He assigned his students projects to go out into the world of work to find out what was going on. This interest in employee welfare and compensation and educational training led eventually to his broader concepts involving adult education. If we jump forward to that seminal 1936 book, Adult Education in Action, edited by Mary Ely, we have in the Prologue the eighteen articles of why adult education is needed. Included was "To prepare for new occupations" and "to open a new frontier."<sup>10</sup>

It is not totally by chance that the social anecdote about the injured worker involved a railroad company. Four railroad companies, including the Southern Pacific, "ran" California. They were known as "The Octopus" and the author Frank Norris wrote a damning novel about the struggle of the California ranchers with the railway corporations. "For a time Hearst's paper the San Francisco Examiner joined the people in their battle against the Big Four . . . the 'Monarch of Dailies' reported Southern Pacific train wrecks and cases of injustice, spreading the attack to include charges of tax-evasion, franchise-stealing, and legislative bribery."<sup>11</sup>

In 1907 Overstreet married Elsie L. Burr and the couple had three sons. The marriage ended in divorce after he left the university. In 1908, he was offered a faculty position at Yale University. Dr. Howison was justifiably reluctant to lose his brilliant young protégé and urged him to remain in California. Because of his fondness for Howison and because he appreciated Howison's guidance and assistance in his early years, Harry decided to remain, and did so until 1911.

### **The Years at City College of New York**

In 1911, John Finley, President of the College of the City of New York (CCNY.), and later, editor of The New York Times, offered Harry Overstreet a position as professor of philosophy and head of the department of philosophy and psychology. Overstreet had attended Oxford with Finley and had a very high regard for him. That, together with the challenge of the headship of the two disciplines led to his acceptance of the offer.<sup>12</sup> He had responsibility over the two separate faculties in this combined department, and the separation into two distinct departments as recommended by Overstreet, did not come about until he resigned from CCNY. He held this position until 1939 when he chose to retire from the world of academia in order to devote his full time to writing and lecturing with his wife Bonaro. He and Bonaro had by that time focused special attention on their interest in the field of adult education and were enthusiastic about spending full time in these endeavors.

To give some indication of how prestigious that position at CCNY had become, when Harry Overstreet resigned, a search committee offered the position to Bertrand Russell who was then perhaps the most famous of all living philosophers. Russell accepted the offer although political turmoil in New York City kept him from actually filling the position.

Under President Finley the mission of CCNY was redefined to nourish “the intellectual vitality and the social ambition of the Jewish Lower East Side,” and this made CCNY one of the nation’s most exciting colleges in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>13</sup> In this endeavor Finley had the complete support of President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University who was anxious to limit the number of Jewish students applying to Columbia. Butler instituted a new policy of “selective admission,” a concept that maintained that the sign of leadership “was the number of *qualified students turned away*.”<sup>14</sup> Columbia was not as blatant as Harvard in acknowledging a policy to limit Jewish enrollment. Still between 1917 and 1921, “the proportion of Jewish students at Columbia declined from 40 percent to 22 percent.”<sup>15</sup> At Harvard, President Lowell took the position that “the effort to keep down the percentage of Jewish students . . . had its origin in a wish to maintain harmony between gentile and Jew.”<sup>16</sup>

Though established in 1847, CCNY was in 1911 still a relatively small institution of 1800 students with a teaching staff of 120. In the prize winning history, World of Our Fathers, Irving Howe. devotes many pages to the need and thirst for education among the immigrants and the responsiveness to this need which resulted in the growth of CCNY into a major American

educational institution. He notes that the golden years of CCNY were between the two World Wars.<sup>17</sup> This was the period when Harry Overstreet headed CCNY's philosophy and psychology department, one of the most impressive of such departments in the nation.

Soon after Overstreet was made head of the department in 1911, he had his first major encounter with anti-semitism. The central figure involved was Morris Raphael Cohen who had been a brilliant philosophy student of William James at Harvard. Cohen had been hired to teach mathematics at City College, and had applied several times for transfer to the philosophy department. His transfer was always denied for a number of unspecified reasons although his credentials were unimpeachable.<sup>18</sup> Overstreet, as the new chairman of the department, reviewed a request for transfer from Cohen. Harry knew, of course, that Cohen was Jewish and had been born in Minsk, Russia. He set up an interview with Cohen. In a letter to Cohen's daughter, Overstreet recalled how he was conquered at that first interview. He wrote: "This was Spinoza sitting in front of me! I was to have Spinoza in my department."<sup>19</sup> Overstreet responded to the anti-semitism present at that time by persuading his superiors at City College to assign Cohen to his department. It was not an easy task as recounted by Rutkoff and Scott: "Only after the strenuous efforts of the head of the philosophy department, Harry Overstreet, did City College in 1911 allow Cohen to teach philosophy, the first Russian Jew to do so in the United States."<sup>20</sup> In later years Cohen wrote, "Overstreet courageously insisted that the College had sent for him and must meet his needs and that he needed me."<sup>21</sup>

