

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE OVERSTREETS DURING THE DEPRESSION YEARS: 1932-39

The early years of Bonaro and Harry Overstreet's marriage coincided with the years of the great economic depression in the United States. These were trying times for everyone. The collapse of the American and the world economy had a devastating impact at home and on democratic institutions in other parts of the globe. In the United States, manufacturers were shutting down plants and production output slid back to 1916 levels. Grim statistics about the collapse of banking institutions and thirteen million people unemployed in 1933 gave no hint of the enormity of human suffering throughout the country and in all occupational areas. Historians have generally agreed that during this period the nation faced its greatest crisis since the Civil War. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his second inaugural address said, "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."<sup>1</sup> In addition to the hunger for food and shelter, there was a hunger for answers to social, economic and political questions. What had gone wrong and why?

While their own social consciousness was being honed into even sharper focus during this period, the Overstreets maintained a remarkably bold schedule involving the writing of books and articles, teaching and lecturing. In this seven year period, Harry Overstreet wrote four books, Bonaro wrote two and they ventured into their first collaborative book, Town Meeting Comes To Town. In addition, there were at least twenty-seven articles published by Harry, seven by Bonaro, two that were joint efforts, and also the many lectures.

Although Harry's responsibilities as department chair and teaching professor at CCNY took precedence during these years, both his and Bonaro's interest and commitment to adult education increased substantially through their involvement with the American Association for Adult Education and the Boston Center for Adult Education. Both of the Overstreets contributed articles to the Journal for Adult Education and both participated in adult education workshops and meetings. It was at the 1932 annual meeting of the AAAE that a discussion method created by Harry was introduced which, in itself, would be reason enough to remember Harry Overstreet as a significant contributor to adult education.

### **Harry Overstreet Creates the Panel as a Discussion Method**

The concept of the panel is so pervasive in our lives today that it would appear it has always been with us. It would be difficult to find a conference today in any business or profession that does not make use of the panel method. This is true throughout the world. For example, at a recent UNESCO conference on adult education, some thirty-three working groups involved in ten major adult education themes were all organized into panels with a moderator.<sup>2</sup> And it is Harry Overstreet who created the panel method of discussion.

In The Principles and Methods of Discussion, Professors James H. McBurney and Kenneth G. Hance attribute the origin of the panel method to Harry Overstreet. They described it as “a method of discussion in which a few persons (the panel) carry on a discussion in front of an audience, which usually participates later in a question-and-answer period.”<sup>3</sup> They emphasized that the panel members are expected to use the problem solving method and that the audience is to direct questions at the panel only after a definite pattern of ideas has been developed.<sup>4</sup> The authors set the date for the beginning of the panel as 1931.

There seems to be a little controversy as to the beginning date, although Harry Overstreet is credited with originating the method in any case. In 1933, Morse Adams Cartwright, wrote, “The panel seems first to have been used during the summer session of 1929 at the University of California in Berkeley under the direction of Harry A. Overstreet.”<sup>5</sup> Cartwright goes on to say that in the beginning this new discussion method had no name. At the 1932 annual meeting of the American Association for Adult Education, the term “panel discussion” was first introduced, and it soon achieved a popular general use. Cartwright’s information is corroborated by a study prepared by Thomas Fansler (1934) for the AAAE. He wrote that the panel discussion “originated by Professor Harry A. Overstreet and first popularized by the American Association for Adult Education at its annual conference in Buffalo in 1932, is a particularly happy invention for audience participation.”<sup>6</sup>

The panel method became popular on such radio programs as The University of Chicago Round Table, and in the educational field it became a regular classroom method. McBurney and Hance wrote that while a lecture may be more orderly and compact, “the panel discussion insures breadth and variety, spontaneity, and freedom.”<sup>7</sup> To Overstreet, the important value of the

method lay in the fact that the audience was actively witnessing and being admitted to thought-in-process.

Harry wrote a number of articles on the successful use of the method and the reason for creating it. In a 1932 article on “The Panel As A Problem-Solving Device” he stated, “We had had enough of being lectured to.” This was somewhat ironic coming from one of the most persuasive and appealing of modern day lecturers. But Harry had often shared the platform with speakers who had monopolized a program with exhausting speeches and total disregard for others. And he firmly believed that “give and take” discussions were more interesting and better received. In the article he recounted an experience at the University of California at Los Angeles where he was the discussion leader for four forums dealing with public affairs. The forums were advertised not as lectures but as discussions, and only one rule was to be observed, “namely, that no speeches were to be made.” The panelists were to consider the problem “and to converse informally among themselves.” At the end of an hour, the audience was permitted to join in the discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Harry also was a firm believer that the panel form of discussion was best suited to a democratic citizenship and a cooperative society. In an article he wrote for Occupations in 1935 he stated that the panel was a method by which a democratic government (or any democratic institution) could come to grips with essential problems.<sup>9</sup> The Overstreets devoted a large portion of their professional lives to the concept that democracy requires a mature citizenry – and this means that people must be “capable of thinking together.” Harry viewed the panel method as an attempt at group thinking which helps meet the admonition from Isaiah, “Come let us reason together.”

Overstreet believed certain characteristics were important to the success of a panel discussion. It should consist of no more than eight people on a platform, behind a table (or several tables), facing an audience. The key individual of the panel is the chairman (chairperson had not yet come into vogue) whose primary function was to keep the discussion within the areas of relevancy. The chairman should possess certain leadership qualities since the success or failure of the panel often rests on his ability.

The chairman must have the imagination to foresee difficulties involving physical arrangement, must be sensitive to detect when personal antagonism is destroying valuable

discussion, and must be quick to restore peace. Of utmost importance, the chairman must maintain his own self-control so as to “never allow himself to take sides or inject his own personal opinions.” This could be an unfair use of the position. The spontaneity of the panel is part of its intellectual value. When this works well, the audience has the “rare experience of witnessing in operation the fine art of cooperative thinking.”

After an hour or so, the discussion should be thrown open to the audience. Again, when it works well, there is a swift response from the audience and opinions come “like rifle cracks” from all parts of the room.<sup>10</sup>

### **Overstreet Views the Country’s Future**

The title of Harry Overstreet’s new book, We Move in New Directions, was certainly in keeping with the time of its publication in 1933. Franklin D. Roosevelt had campaigned and been elected President in 1932 promising to reform the economic structure of the country and to provide a “New Deal” to alleviate the national emergency of the great depression. Overstreet’s book, which was based on an adult education course given at the New School, seemed to be in tune with the times. Overstreet had often been asked, especially with the beginning of the depression, “Is there going to be a revolution?” This book was his answer to that question.

He did not believe that this country would experience a revolution in the traditional sense. It was his opinion that the country was passing through a period of three concurrent revolutions: economic, cultural, and spiritual. He believed that the nation could “expect an order of life greatly different from that to which we have grown accustomed.”<sup>11</sup> He believed that we were in a condition of readiness to accept new ideas and to discard the old conceptions which were inadequate, misdirected or even destructive of human values.

