

A Dedicated Life

drawn out by skillful educational methods. The maid-servant in Oberlin's family, Louise Scheppler turned out to be a gifted teacher who started infant schools up there long before Froebel started his kindergartens. One example of Oberlin's school lessons will show how widened people's horizons and drew out their active devotion at the same time. In teaching Geography he started by asking the pupils to locate their houses on the map of the parish, then the parish on the map of Alsace, Alsace on the map of France, France on the map of Europe and Europe on the map of the world, reaching at last the Supreme Being. At each point they asked themselves, "What has the parish done for me? What have I done for the parish? What has the country done for me? What have I done for the country?"—culminating in the question, "What has God done for me? What have I done for God?"

Oberlin did not promise to stay forever when he went to the mountains - only to stay until his divine commanding officer sent him to some other difficult post. At one time it looked as though he might go to America. A German-speaking colony in Georgia, hearing of his work, asked him to come over and be their leader. When Oberlin heard there were hard economic problems to solve and Indians and Negroes to be educated, he agreed to go and wrote a farewell message to his people. But just then the Revolutionary War broke out in America, interrupting traffic on the Atlantic and destroying the colony, so Oberlin decided his commanding officer had changed the orders and he was to stay at his post in the Mountains. He stayed on till he became an old man, beloved by all his people. When he died, they put a cross at his head with two simple words, "Papa Oberlin."

Did Oberlin throw his life away, as many people told him he was doing? Even in his life-time, there was some evidence to prove that the Biblical promise had been fulfilled: "Whoever seeks to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's shall preserve it." The influence of this self-sacrificing man has literally gone around the globe. In his native region he is equally honored by the French-speaking and German-speaking world, by Protestants and by

Catholics whom he tried to reconcile. The Czar of Russia corresponded with him, and when his troops were chasing Napoleon back into France, gave them orders not to harm the work of that great and good man John Frederick Oberlin. But Oberlin's greatest influence came after his death. A young American home missionary in Ohio a hundred and twenty-five years ago, baffled in his attempts to civilize and Christianize what was then the Wild West -- just as wild as the Western movies depict today -- found the solution when he read a little book about Oberlin's work in the Vosges Mountains, and decided to found a college to draw out leadership of people living in the West as Oberlin drew out the leadership of his mountain people. That was the beginning of Oberlin College. Many years later a group of Oberlin graduates went to Shansi province, China, because they heard the field was difficult and the need was great. When many of them were killed in the Boxer Uprising, a school was founded in their honor -- Ming Hsien -- to which we sent student "reps" every year. When my wife and I visited there in 1932, we found a program of rural reconstruction going on there which Ray Moyer, our agricultural expert, told us was directly inspired by re-reading the life of John Frederick Oberlin. On a visit to John Frederick Oberlin's parish a few years later -- one of five or six visits I have made there -- I told the people about our work in China and they said they would like to be brought more directly in touch with it; so one of our returning reps, Robbins Strong, paid a visit to Oberlin's old parish in the Vosges Mountains, bringing with him a jar of earth from the grave of the Oberlin martyrs in Shansi, to be put on the grave of "Papa Oberlin." I think you all know that since we no longer send "reps" to Shansi province on the Mainland, we have been sending them to you here in Taiwan and to other schools in Japan and India. Meanwhile Mr. Moyer himself has been very active here in Taiwan as one of the original members of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction. Thus John Frederick Oberlin continues to live and work in Asia, long after the end of his work in eastern France.

I would not have you suppose that the line of his influence passes only through Ohio and China. There is an order of Deaconesses named after him in Germany and an association of rural ministers in New England who wear his silhouette in their button-holes. On a trip to South America, I found an agricultural mission in Chile modelled after his work and read a novel published in Brazil, urging that the whole future of that country could be changed by using his methods. Enough to prove that he is truly a world figure. If even a few of you here should study his life and catch his spirit and adapt his methods to your own environment, it would be a great thing for this country and this people, as it has been for other countries and other people. For Oberlin was truly a universal "helper of mankind".

In talking of John Frederick Oberlin and his dedicated life, I am not advertising Oberlin College in America, where I teach and where our "reps" here have been studying. We did a daring thing when we took the name of Oberlin for our College, and we often have to ask ourselves whether we took his name in vain. No, John Frederick Oberlin is not our private possession. He belongs where the West German Government has recently put him, by including him in a series of postage stamps headed "Helfer der Menschheit", "helpers of mankind," along with Florence Nightingale and other great servants of humanity. He belongs to you and to all people as much as he belongs us.

The key to John Frederick Oberlin's dedicated life was his conception of himself as a Christian soldier. He was born in 1740 at Strasbourg in Eastern France on the banks of the River Rhine, a city which has often changed hands between France and Germany, and which has always been a great military outpost. Seven years ago, I spent my previous sabbatical leave in Strasbourg, and I often saw small boys marching stiffly beside a column of troops, playing at being soldiers. I imagine that John Frederick Oberlin and his brothers liked to play soldiers just like this. Their father saw in this an educational opportunity. He drilled the boys to their hearts' content; but he told them if they were to be real soldiers, they must also have the courageous spirit that runs into dangers and difficulties instead of running away from them. John Frederick Oberlin took this particularly to heart. He formed a life-long habit of doing things that were hard and went against his inclination. About the time he was confirmed in the Church, he drew up a kind of formal oath of allegiance to God his Creator and Christ his Savior, dedicating all his powers and possessions to whatever form of hard, sacrificial service he might be assigned to. The most remarkable thing about this document is that he kept it all his life, and signed it over again every few years, the last time when he was over eighty.

Between the first and second signatures on this document, Oberlin found his life vocation. He had made a high record at the University of Strasbourg, where he took the theological course. Before taking any particular charge in a church, he spent some time studying botany and practical medicine while tutoring the

John Frederick Oberlin

children of a medical man. So eagerly did he pursue the studies that he never stopped to go out to lunch but simply heated up a little bread and milk in a pan on top of a lamp, and went on reading as he ate. One day when he was eating his bread and milk and reading in his little garret room, he was visited by a home missionary named Stuber, who had worn out his health and his wife's health trying to improve conditions up in the Vosges Mountains, then the most uncivilized region in France, and was looking for a strong, determined young man to continue his work. Seeing the kind of Spartan discipline that Oberlin imposed on himself, he said "You are my man," and offered him the position on the spot. Oberlin accepted on two conditions: that some one else would take a fine military chaplaincy he had just been offered, and that no one else was willing to go up in the Mountains. Both conditions were soon met, and Oberlin set out for the Mountains, precisely because he knew it was a hard and difficult field to cultivate. There were no roads up there, no proper means of making a living, no good schools, only ignorance, poverty and prejudice. For a brilliant university graduate to bury himself in that godforsaken neck of the woods seemed like throwing his life away, and his friends and family all told him so. Perhaps the nearest analogy in Taiwan might be some of the mountain areas where some of your aboriginal tribesmen live. But Oberlin went in spite of all warnings, and he stayed there till he died at the age of eighty six.

I can't tell you the details about the great fights this Christian soldier put up for better conditions up in those mountains. I hope you will read about it for yourselves some time. Enough to say that before long there were roads and bridges, and living conditions began to improve. Better seeds, better adapted to mountain climate, were first planted in Oberlin's kitchen garden and then distributed to all who asked for them. Home weaving gave an extra source of income during the long winters when the snow was deep and people had to stay home. Best of all, those reforms were carried out more and with the cooperation of the mountain people, whose talents and interest were