The two men worked closely together for more than twenty-five years. Cohen was a scholar of legendary charisma who was highly thought of by Albert Einstein, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others.<sup>22</sup> Justice Felix Frankfurter, who had been his roommate at Harvard, stated that "all of us were students of Morris Cohen."<sup>23</sup> Cohen was an influential pioneer in introducing legal philosophy as a significant study to universities and law schools. He wrote, "Law without concepts or rational ideas, law that is not logical, is like pre-scientific medicine – a hodge podge of sense and superstition."<sup>24</sup> In his autobiography Cohen wrote that with "encouragement from my new department head, Professor Overstreet, I decided to try to bring together representatives of legal and philosophic thought . . . so was born the Conference on Legal and Social Philosophy. John Dewey was chairman, and I was secretary."<sup>25</sup>

Cohen joined Overstreet in lecturing at one of the major centers of continuing education, the New School for Social Research. Although he was an outstanding teacher, Cohen was, at times, aloof and disparaging to others. His temperament was unlike the easy, humorous manner of his friend and mentor, Harry Overstreet. Still, the relationship between the two was warm throughout Cohen's entire tenure at CCNY and beyond, as can be discerned by Cohen's touching letter of resignation to Overstreet in 1938 due to illness. He wrote:

You, especially, have been great-hearted and high-minded in your patience with my frailties of temper. And I can never forget that but for you I might not ever have had a chance to teach philosophy in my Alma Mater. . .

These are matters for which any verbal expression of gratitude must necessarily be inadequate.<sup>26</sup>

The Overstreets continued their friendship with the Cohen family, especially with Cohen's son, Felix, up to his untimely death. Felix Cohen was a noted legal philosopher in his own right, who in his writings paid homage to his teacher, Harry Overstreet.<sup>27</sup>

### **Developing Liberal Social Concerns**

During the years between 1911 and 1931, Harry Overstreet's concerns about social problems led to his personal involvement in the issues of the period. He believed that professors should not hide in the sanctuary of the classroom but should take part in improving social change. This led him, for example, to become an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1911 (the NAACP was formed in 1909), when it was not a popular thing for a white man to do. He became acquainted with such notable leaders in the fight for racial justice as James Weldon Johnson and Walter White. His concern about social welfare also involved him in the women's suffrage movement, and he spoke in its support and took part in the demonstrations and marches on its behalf through New York City streets. He was a pioneer in studying organizational behavior and principles of good personnel management along with Mary Follett and Eduard Lindeman. Prior to the first World War Overstreet worked with the League for Political Education which later became better known as Town Hall.

Harry became more and more interested in the potential growth of education for working people, and this led to a close association with the Labor Temple in New York City (where he taught for Will Durant) and the liberal educational policies of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union where he often taught classes on Sunday mornings. Gustav Beck, described the student body at the Labor Temple as "drawn from every nationality under the sun . . . a good

sixty percent of our students are workers; the remaining forty percent are of the small trader and shopkeeper class.”<sup>28</sup> Beck described a number of subjects which did not go over well “but the *piece de resistance* of our program is a detailed history of philosophy.”<sup>29</sup>

Not surprisingly, he also was influenced by his own students at CCNY. There was a large Jewish student body that was made up of first generation Americans, and he felt the impact of the tradition being passed down from the unschooled immigrants who placed a high premium on the value of an education in getting out of the ghetto.

Overstreet’s interest in the welfare of the “common man” never waned, and his concern that he not lose his roots as a working man nor his understanding of the “common touch” led him in the early 1920s to take a year’s leave of absence from the academic world in order to experience the problems of the everyday working world. He worked at a variety of jobs from the U. S. Rubber Company in Ohio, a shoe factory in Connecticut, a machine shop in California, and making sacks for the Hawaiian Sugar Company. These work experiences brought him to the conclusion that the problems in industrial relations were not due to the division of capital and labor but to the differences between the educated and the uneducated. He was reinforced in his belief that average men and women are truly interested in learning as much as possible about the world in which they live and in enriching their lives through knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

Overstreet’s conviction that educators should use their knowledge and skills to aid in the solution of social problems, together with his belief that educating adults can change their attitudes and thereby their behavior, led him to increase his efforts in his writing and lecturing outside the college.

### **Harry Overstreet As Writer**

Harry Overstreet’s early articles involved philosophical topics and it was not until he published Influencing Human Behavior that his writings dealt with the subject of adult education. His early writings often were on religious and political philosophy. It is interesting to note that as early as 1914 he wrote about “maturity” although it was not yet a fully developed concept. As his teaching of adults increased, his writing about adult education increased.