The book certainly noted the economic problems of the times, and the first part was fittingly entitled, “Toward Economic Self-Respect.” The opening sentence found Harry Overstreet in the untypical position of being on the attack. “The profit-economy is fated to pass away,” he wrote, and this is followed by sharp assertions that it is evident that (a) the basic motivation is too low, (b) the system is wasteful and (c) it is inherently self-contradictory.<sup>12</sup>

Overstreet stated that the beneficent Providence that Adam Smith talked about in “leaving business alone,” was “conspicuous by its absence.” In place of what Overstreet called “the

confusion of an irresponsible competitiveness” was the need for “responsible cooperation.”<sup>13</sup> Overstreet clearly supported the liberal ideas of the period.

Still, looking back with 20/20 hindsight, the reader cannot help but be disappointed in the focus of the book. One looks in vain for any mention of New Deal legislation and the only reference to FDR involved some ideas he had expressed with regard to wastefulness in government administration. This omission might be explained because the book was published during Roosevelt’s first year in office except that FDR had expounded his views in his campaign and in his early “fireside chats.” Also, major legislation was passed within the first three months. The historians Morison and Commager wrote, “With a rationalized philosophy of government, Roosevelt combined qualities that perhaps no President since Jefferson possessed in equally happy proportions . . . Within a year Congress, under the relentless leadership of the President, had enacted a far-reaching program of social and economic legislation.”<sup>14</sup> Had Overstreet wished to include more of this in the book, it would not have been particularly unusual for the publication date to be pushed back.

On the economic front, Robert L. Heilbroner and Lester Thurow noted that “most of the apparatus of microeconomic analysis stems essentially from the work of John Maynard Keynes during the Great Depression. At that time his proposals were regarded as extremely daring, but they have become increasingly accepted by both major political parties.”<sup>15</sup> Keynes’ remedy for the depression was to encourage investment activity but when private business was unable to expand he thought that the government should take up the slack and stimulate the nation’s buying power. When Keynes book, The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money was published in 1936 it “was not so much a new and radical program as a defense of a course of action which was already being applied” by the New Deal.<sup>16</sup>

The reader would look in vain for any mention of Keynes in Overstreet’s book in spite of his prominence during the period and Roosevelt’s espousal of Keynesian economic theories during his campaigning. Harry does fully discuss the economic theories of J. O. Hobson who wished to humanize traditional economic definitions of utility, cost and value. But from an economic viewpoint, Harry Overstreet seemed unaware that he was in the midst of a major upheaval in America. It’s true this wasn’t a revolution, but it was a change. As Morison and Commager noted, “Actually the New Deal seemed revolutionary not because it introduced

fundamental changes into American politics or economy, but because it was carried through with such breathless rapidity.”<sup>17</sup>

In spite of its shortcomings, the book did recognize the need for an active adult education movement. Overstreet never once lost sight of that objective and was one of the earliest and strongest voices in support of the young movement. Adult education had not received widespread attention and had not succeeded in being an important part of a community’s educational planning. Harry noted with disapproval that “it is a rare community that gives (the adult) the opportunity to pursue the further cultivation of his mind.”<sup>18</sup> This was not a new theme for the Overstreets who were early advocates of the importance of adult education to the future welfare of the country. It was a theme which he had stressed before and would continue to stress throughout his life. He rarely allowed any of his books to be published without reemphasizing this basic belief in adult education and his conviction that “nothing very far-reaching can be achieved in the way of world enlightenment or even of personal or group understanding until our civilization deliberately sets itself to the education of adults.”<sup>19</sup>

While decrying the lack of adult education opportunities in most of the cities and towns in the United States, Overstreet in this book does single out some communities which had taken the initiative to sponsor lectures, discussion groups and similar activities. In Des Moines, Iowa he notes that with the assistance of the American Association for Adult Education there had been successful efforts to organize forums on vital and current topics. Similar successes were achieved in the state of Delaware. As he did in earlier works, Overstreet wrote of the great influence of Bishop Grundtvig in Denmark whom he described as “a kind of Danish Socrates.”<sup>20</sup> Overstreet pointed out that it was Grundtvig’s adult educational methods and philosophic vision that helped to regenerate Denmark from a depressed and demoralized country into an effective modern community.<sup>21</sup>

While the book is inadequate in some ways, it is important in terms of the ideals Overstreet presented. He concluded We Move in New Directions with an eloquent and remarkably farsighted description of what American ideals have set out to achieve and the ways in which many of them have not been achieved. He noted there was a certain hypocrisy in our pointing with pride to the ideals upon which our nation had been founded and to which we

verbally subscribe when it was evident that our actions have not lived up to those ideals. He listed them for consideration:

The Pilgrim Fathers had a sense of spiritual freedom—for themselves. They could not sense a generous freedom for all. Our political forefathers could conceive a democracy of the ballot; they could not yet conceive of that equality of life-opportunity without which the equality of the ballot becomes a farce. The founders of our schools could conceive of a battle against illiteracy; they could not yet conceive of that more significant and enduring battle which confronts ignorance and prejudice in all their forms and which should make the school—from our infancy to old age—the place of a seeking unhampered and unafraid. The emancipators of the slave could visualize one kind of slavery; they were as yet too restricted in vision to realize the thousand-fold forms of bondage that must be removed before man—black or white—could be called truly free.

The makers of machines could conceive of conquering nature; they were too shortsighted to realize that there were forces in man himself that needed conquering if the very machine was not to become a monstrosity and a despair. The emancipators of women could visualize the removal of a single disability; they could not yet see that this disability was but one of many, and that only by a profoundly reconstructed view of the place of both men and women in society could women be truly liberated. The fighters for a world made safe for democracy could visualize the defeat of an immediate enemy; their own efforts at peace, following the war, indicated all too clearly that they did not realize—among themselves and their foes—a far more wide-flung enemy that needed overcoming.

Today there is the plea among us for a more than verbal justice, the plea for a new viewing of the possibilities of life.<sup>22</sup>

Although all these democratic ideals were far from fulfilled, the book nevertheless ended optimistically by noting that we were in fact moving forward out of the wilderness and into “our own promised land.” Presumably one had to think that way in 1933 in order to keep going on.

### **The Utopian Vision During the Depression**

In 1934 Harry Overstreet wrote a book that was somewhat different in style than the four books that had preceded it. It differed from his earlier efforts in two aspects. The other books had their beginning in lectures Harry had given at the New School or at other institutions. This book came from an idea that had been germinating in Harry’s mind about the importance of the hours an individual spends outside his or her profession or trade. He believed the non-working hours could enrich one’s life and make a contribution to society as well. This idea of using leisure time well became the basis for the book.

The second difference from earlier books was in the relaxed style of the writing. The earlier books had a certain professorial insistence to them – there were specific thought-provoking points to be made before the series of “lectures” was completed. They were enjoyable enough, as Lindeman and other reviewers had commented, but reading them was still somewhat like taking college courses. This book was “easy reading” – that encouraged the reader to think about the kind of leisure life he would like to live if given the opportunity to do so. Appropriately enough, it was entitled A Guide to Civilized Loafing.

An interesting sidelight involves the retitling of the book. One of the publisher’s representatives, Storer Lunt (who later became president of W. W. Norton), was selling the book to bookstore owners in the Midwest. From Iowa he telephoned the home office in New York to discuss the book’s title. “They don’t loaf in Iowa,” he said in attempting to describe the communities that had embraced and adapted the idea of a “work ethic.” Indeed, “loafing” had a poor connotation in a country with a huge number of people unemployed. To offset the negative impact of the word “loafing,” the book was retitled, A Guide to Civilized Leisure, (with Overstreet making a few revisions and additions) and then sold very well.