#### Articles

During these years Harry wrote many articles for such publications as The International Journal of Ethics, The Forum, and The Freeman. In a thought-provoking article written for The



Forum in October, 1914, entitled, “New Loyalties For Old Consolations,” he touched upon the idea of “maturity” – a concept which he was to develop extensively in later years. In the article he recalled vivid memories of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, in which people prayed to a personal deity. His own conception of prayer indicated that it is most powerful not in what it brings to us from without, but in its effects within: “what powers, efforts, aspirations it develops in us. . . The time has come for a moral and spiritual maturity.” He went on:

In light of spiritual maturity, the god of magic, the god of miraculous power, the god of loving protection, the god of all-seeing care – the Parent God – must give way to the God that is the very inner ideal life of ourselves, our own deep and abiding possibilities of being; the God *in us* that stimulates us to what is highest in value and power.<sup>31</sup>

In an article written for The Forum in July, 1915, entitled, “The Government of Tomorrow,” Overstreet wrote about the discouraging spectacle in American political life, “of legislative inefficiency.” In an uncharacteristic pessimistic view, he wrote: “Not only is the ordinary legislator a man of mediocre character, but the whole system in which he works is so organized as to call forth little save the most visionless political ability.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Overstreet, there was no representation in our present form of government for occupations that are fundamental to our modern life such as education, medicine, art, or housewifery. Our concept of representation by territory would be more efficient, he argued, if it were changed to representation by an “organic system of vocational groupings.” To the objection that occupational groupings would simply mean a battle of special interests, Professor Overstreet replied that, “matters, in this respect, could scarcely be worse than they now are,” and, in the second place, groups are not necessarily antagonistic with each other.<sup>33</sup> The article is an interesting concept in political philosophy but not fully developed. The primary flaw is the supposition that all people in a group such as medicine or housewives would share the same opinions.

In The Freeman in December, 1923, in an article entitled, “Can Philosophy Come Back” Overstreet wrote that we must distinguish between “knowledge” and “wisdom” and that the birthright of philosophy is the “love and pursuit of wisdom.” In order for there to be a rejuvenation of philosophy, there must be a return to the dictum of Socrates, “Know Thyself.”<sup>34</sup>

Books

Overstreet's first published book was Influencing Human Behavior which grew out of a lecture series given at the New School in 1924. It was when this book was published by W. W. Norton & Company in 1925 that Harry first introduced in writing the subject of adult education. The primary subject matter of the work was behaviorist psychology, but it is evident throughout the book that Overstreet had become imbued with the philosophy and promise of adult education. His foreword explained that the series at the New School for Social Research had come about through a petition from the students who desired to utilize the knowledge of modern psychology in their daily work and lives as "educators, social workers, lawyers, business men and women, and those describing themselves as having no vocation." Overstreet wrote that "from the outset. . . the course belonged to the students." They held discussions in small groups before the lectures; they cooperated in observations and experiments; and they reported their findings in the class. He noted there was "a large amount of valuable material contributed by the members of the class" and stated that the course was "one of the most stimulating" it had been his good fortune to give. It strengthened his belief in the great value "of serious and systematic study on the part of men and women who can contribute out of the maturity of their experiences."<sup>35</sup>

The book received a mixed review by Eduard C. Lindeman in the New Republic:

It is a book of many fascinations – chief of which is its experimental character. I have never read a book based upon lectures which so vividly transferred aspects of the classroom environment to the printed page. It is also a volume of many utilities, particularly to those who are striving to learn whether or not this so-called new psychology has any real meaning for the day-to-day lives of non-academic persons. And Professor Overstreet will, I prophecy, confound those who overpraise him by writing a better book.<sup>36</sup>

The book is divided into two parts. The first part discussed the more frequently used techniques for influencing human behavior. The second part dealt with the more difficult matters of what Overstreet called "actual psychological reconstruction." It was in this section that Overstreet considered various aspects of adult education as a problem solving method.

About two thirds of the way into the book there is a chapter which spelled out the problem of an "older generation" who are responsible for judging the affairs of a nation but have not kept pace with all of the intellectual and scientific changes that have taken place since they were in school. When people fall behind they are not happy about it but they do not blame themselves. They send out "angry cries to the impetuous new world to stop and behave itself and

settle down!”<sup>37</sup> Here Overstreet is so bold as to proclaim, “A new idea is beginning to gain ground, the idea of education as a process continuous throughout life.”<sup>38</sup> He expanded on the idea that we must devise means to give adult education a more pleasurable surrounding instead of maintaining the connotations of education as a severe enterprise. He was talking about ugly lecture rooms; bad seats; poor lighting and ventilation; the absence of pictures, music, and social life; among other disagreeable conditions. These are all handicaps to adult learning, and he contrasted this with the adult education movements in Denmark and Switzerland, where there was a concentrated effort to link intellectual work with pleasurable surroundings.

One fundamental concern of Overstreet was in the need to “build up habits of straight thinking.”<sup>39</sup> This, he believed, is not accomplished through specific techniques but by a fundamental change of attitude and habits. He stated that formal education had not yet caught the idea that we need to develop an attitude toward facts even more than a knowledge of facts. He prophesied, perhaps a bit too optimistically, that within a generation, “adult colleges will be found springing up all over the world.”<sup>40</sup> He forecast that adult education would have an effect of immeasurable importance in our social and ethical thinking.

In a chapter on “The Creative Mind,” Overstreet ventured a guess “that the next really significant civilizational advance will be in the direction of freeing societal relationships altogether of the ‘piety’ motive and making them subject to the same naturalistic inspection and experimental reorganization as now prevails in the physical and mechanical field.”<sup>41</sup> This was perhaps the core of the book, but there are other areas of interest as well. This includes Overstreet’s enthusiasm and optimistic forecast of the future importance of adult education. The fact that many of these predictions have not yet come to pass does not reflect upon the author so much as it does upon educators’ inability to fully develop the potential of the adult education movement. Although Overstreet developed his ideas more fully in later books, Influencing Human Behavior is an interesting early book in which the adult education concept is involved as a response to a large problem. The major philosophical influences on Overstreet with regard to adult education as exemplified in the book include the democratic ideals of Jefferson, the transcendental philosophical thought of Emerson, the pragmatic ideas of Williams James and, most definitely the education concepts of John Dewey on continuing learning through life. He

also paid homage to the Danish model of adult education which he expanded upon in his next book, About Ourselves, published in 1927.

In this second book, Overstreet acknowledges the major influence of Bishop Grundtvig, the great Danish educator whom he refers to as “the prophet of adult education.” Overstreet wrote:

When Grundtvig, the prophet of adult education, thought out and established his first Folk High School in Denmark, trying thus to help solve Denmark’s difficult problem, he brought something novel into existence. He broke through the closed circle of that to which his people had become habituated. He extended the boundary of the actual and widened the area of men’s functioning.<sup>42</sup>

Overstreet also cited and made much of Thorndike’s psychological experiments with two different age groups – age twenty-two and forty-four. The major conclusion of the experiments was that overall older persons learned with only a little less facility than younger people. Indeed, in some experiments, adults learned even faster than youth. Overstreet wrote:

So much for the adage you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. . . This has great implications for all education – it means that children can be given more breathing space in growing up and there is no psychological need for cramming the younger years with unwished-for information.<sup>43</sup> Again Overstreet probed the concept of maturity and its specific relationship to adult education:

It is when life is relatively matured, when there has been some gaining of experience, that the mind must be permitted freely and quite without fears to take stock of its world; to rethink it, and perhaps even go some ways toward reshaping it. That, one suspects, will eventually be the chief objective of adult education, once adult education really becomes aware of its unique function in the whole scheme of life.<sup>44</sup>

Harry Overstreet objected to passivity in educational methodology. “Listening to lectures without ‘doing something’ no matter how small is not really education. Lectures must be supplemented with vigorous discussion, group inquiry, or group problem solving.”<sup>45</sup>

About Ourselves received praise in a review in the *Bookman* of March, 1928. H. D. House wrote:

From whatever angle viewed, a most excellent contribution to general enlightenment. In lucidity of exposition, happiness of style, liberatory philosophy of life, it compares favorably with the illuminatory popular works of Bertrand Russell. No service could be more useful these pathologic days than to utilize the momentous findings of abnormal psychology for the re-education of normal

men and women. Overstreet achieves that task beautifully.<sup>46</sup>

His next book was The Enduring Quest in 1931, which emanated from a series of lectures given at the New School for Social Research entitled, “Life and Destiny.” In The Enduring Quest he wrote, “Education is undergoing important transformations. From a relatively external process of pouring in facts it is increasingly becoming a process of evoking the deeper, generative possibilities that lie within the individual.”<sup>47</sup>

In the Survey Graphic Magazine of June, 1931, there appeared an interesting review of three books: The Religion of Man, by the Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore; Cosmic Religion, by Albert Einstein; and The Enduring Quest by Harry Overstreet. Three books, as the reviewer put it, to help the ordinary man in the street catch up with the world of ideas. He wrote:

By every standard, Overstreet is the best of the three. He gives a running survey of the progress of scientific thought and the resulting changes in religious and philosophical thought. . . You ought to read these books. At least you ought to read Overstreet. It might help you from becoming or remaining a religious anachronism.<sup>48</sup>

The book’s title refers to a search through all of the upheavals of modern science for a philosophy of life. It is nothing less than a search for God and, as such, it is perhaps doomed to be just that – a quest. There is the statement, “To love God is to love the process of bringing life into a more vital integration.”<sup>49</sup> Overstreet concludes almost mystically, “The universe, as we now seem to see, is life of our life, spirit of our spirit. It is in us and of us.”<sup>50</sup>

Incidentally, in an earlier chapter Overstreet wrote of the uncommon heroism of those who have achieved greatness such as Socrates, Christ, and Giordano Bruno. He also included his mentor, George Holmes Howison, “a great teacher of philosophy” who was meant for the monastery but found it “enslaved by a crude and fanatical religion.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Overstreet As Lecturer**

During this period, Harry Overstreet was becoming noted for his ability on the platform. He was in great demand everywhere as evidenced by the records of his heavy travel and lecture schedule. Part of his appeal was that he combined seriousness with humor and scholarship with an easy simplicity in presentation. His was a rare combination of philosophical, psychological and educational insight. His national fame as a lecturer took him everywhere. He spoke not only to educated intellectuals but also to people with little formal schooling. He spoke to prisoners at

San Quentin, to personnel managers in New Jersey, to city planners in Texas. He used the breaks between semesters and vacation periods to lecture throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, and Kentucky for the Chicago Adult Education Council. And, he spoke to adult learners in his own “backyard” in New York City.