The book started from Aristotle’s philosophical observation that “The end of labor is to gain leisure.” Overstreet expanded this proposition to a futuristic idea (not common for the years of the Depression) that “we are to have more time to live our lives as we please.”<sup>23</sup> The objective of the book was to examine the possibilities in our lives which can be fully enjoyed in our liberated hours. It certainly was more optimistic of the future than was We Move In New Directions which was written a year earlier and was an attack on the inequalities of the economic system. Even though the depression was still very much on everyone’s mind and a part of everyone’s daily life, Overstreet foresaw that “the old world of oppressive toil is passing and we enter now upon new freedom for ourselves.”<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that what Overstreet called “loafing” had little to do with the typical associations with that word. He was not writing about a life of self indulgent indolence but was looking forward to the civilized leisure of the maturing society in which people take an active role in doing things that they enjoy and, at the same time, enhancing their self respect. In this book, Harry Overstreet had a vision of a kind of utopian ideal. The world of work would be one in which people would enjoy their labors. But equally important and complementing this, the



environment in which people live would be regenerated. The sordid tenements and the ugly inhospitable middle class areas would be transformed. He wrote, “Where ugliness has penetrated into the souls of people, free hours are powerless to wipe them clean.” Communities need to plan “for the living of a good life,” with parts “built for safety, comfort, and beauty.” There should be places where young and old can “feel something of a community tie. . . parks, swimming pools, . . . libraries,” and schools “of a new type.”<sup>25</sup> The schools must meet the needs of adults as well as children and be places where adults can be comfortable. Harry expressed the belief that we could achieve these physical and social requirements if, as a nation, we were not timid. “There is a full life for us if we will take it,”<sup>26</sup> is the message of the book.

Adult education would play a significant role in the environment that Overstreet envisioned. In this ideal society an individual’s education would be lifelong and, a right, not merely a privilege. Such a civilization, he wrote, will look back upon our present communities “as little less than barbaric.” Here too, the future is seen as utopian:

The community we shall build will know no sharp break, educationally, between childhood and adulthood. It will conceive life as a continuously on-going process; and it will consider it to be a preposterous condition in a community to be without a center of adult intellectual interests.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that we are still far from fulfilling this dream does not mean that it is something beyond the realm of achievement. Overstreet had a special gift for outlining the ultimate idea of what it is we should be aiming for in the future.

### **Social Philosophy in America: From Independence to Interdependence**

Harry Overstreet’s next book, A Declaration of Interdependence, published in 1937, developed a social philosophy in which the key element was that in this stage of American history our independence could best be maintained through interdependence. He called for a recognition of a new kind of independence – one that would recognize we are more secure when we are united with others rather than when we are isolated and alone. Although isolation is one kind of independence Harry referred to the philosopher Hegel who said we achieved our greatest freedom when we had at our command “the resources of an organized society.”<sup>28</sup>

Overstreet used as a guide Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. The book is divided into three sections significantly titled, “When In The Course of Human Events,” “We Hold These

Truths” and “From the Consent of the Governed.” A chapter on education, “Growing Up to Our Age,” was based on an article he had written for the Journal of Adult Education.

Although; America was still in the midst of a depression, Overstreet remained optimistic that we would emerge with the capability of eradicating poverty and of making life a more fulfilling proposition for the masses in this country.

In the same fashion that Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence provided a long list of grievances that had led to the revolution, Overstreet listed the evils he believed had become a part of the fiber of life in America. He found absentee ownership of business to be unjust not because the owners were inherently evil, but because they did not have first-hand knowledge and therefore were insensitive to the labor exploitation which went on in order to provide an economic profit. He drew parallels with Jefferson’s Declaration by noting that the absentee owners in England had been ignorant of conditions in the colonies and thus pressed their claims beyond the point of acceptance. (He also noted that in 1937 England had the same problems with Ireland and India.) Because of the accumulation of wealth in a few hands, America was developing a privileged class every bit as distinct as feudal dukes, earls or counts. This was not healthy for a democratic community.

Other abuses Overstreet identified were the decline of the farmer who “has been pushed more and more out of the American picture;” the decline of the independent artisan whose work is valued less and less; the correlation between the increase in crime and the decline in the environment; the subordination of the human to the economic; professional people who had become “a bulwark of privilege and a hindrance to social advance,” organized religion which was often negligent of social injustices and the cruelties of man to man; educators who had become reduced to being adherents of the *status quo*; government officials who had turned public business into private advantage; and the waste of our natural resources.<sup>29</sup> He was not yet willing to say that America had flunked the course but “the health of our democracy is only ‘so-so.’”<sup>30</sup>

Harry’s comments on the situation of increased crime anticipated an awareness that crime cannot be treated as an isolated evil. He called on people to recognize that except for isolated instances, “the criminal is made, not born.”<sup>31</sup> It is the citizens’ job to alter conditions which transform “potentially good human stuff into a form of life that is a tragedy to itself and a menace to the rest of us.”<sup>32</sup>

To counter these abuses Overstreet proposed a future based on Jeffersonian philosophy. The health of our democracy was not as strong as it should be, and the nation conceived in liberty was “not the nation as we now know it.” We had to learn how to build more effective political mechanisms starting with the smallest community, and we had to learn how to build better cities and countrysides and “distribute equitably as well as abundantly.” Harry believed two philosophies lay claim to the future. On the one hand was Marxism, which Harry described as “despite its zeal for a reconstructed future, was a philosophy of psychological and social disillusionment.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand was an American or Jeffersonian philosophy “born out of hope.” Overstreet was enough of a Jeffersonian to believe we still have “inalienable rights” and that a “properly organized society will defend these rights against invasion.”<sup>34</sup> He believed we had to learn to educate the minds of young and old into a knowledge and wisdom appropriate to this far more difficult age, and that we needed a “declaration of interdependence” for the new bloodless revolution. We need to discover the values of cooperation beginning with consumer’s cooperation. It had been successful in Sweden and needed to be made compatible with American tradition. Overstreet viewed the consumer’s cooperatives not only as an economic enterprise but also as a means of self-education “of profoundest significance.” To achieve this new interdependence adult education must play an important role by educating adults “about the whole range of facts that present themselves after adolescence.”<sup>35</sup> The literary critic, Sterling North, in his review in the Chicago Daily News, wrote “the American who fails to read Overstreet’s new book is the sort who would have slept soundly with Paul Revere at the door.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Overstreet Introduces The AAAE’s The Peoples Library Series**

Harry’s next book was Let Me Think, published in 1939. It was the first in a series of eleven books entitled, “The Peoples Library – Books for Americans Who Want to Know” and was published by MacMillan in conjunction with a committee from the American Association for Adult Education consisting of Charles Beard, Lyman Bryson and Morse Cartwright. Overstreet was charged with introducing the series in which each book dealt with a specific area: labor unions, health, economics, science, criminology, etc.

Let Me Think was a philosophical review of the problems of everyday living. He discussed problems everyone must solve in some way if he is to be successful as a person and wrote of the necessity of maturing and yet maintaining the “impersonal curiosity of the child.”

He presented ways to enjoy life “clear up to the very end.” The importance of using one’s mind fully, intelligently and maturely was stressed, with the first chapter entitled, “Our Many-Powered Minds.”