One of the major events in the adult education movement took place in New York City in 1919 with the establishment of the New School for Social Research. It was started by such distinguished scholars as Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, Thorstein Veblen and Alvin Johnson. Early in its establishment, Harry Overstreet served on the Board of Directors, and from 1924 on, he was a regular and popular lecturer at the New School. This university, established for adults, began with seven course offerings in its initial semester and today is going strong with more than twelve hundred courses from which to choose. Some of the eminent men and women who have given courses at the New School include John Dewey, Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Frank Lloyd Wright, Aaron Copland, Martha Graham, Alfred Adler, T. S. Eliot and John Maynard Keynes, to name only a few.<sup>52</sup> It was a course Harry Overstreet taught to the adult students at the New School which led to his increased commitment to adult education.

### **Overstreet As Teacher**

First and foremost, during this period Harry Overstreet was a teacher. He taught not only during the academic year but during the vacation period as well. During the summers, Harry often returned to California to teach. He was a frequent teacher at Mills College in Oakland where he spent part of each summer of 1926, 1927, and 1928 participating in the college’s special summer programs for adults. The director of the program at Mills was Ethel Richardson Allen who characterized her first summer program as an “adult kindergarten.” In subsequent years Harry often served as the adult education coordinator or director and brought outstanding teachers from around the country to his popular summer sessions. For example, in 1928 he directed a three week adult education summer school at Mills College which the flyer termed a “Vacation With Education.” It described the program as “a summer school for adults freed from all the requirements and burdens of credit granting and examinations.”<sup>53</sup> The general course subject was: “Is there social progress in the United States?” The faculty included the internationally famous anthropologist from Columbia University, Dr. Franz Boas, and distinguished professors from Harvard, University of Wisconsin, UCLA, University at

Gothenburg, Sweden, and others. All for only twelve dollars for the course and sixty-five dollars for room and board for the three weeks.

Harry Overstreet wrote that “the best growing period in my own life as a teacher came when I was given the opportunity to teach men and women. . . .A great deal has been said of the value of adult education to the adults that are taught. I should like rather to emphasize its value to those who do the teaching.”<sup>54</sup>

It was during this summer of 1928 when Harry was teaching a course for his alma mater, the University of California at Berkeley, that one of his students brought a young school teacher friend to visit the class. Her questions and comments after the class period were intelligent and perceptive, and the school teacher and college professor continued their discussion for several hours. Bonaro Wilkinson’s warmth, wit, keen mind, and appreciation and familiarity with poetry struck a responsive chord in Harry Overstreet’s awareness, and he became both friend and mentor to her during the next four years. From the summer of 1928 until the summer of 1932, their friendship and mutual respect grew into a mutuality of purpose and a deep and abiding love.

### **Bonaro Wilkinson Prior to Her Marriage**

Alice Bonaro Wilkinson was born in the very small town of Geyserville, California on October 30, 1902, the year of Harry Overstreet’s first published article. Her parents had a small fruit farm in the fertile Santa Rosa Valley north of San Francisco. Her father, Edward Wilkinson, was born in England and had come to California from Canada as a homesteader in 1897. The distinctive name, Bonaro, by which she was called and known all of her adult life, emanates from her mother’s family name of Bonar. Her mother was related to Horatio Bonar, a Scottish Presbyterian minister whose hymns and religious tracts were popular during the nineteenth century. The influence of Edward and Margaret Elizabeth Wilkinson in shaping the ideas and ideals of Bonaro cannot be overstated. The family was of extremely modest means, but they insisted on providing their three children, of which Bonaro was the youngest, with an educational background that included a knowledge of the Bible, classical literature, and the United States Constitution. Both parents read aloud to the children daily and encouraged them to memorize favorite lines of poetry and literature. Even before she began her formal education Bonaro began her writing career. She enjoyed writing in her “daily journal” in which she recorded not only the family’s daily events, the weather, local births and deaths, and family meals but also included

newspaper clippings, post cards, label from cans, pressed wild flowers and more. She commented on events and frequently wrote little poems about them. She drew pictures of wildflowers and wildlife and illustrated events with her own drawings. Her father built her a desk out of fruit crates and made a writing nook in the garret. Some of her early efforts in poetry were published in the local newspaper. It was a happy childhood not only for Bonaro but also for her brother Clarendon who was five years older and for her sister Muriel who was three years older. Bonaro and her siblings worked along side their parents in planting, weeding, and harvesting the fruit and nuts. It was a rural upbringing from which countless anecdotes and recollections would be brought forth on lecture platforms throughout the world in order to emphasize a psychological or philosophical point of view.

The town of Geyserville is north of Santa Rosa, and even though it lies on Route 101, it had fewer than 250 inhabitants even as late as 1960. Though geographically not far from San Francisco, the tempo of life during Bonaro's youth was far distant from life on the Barbary Coast. It is an area of rich soil and gentle climate that is amenable to the raising of apples, peaches, plums, prunes, grapes and other fruits and nuts. It was this valley that Luther Burbank chose for his experiments in plant breeding that were to become famous throughout the world.

The town comes by its name honestly enough as it sits about ten miles south of an area known as the Geysers. There are some thirty-five mineral springs bubbling away and regularly shooting jets of steam high in the air. The most famous of the springs is known as "The Devil's Inkstand" because it emits a black jet of water which has been known to be used for writing. Because of the reported therapeutic qualities of the springs, a hotel was built in the area as early as 1851.<sup>55</sup>

The importance of education to the Wilkinsons was evidenced by her father's efforts to gain a high school for the town. He, along with neighbors, organized town meetings which led to the passage of a local levy and the building of the Geyserville Union High School from which Bonaro graduated in 1920 as the valedictorian of her class. This omen of things to come should perhaps be tempered by the fact that she represented one-third of her graduating class. Earlier, during her high school years, she had become severely ill as one of the victims of the international flu epidemic of 1918. She recalled the literal stench of that epidemic, stating that "one couldn't stand one's own odor."<sup>56</sup>



In order to earn money to attend the University of California, Bonaro worked for one year after high school in a nearby prune packing plant, a job she said she “thoroughly enjoyed.” During this year she was promoted from the assembly line to working with adding machines in the accounting department, but admits to feeling more at ease with the packing of fruit on the assembly line than with the manipulation of figures. The assembly line had afforded her the opportunity to create poetry and to recite mentally the large amount of poetry she had committed to memory. She preferred the world of ideas to the world of figures.

After the year of employment, Bonaro enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley from which she graduated with a Phi Beta Kappa key and a major in Spanish in 1925. While a student, she worked as a waitress in a local tearoom to meet living expenses. During the 1925-26 academic year she stayed at the University to pursue graduate work, do practice teaching, and earn her state teacher’s certificate.

#### Bonaro as Teacher, Student, and Author

In the autumn of 1926 Bonaro accepted employment in the Kern County High School in Bakersfield, California. Bakersfield is at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, and the summer temperatures often go well over one hundred degrees. By the time Bonaro began teaching there, Bakersfield had become a booming oil-producing and refining center. Bonaro taught six classes her first year at the high school, three in English and three in Spanish. She continued to teach at this school from September 1926 until June 1929.

It was during the summer of 1928 that Bonaro attended a lecture at the University of California in Berkeley which was part of a course taught by a visiting professor from New York City, Harry A. Overstreet. This was an event which was to have considerable significance in her future, for the friendship begun that day was to continue during Bonaro’s study in New York City over the next several years.

Bonaro left California for the East in the summer of 1929 in order to study toward a master’s degree in psychology at Columbia University under William Kilpatrick and Harold Rugg, leading progressive educators of that period. Kilpatrick was also an adult educator who contributed articles to the Journal of Adult Education. In February of 1929 the publication contained an article of his which argued for a broad definition of adult education and indicated

that “the outlook and opportunity are greater than most of us have dared to entertain even in imagination.”<sup>57</sup>

Another major influence on Bonaro’s philosophical thought was a teacher she greatly admired, Lita Hollingworth, who taught a course in adolescent psychology at Columbia. Bonaro continued a lifelong interest in the physical and psychological welfare of children and was a regular contributor for many years to the National Parent-Teacher magazine. Bonaro also attended modern art and drama appreciation classes at the New School for Social Research in the autumn of 1929.

The summer of 1930 was one that was never to be forgotten, for it was that year that the young aspiring poet met and discussed poetry with Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg. These men were at the height of their poetic power and yet were very different types of personalities. Although she admired them all immensely and maintained her friendships with all of them throughout their lives, there was always a personal predilection for the painfully shy but graciously kind Robinson. Bonaro often quoted lines from his poems in lectures and used them frequently in her books.