Five of the twelve chapters carried the word “mind” in the title. The last two covered the importance of keeping mentally alive and achieving mental mastery. One can see in this book the beginning of Overstreet’s working toward his maturity theory which culminated ten years later with The Mature Mind.

It was obvious in the book that Harry was not oblivious to the dangers of totalitarianism abroad. In discussing the problems that mature citizens must face he strongly condemned the uncivilized actions of Hitler and his hoodlums and “their barbaric wrath upon the Jews and Catholics and upon all those whose political views differ.”<sup>37</sup>

In a summation, he noted philosophically that “we have both to accept our world and work to change it, to take it in and to take it in hand.”<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting to conjecture on Harry Overstreet’s selection of the title, Let Me Think. It has overtures of one of the most famous pronouncements in all of western philosophy. The great seventeenth century French philosopher and mathematician, Descartes, made his first premise in these memorable words: “*Cogito, ergo sum*,” – I think, therefore I am. Will Durant wrote “the central notion in Descartes was the primacy of consciousness – his apparently obvious proposition that the mind knows itself more immediately and directly than it can ever know anything else; that it knows the ‘external world’ only through the world’s impression upon the mind in sensation and perception.”<sup>39</sup>

While Stubblefield and others have focused on the concept of “maturity” in the Overstreet literature, it is interesting to note how often the concept of “mind” comes into later Overstreet titles: Our Free Minds (1941), The Mature Mind (1949), The Mind Alive (1954), The Mind Goes Forth (1956). We can see that for the Overstreets it is the ability to use the human mind to think which enables one to move from immaturity to maturity.

The books Harry Overstreet wrote during this period indicated a belief that America had weathered the worst of the depression but needed to return to the Jeffersonian ideals which stressed strong community involvement in all matters and most notably in adult education. He was guardedly optimistic that beneficial changes would occur unaccompanied by unwanted

political upheaval. His commitment to democracy was as strong as ever, but he believed America's ideals had to be practiced more fully in social areas.

### **Overstreet's Adult Education Activities Increase**

During 1932 and 1933 Overstreet worked with his close friend and Harvard geology professor, Kirtley Mather, in forming the Boston Adult Education Center, and Harry became a frequent speaker there. At this time there were very few courses in American colleges designed for adult educators. The two men discussed the kind of courses that would be beneficial and Mather worked with the Harvard University Graduate School administrators in adding courses in adult education to the summer session curriculum. In the summer of 1934, Harry began teaching adult education courses at Harvard. He taught such courses as, "Philosophy of Adult Education," and "Psychology and Techniques of Adult Learning." He continued to teach courses in adult education at Harvard each summer through 1937 and occasionally thereafter.

### **Overstreet's Broadening Areas of Interest**

During these years Harry Overstreet's lectures were becoming increasingly popular throughout the country and the range of topics which was already wide was becoming even broader to include executive management, community planning, and the problem of religious intolerance. He was always willing to tackle the concepts and problems of racial intolerance. During 1933 alone, in addition to his normal teaching and administrative workload at City College, Harry Overstreet delivered more than seventy-six lectures on a variety of psychological, management, and education topics. In addition to his lectures at such familiar grounds to him as the New School, Town Hall, Columbia University and Cooper Union, he attracted large audiences in Boston, Providence, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and Stamford, Connecticut, to name but a few of the many locations.<sup>40</sup> He was in great demand and was at ease both with audiences which were largely professional and academic in makeup and those which consisted of laborers from the steel mills of Pennsylvania or the auto plants of Michigan. Added to this were students from all walks of life who regularly attended the New School.

Although some of the lecture topics were extensions of past talks that leaned heavily on modern psychology and the concepts of adult education, new titles included "Building a Modern

Maturity,” Meeting Community Needs,” “Problems and Scope of Adult Education,” and “Relations Between Adults and Children.”

By 1935 his lecture schedule had increased even more dramatically. Records indicate at least ninety-five lectures (outside his regular college schedule), and a number of months reveal fifteen or more engagements.<sup>41</sup> He spoke on such new topics as “Life Values That Endure,” for the Meriden (Conn.) Community Forum, and “Principles of Adult Behavior,” for the midshipmen of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. In August, he spoke at Williams College under the auspices of the National Council of Christians and Jews.

Overstreet was in demand because he was a gifted speaker who knew how to involve an audience and who had an appealing sense of humor. Neither he nor Bonaro ever let money be a primary factor in whether or not to accept a speaking engagement. Eventually they made use of a lecture bureau to screen their schedule, but with the understanding that they had the option to override the lecture bureau’s decisions. In many instances the honorarium was minimal at best.

A look at a few specific lectures of this period gives an idea of the areas he considered important to bring to the public’s attention. At the annual meeting of the National Council of the Jewish Welfare Board in April of 1937, Overstreet spoke on a topic that was not at all prominent at the time – ethnicity. He was speaking at a conference of 531 delegates from Jewish organizations in all parts of the country and he spoke as a staunch defender of the values inherent in ethnic backgrounds.<sup>42</sup> He said that the Jewish culture should be a strong and valuable factor in the development of a final American culture strain. These views were to become more widely accepted in the 1960s and 70s, but it was in 1937 that Overstreet said: “It is the high distinction of America to have been the first nation in civilized history to welcome different cultures and to give free scope to participate in the building of a new nation.” This national tradition, he said, is the most significant aspect of our democracy and its most valuable contribution to political development of the human race. “However,” he continued, “this American hospitality has not been without its enemies in America. The melting pot advocates have been individuals who have disliked to be reminded that there was any culture in America save that of Anglo-Saxon origin.” He recalled the nation’s motto:

. . . those who know America intimately know that whatever unique virtues she possesses among the nations of the world comes from the inclusion of the great qualities of varying peoples. America, we

can be thankful to say, is an integration of differences, not a monotonous repetition of type. America is “E Pluribus Unum.”<sup>43</sup>

In a commencement address at Rutgers University In June of 1937, Harry Overstreet expressed an important aspect of this philosophy of education when he stressed the need for teachers to look upon their profession as a means “to help advance all those forms of human association that encourage mutuality of life.” He noted the importance of having minds not bound by class, sect, or local prejudice. He spoke of the responsibility of one educated in a profession:

He who has a profession makes a double avowal before the world; on the one hand he makes an avowal of knowledge; on the other of pre social intent. Thus the physician undergoes an arduous training before he is permitted to take the Hippocratic oath. When he takes it he is admitted to a fraternity whose two major aims are to advance the search for medical truth and to ameliorate human ills. The teacher, too, undergoes his systematic training, and when he has completed it he enters a fraternity pledged to the enlightenment and the service of human intelligence.<sup>44</sup>

Speaking at Chautauqua in August 1937, Overstreet declared that the Declaration of Independence was “a presentation of faith so far beyond the practices of those times that it is a miracle it was ever written.” He stated that the document was “against all aspects of the life of that time.” He continued by discussing that declaration of faith as it pertained to today and stated that the chief obstacles to attaining it were three in number: First, a loss of faith in democracy; second, an inability to make use of our new abundance; and third, a monopoly grip on inventions. He stated that many corporations have inventions “tucked away in safes which they won’t release.”<sup>45</sup> This is one of the corporate abuses he noted in A Declaration of Interdependence.