Bonaro returned to Bakersfield in 1930 to teach English literature at the Kern County Junior College until 1932. During her tenure at the junior college, Bonaro worked on her first published book, The Poetic Way of Release. It was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1931 and included an introduction by an already famous philosopher and lecturer, and by now her close friend, Harry A. Overstreet.<sup>58</sup>

The book is a contribution to the understanding of the place of poetry in the modern world. Bonaro placed it alongside science and showed how “both satisfy human demands.”<sup>59</sup> On the one hand science encourages one to investigate the world and help to control it. On the other hand, “poetry satisfies his need for meaning and beauty.”<sup>60</sup>

The book received fairly good reviews including one by William Rose Benet in the Saturday Review of Literature. He wrote that in the chapter on “venturing into poetry,” Miss Wilkinson has done “something that should be most enlightening to the layman – she shows us the poet at work, struggling with his material, substituting this word for that, shifting this or that phrase, in short, actually working at his trade.”<sup>61</sup>

Poetry was to remain a great love for Bonaro to the end of her days and she could quote lines from a seemingly inexhaustible memory bank to make a relevant observation when on the platform or in conversation. When she was nearing the end of her life, she took comfort in reciting, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” by William Butler Yeats which begins, “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.” She often greeted me with a smile and those lines, expecting me to continue them with her. For Bonaro, poetry underscored the meaning of life and while death was inevitable, life was not futile. She wrote about poetry that through it “there are ways in which man can justify the universe to himself, and himself to the universe.”<sup>62</sup>

#### Bonaro’s Introduction to Adult Education

Bonaro Wilkinson’s earliest specific involvement with the education of adults came during this time at Kern County Junior College when she became a teacher and group leader for a home study course in literature. This was put together by the Universal Library and was a forerunner to the later popular “Great Books” program.

Her absorption with “adult education” became greater in January, 1932, when David MacKaye, a public school educator, invited Bonaro to his Evening and Weekend School at Tulare, California to speak and discuss a subject dear to her heart, “The Enjoyment of Poetry.” (Fifty years later, Bonaro’s repertoire of subject matter had broadened to literally dozens of areas, yet one of them which she continued to teach was, “The Enjoyment of Poetry,” at the University of Virginia’s continuing education center in Northern Virginia.) David MacKaye was an innovator in the field of adult education. He initiated the idea of taking adult education to the people. He believed that most people would not willingly go someplace for educational reasons if they would not go there for any other everyday reason. He had no trust in marble halls and, as Bonaro Overstreet put it, MacKaye was of the opinion that the “architecture of places like public libraries made an awful lot of people feel that they had nothing to wear.”<sup>63</sup> MacKaye brought classes to where people were meeting together for other purposes – stores, granges, and public schools. He also scheduled classes on weekends when the farmers and workers would not be as tired as on weekdays after toiling in the vineyards of surrounding Tulare. Bonaro was enchanted with the idea and with her experiences there, and for many years she maintained a warm relationship with MacKaye and his wife. He went on to become the head of the evening school

of adult education at San Jose during the 1930s and contributed articles to the Journal of Adult Education.

In the summer of 1932, Bonaro Wilkinson again traveled to the East to continue her graduate studies at Columbia University. The Bakersfield Californian reported that Miss Wilkinson, the author of The Poetic Way of Release, and a teacher at the junior college, had left “to study for her A.M. degree at the summer session of Columbia University,”<sup>64</sup> but the departure was to lead to more than a summer of study, for Bonaro Wilkinson and Harry Allen Overstreet were married on August 23, 1932, in New York City. From that time on, theirs became a joint contribution to American culture and to adult education that was to be known as the work of the Overstreets.

This chapter has shown us the lives of Harry Overstreet and Bonaro Wilkinson prior to their marriage in New York City in 1932. Both were native Californians and while they could never be accused of being provincial there was always a special attachment to California for both of them. For many years the area near Sausalito and Mill Valley was their winter home. There was a twenty-seven year age difference between them and Harry had already made a name for himself in the fields of philosophy, psychology and adult education by the time they met. But the difference in age was never a problem to either of them. Bonaro brought to their relationship a wonderful poetic sensitivity and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge on a variety of subjects. She had graduated from the University of California as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and had studied toward a Masters Degree in psychology at Columbia University prior to their marriage. She had become involved with adult education while a teacher at Kern County Junior college through the tutelage of David MacKaye who became the head of the evening school of adult education at San Jose. Her interest in it never wavered. For Harry the years at the City College of New York were significant. The college was full of intellectual vitality in large measure due to the philosophy and psychology department. Harry was instrumental in bringing to the department Morris Cohen who was destined to be one of the country’s leading philosophers. The twenty-five year relationship with the legendary Morris Cohen played an important part in Harry Overstreet’s developing insights. During this period Harry was also increasing the amount of time and effort spent in the teaching of adults.

Harry and Bonaro shared a social philosophy that stressed liberal causes with regard to race, religion, women's suffrage, and equal justice under the law. They both possessed a deep faith in democratic principles. They also had a deep conviction that it was the duty of educators to convince adults that they could solve social problems and to help them gain the knowledge they needed to do so. They were to spend the next forty years working to achieve that goal.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Flyleaf inscription by Robert Frost, on A Further Range (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1936). A reference to California was made in an earlier inscription on the 1931 edition of Collected Poems which reads, "To Bonaro Wilkinson, my California friends."
- <sup>2</sup> John Gunther, Inside U.S.A. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 16.
- <sup>3</sup> Wallace Boyle, Charles Coppock, S. S. Greenleaf, and Dorothy Wagner, eds. San Francisco. Compiled by workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in Northern California (New York: Hastings House, 1940), 106.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.
- <sup>5</sup> Harold L. Wattel, "Harry Overstreet," Dictionary of American Biography, Sppl. 8, (New York: Charles Scribner and Son, 1971), 487-490, and conversations with Harry and Bonaro Overstreet at home in Falls Church, VA., 1967-70.
- <sup>6</sup> Felix Riesenber, Jr., Golden Gate (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 197.
- <sup>7</sup> "Harry A. Overstreet," Current Biography, 1950. (New York: H. S. Wilson Co., 1950), 433-435.
- <sup>8</sup> Wattel, 488.
- <sup>9</sup> Leo Tolstoy, in Tolstoy's Letters, ed. R. F. Christian (New York: Scribner, 19
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Ely, ed., Adult Education in Action (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1936), 3-51.
- <sup>11</sup> Riesenber, Golden Gate, 199.
- <sup>12</sup> Conversations with Harry and Bonaro Overstreet at home in Falls Church, VA., 1967-1970 and with Bonaro Overstreet, 1979.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas Bender, New York Intellect (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 291.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 412.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.
- <sup>18</sup> P. M. Rutkoff and W. B. Scott, New School: A History of the New School for Social Research (New York: Free Press, 1986), 78.
- <sup>19</sup> Leonora Cohen Rosenfeld, Portrait of a Philosopher: Morris R. Cohen in Life and Letters (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p.93.
- <sup>20</sup> Rutkoff and Scott, New School, 78.
- <sup>21</sup> Morris R. Cohen, A Dreamer's Journey (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1949), 139.
- <sup>22</sup> Ronald W. Clark, Einstein: The Life and Times (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1971), 32, 42, 389, and Morris R. Cohen, A Dreamer's Journey, 148-149.
- <sup>23</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 116.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Edwards, Ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, II (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 128-129.
- <sup>25</sup> Cohen, A Dreamer's Journey, 140.
- <sup>26</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 106.
- <sup>27</sup> Lucy Kramer Cohen, ed., The Legal Conscience: Selected Papers of Felix S. Cohen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. viii

- <sup>28</sup> Mary Ely, ed., Adult Education in Action, 344.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.
- <sup>30</sup> Wattel, Dictionary of American Biography, 487, and conversations with Harry and Bonaro Overstreet at home in Falls Church, 1967-1970.
- <sup>31</sup> Harry Overstreet, "New Loyalties for Old Consolations," The Forum, 52. No. 4, October, 1914, p. 512.
- <sup>32</sup> Harry Overstreet, "The Government of Tomorrow," The Forum, 54. No. 1, July, 1915, p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> Harry Overstreet, "Can Philosophy Come Back?" The Freeman, 8, (1923), 324.
- <sup>35</sup> Harry Overstreet, Influencing Human Behavior, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), p viii..
- <sup>36</sup> Eduard C. Lindeman, Book Review of Influencing Human Behavior in New Republic, May 26, 1926.
- <sup>37</sup> Harry Overstreet, Influencing Human Behavior, 196.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.
- <sup>42</sup> Harry Overstreet, About Ourselves, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1927), p. 231.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.
- <sup>46</sup> H. D. House, Book Review of About Ourselves in Bookman, March, 1926, clipping in Overstreet Personal Files.
- <sup>47</sup> Harry Overstreet, The Enduring Quest, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 1931, 272.
- <sup>48</sup> Book Reviews, Survey Graphic Magazine, June, 1931, Overstreet Personal Files.
- <sup>49</sup> Harry Overstreet, The Enduring Quest, 280.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.
- <sup>52</sup> New School for Social Research flyer, (New York: n.d., n. p.)
- <sup>53</sup> Flyer announcing Mills College, "Vacation With Education, Summer, 1928, Overstreet Personal Files.
- <sup>54</sup> Mary Ely., ed., Adult Education in Action, 45-46.
- <sup>55</sup> Harry Hansen, ed., California: A Guide to the Golden State rev. ed., (New York: Hastings House, 1967) first published in 1939, California: Federal Writers Project of the W.P.A.
- <sup>56</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, personal interview, 1 Feb., 1980.
- <sup>57</sup> William Kilpatrick, "The Task Confronting Adult Education: How Shall We Conceive It?" The Journal of Adult Education, (February 1929), 403.
- <sup>58</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, Introduction to The Poetic Way of Release by Bonaro Overstreet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931) i-iii.
- <sup>59</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, Poetic Way of Release, 139.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> William R. Benet, Book Review of The Poetic Way of Release, in The Saturday Review of Literature, (November 7, 1931), 264.
- <sup>62</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, Poetic Way of Release, 365.

- <sup>63</sup> Conversation with Bonaro Overstreet in her home in Falls Church, VA., February 1980.
- <sup>64</sup> Bakersfield Californian, 20 June 1932, clipping in the Overstreet Personal Files.