Two of the many articles Harry published during this period also illustrate the breadth of his interests. An article published in December of 1934 appeared in the magazine, Independent Woman. It was titled, “There’s Art in Handling People,” and is of special value in the literature of management motivation. The article was written from the perspective of an executive and, more precisely, as advice to the up and coming woman executive. It is another example of Harry Overstreet’s involvement with the social issues of the twentieth century. It could well have appeared almost intact in a woman’s liberation magazine article of the 1970s and 80s. Long before Betty Frieden, Gloria Steinam et al began to raise our social awareness, Overstreet was

writing for and about women as equals without ever spelling it out, and writing lucidly and effectively without catch phrases and free of slogans. In discussing the manager's role in "handling people," he uses examples which help to define the term. Handling does not mean manipulating or exploiting but refers to the aesthetic sense in which an artist "handles" his materials or instruments. To be effective, according to Overstreet, the executive should "be able to give to subordinates a heightened sense of significance." To this end he offered specific advice to those who would be "good" executives." One should "have respect for the personality of the subordinate," and not impinge on people's privacy or act as censor of other people's lives. It is important to remember that "every individual wishes to believe himself to be of some value." This is a corollary to treating people with respect. It is important to realize that "the good executive. . . is one whose major influence is indirect." One's influence is not so much what one says or even does, but rather what one is. According to Harry, one of the indispensable attributes of the good executive is a "sense of humor" or an ability to remain relaxed in a tense situation and "not take oneself or one's problems too portentously."<sup>46</sup> In summation, Overstreet notes that the superior should respect subordinates and that "the great executive is the one who believes in the life of his associates. . . so sincerely that he gives it every chance within his power."<sup>47</sup> He points out the value of including one's subordinates in planning and decision making. Harry Overstreet was advocating "participatory management."

Over the years there have been many books and articles written by management consultants and human behavior specialists which expound their ideas at great length. In this article, written in 1934, principles of good executive management are propounded which are consistent with those expounded today.

Overstreet provided an important and searching essay on adult education in the book, Capitalizing Intelligence: Eight Essays on Adult Education edited by Warren C. Seyfert and published in 1937. In his essay entitled, "An Experiment in Disciplined Freedom," Overstreet stated as his thesis that while adult education in America had succeeded in liberating itself from the compulsions of the academic world by giving adults freedom from specific requirements, examinations and grades and providing them the freedom to choose whatever they felt they would like to know or enjoy, it had become too "haphazard" in the fulfillment of its own role and "must now make its own acceptable compulsions." What had become obvious to him (and



presumably to others interested in the movement) was the “piece-meal, helter-skelter nature of most adult education.” He noted that adult centers permit students to move from one course to another “all quite unrelated in content.” And while the people attending these classes might be exposed to various ideas, “they are given no experience in following anything through to the end.” They master nothing. This, he wrote, “is the central weakness of adult education as we now find it in America.”<sup>48</sup>

He contrasted this concept with the more disciplined methods utilized in England and Denmark. For example, in England the Workers’ Education Association enlisted students “in systematic study covering a period of years” and in the end there was “something equivalent to a certificate of accomplishment.” In Denmark, there were periods of several months of residency in a folk school. He doubted that America would find either the English plan or Danish plan congenial to American life. In England, the Workers’ Education patterned itself after college education including the taking of required subjects and the passing of examinations. In Denmark, what was feasible in a rural community with long winters might not fit into America’s tempo of life which was chiefly urban and industrial. Overstreet was convinced that “America will doubtless have to find its own pattern of more serious adult education.”<sup>49</sup>

One experiment that Overstreet thought might indicate a desirable direction was the School of Related Arts and Sciences which began in Ridgewood, New Jersey. At the time of the article it had expanded enough to have branches in New York City, Utica, New York, and a summer school at Roxbury, N.Y.

The basic idea of the project was that “the individual should ‘discover’ for himself where he stood in respect to the human tradition and to the contemporary scene.” What was needed was the ability “to find the power to communicate” which lies within oneself. Too often, adult education studies consisted in reading “about artists, scientists, musicians, architects, poets, religionists, philosophers.” What the founders of the Ridgewood School dared to do was to make people intimate with the relevant materials and to attempt “to make the average adult feel progressively competent in the use of these materials.” Individuals were made acquainted with a variety of different media and given a chance to express their ideas or feelings in each of them. The effect of this, according to Overstreet, was that the individual began to move more familiarly among poets, scientists, and philosophers because, “He, too, in his modest way, is one of them.”

This approach differed significantly from the educational methods provided to children because, where the child needs daily doses of information, the adult needs daily doses of integrating experience.”<sup>50</sup>

The Ridgewood School used the technique of introducing the student into what was called a “discovery class.” No one was taught anything in this class; however, the students were stimulated to attempt their own non-competitive creative effort in a media of their own choosing. During this process the student “is encouraged to discover the medium in which he would like to achieve a mastery.” The teacher did not impose his own technical skill upon the student. In other words, the student was not given information before he asked for it. Another important aspect of the process is that the student set his or her own pace. The student was his own disciplinarian and “his freedom is that of self-determination.” One distinguishing characteristic of the Ridgewood School was that the classes were not taught by just a single teacher so that people were not encouraged to build a fence around their own specialization but instead experienced “life in the unity of its own diversity.”<sup>51</sup>

Overstreet concluded the article with an admonition that adult education could be free of the rigidity of academia yet need not be totally haphazard. It should strive for an “active continuity of effort which can lead to a more unified and resourceful life.” What one wonders, of course, today, is what were the lasting results of the Ridgewood School experiment some sixty years later?

### **Bonaro Overstreet’s Growing Involvement with Adult Education**

During these years Bonaro gradually became more involved in lecturing and became more at ease on the platform. She became less dependent on Harry and developed a reputation of her own.

It was in March, 1933 that Bonaro Overstreet delivered her first lecture at the New School (substituting for Harry) which was to be the beginning of a long association for her with that institution. Since she was always involved in the research of his material and in the preparation of an outline, as well as regularly sitting in the audience when Harry spoke, Bonaro could readily act as a substitute. (She would never use the term “pinch hit” because she was a stickler for accuracy and she noted that pinch hitters are called upon because they are expected to be an improvement upon the scheduled batter.) Often, of course, she sat in the audience and listened

critically to her husband as he kept the attention of the listeners and inspired them to express their ideas. On one occasion, a woman seated next to Bonaro whispered to her, “I wonder what kind of person he has for a wife?” Bonaro smiled and answered as truthfully as she could, “I don’t know – I wonder about it myself.”<sup>52</sup>

It was not always Harry for whom Bonaro was asked to substitute. A few weeks after the lecture at the New School, Bonaro filled in at a forum in Englewood, New Jersey as an able substitute guest lecturer for the famous Yale professor and man of letters, William Lyon Phelps. She received an adulatory letter of appreciation with an invitation to return again as the scheduled speaker, which she did on several occasions.

Bonaro considered lecturing a “risky business,” but little by little, she was becoming more at ease. After lectures, Harry and she would go for a long walk and then stop somewhere for a cup of coffee. He would tell her all of the things that had gone particularly well. A week or so later he might make a few suggestions for improvement. She began to receive an increased number of requests for her services as an extremely well received speaker. Almost without exception the letters of appreciation from groups for whom she lectured expressed the desire for a return engagement.

Bonaro spoke on a variety of topics often responding to a suggestion from the program planners. On one speaking trip to Illinois in 1935 Bonaro lectured on “Poetry in a Changing World,” in Chicago and on “The Adventures of Being a Modern Adult,” before the Women’s Club in La Grange. By 1938, it was Bonaro who delivered the banquet speech at the thirteenth annual meeting of the American Association for Adult Education held at Asbury Park, New Jersey.<sup>53</sup>

During this period Bonaro continued to write both poetry and articles for publication. The prestigious Saturday Review magazine published many of Bonaro’s poems. The poetry editor of the Saturday Review was William Rose Benet, and through him Bonaro became friendly with Stephen Vincent Benet and his wife Laura. Years later, at Stephen’s death, Bonaro was asked to read his poetry at a special memorial service. After the service, Laura Benet told Bonaro that she had selected Mrs. Benet’s favorite poem.

Bonaro wrote an article for the Journal of Adult Education in October 1934, entitled, “Youth Incorporated,” which was a description of an experiment in an educational-social

organization in Ferndale, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. There a group of youths and adults cooperated to form a discussion program in which the young people organized their own curriculum.<sup>54</sup> This article was an indication of her own growing interest and involvement in the field of adult education.

Bonaro wrote a comprehensive article in 1936 about Harvard's total program in adult education in which Harry had been participating since the summer of 1934. "John Harvard Becomes An Adult Educator" was published in the October 1936 issue of the Journal of Adult Education. It seems that one of the educational innovations that must be credited to Harvard is that of the summer session itself. This experiment in adult education (for that is the original concept of a university summer session in that it was meant to instruct teachers) was begun in 1871 and by 1874 there were two courses and thirty-six students.<sup>55</sup> In the mid 1930s, Harvard set out to find new ways in which the summer session could be of use to the community. According to Bonaro, "The backbone of the new experiment has been the afternoon and evening series of lectures, forum discussions, informal platform conversations, and panels, which students and the Cambridge public have alike been encouraged to attend."<sup>56</sup>

Throughout this period both of the Overstreets were continuously involved with the American Association for Adult Education. Harry Overstreet had been one of the founding members of the Association and had served on the Executive Board since its inception in 1926. For much of this period he had also served as an Associate Editor of the Journal. In 1936 Charles Beard wrote that it had become "primarily a clearing house for the exchange of ideas and experiences, for reporting achievements, for making generally available the methods found best and most effective by this inescapably human process of trial and error."<sup>57</sup> Although it had been in existence for only ten years, Beard and others felt that "it is entirely fitting that a movement so large and so significant for American culture should have its written history."<sup>58</sup> Still it was felt that it was too soon to view the adult education movement with any detachment. The next best thing was to compile the best documents that had appeared in the Journal of Adult Education. Mary Ely, who had been an editor of the Journal, put together a book which is still an indispensable source document of the movement, entitled, Adult Education In Action.<sup>59</sup>

The book contains one hundred and sixty condensed versions of articles by such eminent practitioners as Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Nicholas

Murray Butler, Morse Adams Cartwright, Alvin Johnson, Jane Addams, Hilda Smith, Everett Dean Martin, Edward Thorndike, Lyman Bryson, Eduard C. Lindeman, and others.

It is of interest that Mary Ely's compilation contains two articles by Harry and five by Bonaro. (No other author except Alvin Johnson is represented by as many as Bonaro.) One of Bonaro's was historical and although it was a program that was not a part of the AAAE, it added to the recorded history of adult education. Bonaro described the early free lecture system in New York. She pointed out that many of the ideas about adult education in the thirties were not new ones. As far back as 1904, the Department of Education in New York City issued a pamphlet indicating that "Adult education is established as a permanent part of our educational scheme" and "The school of the future must be constructed with a view to its use for various educative influences, so that it may become not alone a nursery for children but a place of intelligent resort for men."<sup>60</sup> The courses were popular and yet the experiment ended sharply. Other articles by Bonaro include, "How to Teach Creative Writing," and "Teacher Training by Joyous Living and Learning."

### **Bonaro Overstreet As Poet and Author**

During this period Bonaro published two books, thus enhancing her reputation as a poet and author. The year 1934 brought the publication of Bonaro's first book of poetry, Footsteps on the Earth, a small book of fifty-two poems, many of which had been published in poetry magazines. Books of poetry have rarely been best sellers or the object of wide interest and comment. The humorist and author of archy and mehitabel, Don Marquis, once described the publication of a book of verse as having the impact of a rose petal dropping down into the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo.<sup>61</sup> The book, however, received excellent reviews and sold well for a poetry book. The New York Herald Tribune review noted that Mrs. Overstreet, "describes homely things, those that make the universe itself seem 'less austere' with a fresh viewpoint."<sup>62</sup> "Less Austere" refers to the title of one of the poems. The poems explored a variety of themes – nature, man in society, the significance in small events, the humor and tragedy of human existence. She used blank verse, the ballad stanza, rhymed forms of her own design, and a diversity of irregular, unrhymed, but always rhythmic structures. She introduced the book with an untitled proem which indicated the poet's search for an understanding of the universe and

oneself, while recognizing that even without answers, a song needs no justification. The poem stated:

Song is man's brave inadequate answer  
 To questions traced on long sand beaches in phrases of  
 foam –  
 To questions scrawled by driven clouds on dark skies –  
 To questions framed in the code of blinking stars.<sup>63</sup>

For the most part, the poems were about common place scenes and emotions, but occasionally there was a suggestion of the depression era, such as:

There is the corner where lost men linger,  
 Hunching their shoulders when north winds blow.  
 Here they huddle in an endless waiting. . .  
 Waiting for something . . . with no place to go.<sup>64</sup>

### **Bonaro's Search for a Philosophy**

During 1938 Bonaro Overstreet made her first lengthy venture toward a philosophical appraisal of life and life's values in a book entitled A Search For A Self Lyman Bryson of Columbia University wrote that the book was "an intelligent and sensitive explanation of all those commonplace things which make up the real texture of our existence and determine the quality of our lives."<sup>65</sup> It was a deeply human and personal philosophy for living and appreciating one's daily life.

Bonaro observed that she was both individualistic and, at the same time, a sample of the human race. This being so, she felt that she had at least a halfway chance to learn from her own experiences what life means to other people. Bonaro used humor throughout the book as she examined the balance between one's private life and those things which tie people to one another. "To be bound and yet free: that is what we most deeply want . . . I want to belong to myself even while giving myself."<sup>66</sup>

Bonaro believed it was important to develop a code of hospitality for strangers and friends. With the multiple relationships in a growing America, she felt that no stranger "is to be regarded as less than a human being" and, at the same time, no intimate friend is to be denied the right to privacy and to "a certain strangeness that we will respect and hold inviolate." In describing the phenomenon of friendship she wrote, "a friend is one in whose presence I am able to come nearer than usual to being a kind of person I want to be."<sup>67</sup>

Bonaro included a chapter on marriage titled “Two’s Company.” She wrote openly about the need for a good healthy sexual relationship and the maturity needed to refrain from taking every disagreement or neglect as a personal affront.

This book, while affirming her individual selfhood, also indicated her indebtedness to the things and people that helped to shape her ideas and personality. These included the various expressions on people’s faces; contacts with things that grow including animals, plants, children, and ideas; and the special influence of sculptors, poets, painters, musicians, carpenters and other workers in raw materials. Finally, she was indebted to all those questions out there without answers.

She paid homage to the concept of democracy – not because it works well but because “democracy is the only system . . . that stands any reasonable chance of doing what any growing thing must do to survive: that is, remaining itself while it becomes something else.”<sup>68</sup> In his review of the book, Lyman Bryson wrote that she had gone into such areas as politics “with assurance and wisdom” and added “I think her statement of the essential spirit of democracy is one of the best that has ever been made.”<sup>69</sup>

With reference to adult education, there is the strong suggestion that adult education may be needed in helping to save the concept of democracy as we know it. “We cannot presume to say that even adult education can save our democracy; but it may, in the long run, rank high among its saviors.”<sup>70</sup>

### **The Overstreets’ Collaboration Begins**

#### The Joint Lecture

February 1, 1934 marked the occasion of the Overstreet’s first joint lecture. It was at the Women’s Athletic Club in Chicago, and the topic was, “Wisdom in Living,” which dealt with the need for developing a personal philosophy. Each of them spoke for thirty minutes and then together accepted questions from the audience. Although well received by the audience, they were not satisfied with the format of their first joint enterprise. It was too formal, too artificial, and did not do what they wanted to do which was to encourage the give and take of informal discussion. They had not yet developed the technique of an informal dialogue of ideas. Another important factor was their overhearing comments from members of the audience as they were leaving which indicated that people were discussing which one did the better job or was better

liked. They did not want to compete with one another in any way, and decided not to continue lecturing from the same platform – at least for the immediate future.

### The First Collaborative Book

The next step in their collaboration was the book, Town Meeting Comes To Town, which celebrated the achievement of the bringing together of the then popular medium of radio broadcasting with that distinctive early American (notably New England) contribution to democracy, the town meeting. The result was the popular program, “America’s Town Meeting of the Air.” It was a successful example of mass civic education on the major issues of the day. It was also a history of Town Hall in New York City.

The great German Nobel Prize winning author, Thomas Mann, who had to flee Nazi Germany and lived his later years in exile once wrote, “It is impossible for ideas to compete in the marketplace if no forum for their presentation is provided or available.”<sup>71</sup> Mann, whose books had been ordered burned by Hitler, had given a lecture at Town Hall on “The Coming Victory of Democracy” and was quoted as saying that the town meeting concept was “a singular contribution to the cause of democracy.”<sup>72</sup>

The radio program was broadcast with a format that tried to capture the spirit of an early New England town meeting. It featured George V. Denny Jr. as a moderator, at least two prominent guests arguing the issues and then spirited questions from the audience. “Town Meeting went on the air May 30, 1935. . . the program proved enormously popular and remained on the air for more than a decade.”<sup>73</sup>

In 1938, it occurred to George Denny and the Overstreets that this singular contribution should not go unrecorded for posterity. Town Meeting Comes To Town published in 1938, was the result. Because of their lectures over the years with Town Hall, and notably the League for Political Education, the Overstreets were familiar with the historical background of this achievement. They also had the full support of Denny, the moving force behind the success of the “Town Meeting of the Air” program.

The collaborative writing did not come easily because it was in many respects different than their earlier books which dealt with ideas and concepts. This book told a story about a specific institution in a particular city and in a sense was a history. Still, the Overstreets did not want it to be a dull chronological story and so they changed their outline several times. They



started with the then current (1938) popularity of the radio program and it was not until page 70 that one read of the laying of a cornerstone for a building in 1920.

According to Bonaro, they found themselves more critical of what was being put to paper than they had been in the past.<sup>74</sup> They read paragraphs aloud as a test of clear comprehension. There was a good deal more rewriting than in the past. They searched for the precise word or phrase. The difference between the right word and the nearly right word was as Mark Twain said, “The difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” When this author talked with Bonaro about this in later years, Bonaro said that when she reviewed their collaborative books it was difficult to say, “I wrote this paragraph,” or “Harry wrote that,” since one could start a sentence and the other finish it<sup>75</sup>

In Town Meeting Comes To Town the Overstreets contended that the radio program contributed significantly to the adult education movement. The dedicated commitment of the Overstreets to the value of adult education is evidenced throughout the book. They wrote, “Nothing is of profounder significance for the future of our democratic experiment than the growing movement for adult enlightenment.”<sup>76</sup> They made a specific point about the need for more adult education centers by noting how few there were in this country. By contrast, Denmark was cited as a model. A country “no bigger than a postage stamp as compared with our own vast territories – has over forty centers where adults come for a fairly intensive education in matters that concern their mature life.”<sup>77</sup> In the United States they could point to the formation of the American Association for Adult Education and such institutions as the New School for Social Research, the Boston Center for Adult Education, the Civic Federation of Dallas, the People’s Institute, the San Francisco School of Social Studies, and a few others. The Town Meeting idea was another example of a great democratic institution. But much more was needed.

The book was not merely a history of an adult education institution. In the hands of the Overstreets it was also an ardent plea for Town Hall to lead the way for a future that would encompass social achievements – specifically in workers’ education, education of the Negro population, and for those members of society who were completely forgotten – prisoners.

Many of the needs they cited still confront us today. Consider the following statements from the book: “Unfortunately, the tale of what America is doing for her Negro population is still one of which we have little cause to be proud” . . . “When Jefferson spoke for a free people,

he unfortunately did not speak for the Negro” . . . “Every prisoner is a person with whom we have failed” . . . “the effort to redeem prisoners still consists largely of doing something to them rather than making better provisions for them in the society that they are to reenter.”<sup>78</sup>

Stubblefield said it well when he wrote, “The Overstreets stood for adult education that addressed unique concerns.”<sup>79</sup>

The book was highly praised by Roger Baldwin who was the founder of the American Civil Liberties Union; the journalist Anne O’Hare McCormick; the poet Carl Sandburg; and Frederick Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation. Baldwin wrote, “It is a job done in such a vivid and popular style as to command attention. . . .This is a milestone in American democracy.”<sup>80</sup>

Denny and the trustees of Town Hall were pleased with the book the Overstreets had produced. On November 19, 1938, a testimonial luncheon was given at the Hotel Astor in New York City by the trustees of Town Hall in honor of Harry and Bonaro Overstreet.<sup>81</sup> The guest speaker was Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana who had been a New Dealer on domestic issues but had become an isolationist. in foreign affairs. Other speakers who paid tribute to the authors included literary critic John Mason Brown, Shakespearean actor Maurice Evans, psychologist David Seabury, and the Director Emeritus of Town Hall, Robert Erskine Ely. George Denny introduced the Overstreets as “makers of a liberal democracy who would be liquidated under any other form of government.”<sup>82</sup>

### **Career Transition: A Change in Emphasis**

In June of 1939 at age 64, Harry A. Overstreet retired from academic life as chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology at the City College of New York to devote full time to his writing and lecturing. His plan was to spend the next year in research and writing on adult education which he said was “the greatest thing happening in America today.”<sup>83</sup>

Although Harry had been thinking about retiring for some time he had remained because of the pleasant associations at CCNY and because he had wanted to assist in its administrative reorganization which gave autonomy to the faculty. Overstreet believed that democracy should begin at home, and academic freedom was important in a democratic educational institution.

He granted an interview to a New York Times reporter just after he finished meeting with his class in social philosophy—the last class in forty years of college teaching, of which the last twenty-eight years had been at CCNY. He reported that in his letter of resignation he had

recommended the separation of the two disciplines which he said would be in line with the modern trend of differentiating between the two subjects. He noted that the CCNY students were in good shape with regard to “intellectual eagerness and social sympathy.” Professor Overstreet was described as “relaxed in a large chair” and talking “behind a haze of smoke from his pipe.” The photo which accompanied the Times story was one by the Pulitzer prize winning black photographer, James L. Allen, whom Harry had sought out because of his admiration for Allen’s work. (The photo had been taken in March of 1933.)

In spite of thoughts about retirement in order to devote more time to adult education, Mrs. Overstreet recalled that the actual decision and letter of resignation had come about suddenly. The catalyst was an aspect of the pending reorganization. Professor Overstreet’s department was to experience a budget cut, and this cut would result in the loss of two young men new to the department who Overstreet felt had great promise. It occurred to him that if his salary were eliminated, both of these men could be retained. When Bonaro arrived at his office to join him on a trip to New England where he had speaking engagements, Harry told her he was considering retiring. She offered to type the letter for him and he dictated it at once.<sup>84</sup> When they left on that short lecture tour they had no idea how many of such tours they would be taking together all over the world during the next twenty-eight years. In the words of Robert Browning’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra: “the best was yet to be.”<sup>85</sup>

For nearly forty years beginning in 1901, Harry Overstreet had been a well known university professor of philosophy and psychology, first at the University of California and then at City College of New York. He had gained a national reputation as a popular lecturer and as a liberal leader in the emerging field of adult education. He had published half a dozen books and innumerable articles which had enhanced his reputation in academia and beyond. Most people, when they reach their mid-sixties feel they have completed their careers and are ready to take steps to relax and enjoy the remaining years. However, somewhere along his career path, Harry’s second marriage rejuvenated him. His young wife was extremely intelligent, her writing ability was admired by many including her husband, and she turned out to be an accomplished speaker. One of the books he dedicated to her has the inscription: “To my wife whose hand and mind have been at work on so many pages of this book that I call the book my own only because she insists.”<sup>86</sup> By the end of this decade the two were a “team” with an enlarged capacity for work

because they were one another's support system. Their combined energy and enthusiasm would lead to many more satisfying years of productivity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Second Inaugural Address," January 20, 1937.
- <sup>2</sup> UNESCO Conference on Adult Education, Official Program, Hamburg, Germany, July 14-18, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> James H. McBurney and Kenneth G. Hance, The Principles and Methods of Discussion (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939), 288.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 289.
- <sup>5</sup> Moses A. Cartwright, "Panel Discussion," Journal of Adult Education, January 1933, 37-42.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas Fansler, Discussion Methods for Adult Groups (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1934), 104.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, "The Panel As A Problem Solving Device," Journal of Adult Education, January 1932, 393-395.
- <sup>9</sup> Harry Overstreet, "On The Panel," Occupations, 13, February, 1935, 389-394.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, We Move in New Directions (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1933), viii.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid , p. 15.
- <sup>14</sup> Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, Volume Two (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 590.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert L. Heilbroner and Lester C. Thurow, The Economic Problem (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1975), 418.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert L. Heilbroner, The Worldly Philosophers (New York: Time Incorporated, 1961), 289.
- <sup>17</sup> Morison and Commanger, Growth of the American Republic, 591.
- <sup>18</sup> Overstreet, We Move in New Directions, 125.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 222.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 143.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 274.
- <sup>23</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, A Guide to Civilized Leisure (Ne York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1934), 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 125-126.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 119.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 129.
- <sup>28</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, A Declaration of Interdependence (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1937), 186.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 38-59.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 72.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 268.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 274.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 116-130.

- <sup>36</sup> Sterling North, Book Review Chicago Daily News, Overstreet Personal Files.
- <sup>37</sup> H. A. Overstreet, Let Me Think (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1939), 45.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 105.
- <sup>39</sup> Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1952), 151.
- <sup>40</sup> Lecture Schedule, Overstreet Personal Papers
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Harry Overstreet, "Democracy and Group Culture," speech at The Jewish Center, April, 1937.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, Commencement address, Rutgers University, June, 1937.
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- <sup>46</sup> Harry Overstreet, "There's Art in Handling People," Independent Woman, 13, December, 1934, p. 374.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, "An Experiment in Disciplined Freedom," in Warren C. Seyfer, ed., Capitalizing Intelligence: Eight Essays on Adult Education (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1937), 86-100.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 88.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 93.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 99
- <sup>52</sup> Conversation with Bonaro Overstreet (anecdote also used in her classes at U.VA.)
- <sup>53</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, speech at the annual banquet of the American Association of Adult Education, Asbury Park, N. J., May, 1938.
- <sup>54</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, "Youth Incorporated," Journal of Adult Education, October, 1934.
- <sup>55</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, The Journal of Adult Education, "John Harvard Becomes an Adult Educator," October, 1936, . 448.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 448.
- <sup>57</sup> Charles Beard, Foreward to Mary L. Ely, ed., Adult Education in Action (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1936), viii.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., ix.
- <sup>59</sup> Mary L. Ely, Adult Education in Action, 1-480.
- <sup>60</sup> Bonaro Overstreet, "The Free Lecture System of New York," Journal of Adult Education, April 1934.
- <sup>61</sup> John Bartlett, ed., The Shorter Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (New York: Permabooks, 1959), 237.
- <sup>62</sup> The New York Herald Tribune, Book Review section: April 8, 1934, 26.
- <sup>63</sup> Bonaro W. Overstreet, Footsteps on the Earth (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934),, untitled, n.p.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid, 31.
- <sup>65</sup> Lyman Bryson, review excerpt on A Search for Self book jacket.
- <sup>66</sup> Bonaro W. Overstreet, A Search for a Self (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 251.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 42.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 233.
- <sup>69</sup> Lyman Bryson, Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> A Search for a Self, 230.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Mann in The Great Quotations, ed. By George Seldes (New York: Pocket Books, 1960), 706.

<sup>72</sup> Harry A. Overstreet and Bonaro W. Overstreet, Town Hall Comes To Town (New York: Harper & Co., 1938), 138

<sup>73</sup> Charles G. Alexander, Nationalism in American Thought 1930-1945 (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1969), 99.

<sup>74</sup> Conversation with Bonaro Overstreet in her home in Falls Church, VA., April 1980.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Harry A. Overstreet and Bonaro W. Overstreet, Town Hall Comes To Town, 241.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 238-240.

<sup>79</sup> Stubblefield, Towards a History of Adult Education, 165.

<sup>80</sup> Roger Baldwin, Town Meeting Comes to Town book jacket.

<sup>81</sup> Town Hall Luncheon program, Nov. 19, 1938, Overstreet Personal Files.

<sup>82</sup> New York Times, November 20 1938, clipping in Overstreet Personal Files.

<sup>83</sup> New York Times, June, 1939, clipping in Overstreet Personal Files.

<sup>84</sup> Conversation with Bonaro Overstreet in her home in Falls Church, VA., April 1980.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," An Oxford Anthology of English Poetry, H. F. Loway and W. Thorp, eds. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), 1007.

<sup>86</sup> Harry A. Overstreet, Let Me Think, dedication page.