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John Janitz

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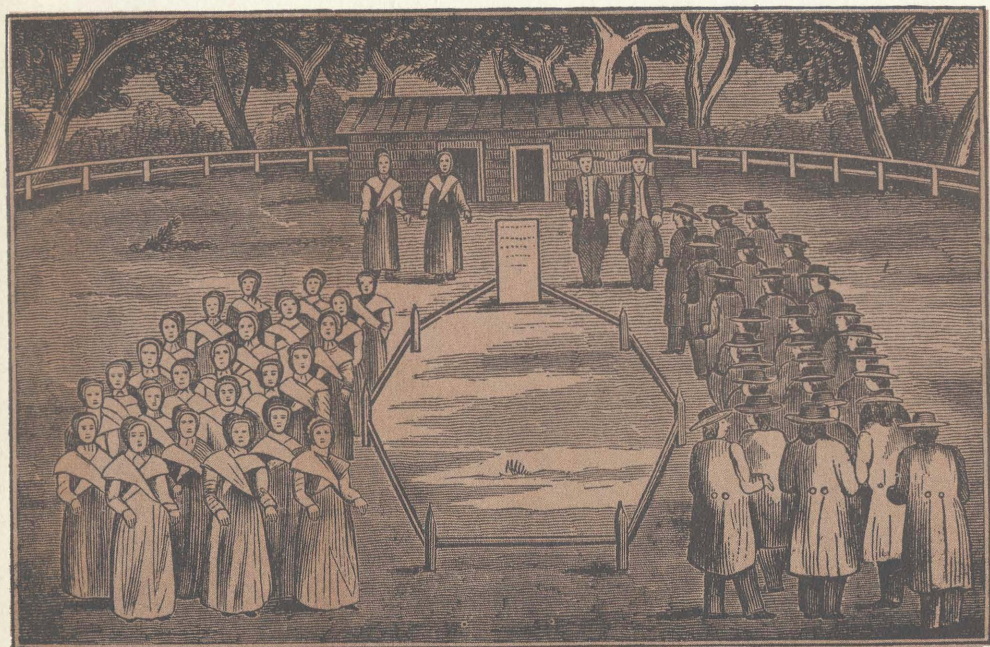


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Mountain Meeting. From *Two Years' Experience Among the Shakers* by David Lamson. West Boylston: Published by the Author. 1848.

THE COURIER

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The Osborne Family Papers: Spotlight on Thomas Mott Osborne

by John Janitz

The records of four generations of a prominent Central New York family are now available for research in the papers of the Osbornes of Auburn. The extensive collection in the George Arents Research Library contains valuable source material in relation to prison reform, history of the Democratic Party in New York State, the women's rights movement, international diplomacy, education, manufacturing and frontier life. Letters numbering 150,000 were written by presidents, governors, soldiers, businessmen, students, Progressive reformers, diplomats, convicts and feminists.

Beginning with the War of 1812 papers of Army Lieutenant Peter Pelham, the collection continues to outline the family history through the correspondence of his widow, Martha Coffin, with her sister, women's rights champion Lucretia Mott; mid-nineteenth century letters from the California Gold Rush country; pocket diaries of a member of the family in Union uniform during the Civil War; and the records of D. M. (David) Osborne & Company, manufacturers of farm machinery. The collection reaches a peak at its most significant section, the papers of Thomas Mott Osborne (1859-1926), son of David M. and Eliza Wright, and concludes with those of Lithgow Osborne, journalist and diplomat, third son of Thomas Mott.

During his lifetime Thomas Mott Osborne played many roles—businessman, author, art critic, world traveler, educator, politician, Progressive and prison warden, and actually assumed the appropriate costume for some of his adventures. The correspondence of his youth reveals a strong attachment to a mother who read widely, enjoyed the theater arts, and stood out as an advocate of educational betterment in her community. She spent a considerable amount of time away from Auburn visiting relatives or traveling with them to the Far West. Many of her letters and a journal from the western rail and stage coach journey are present among the Osborne papers.

T. M. Osborne emerged from this vibrant setting to attend Quincy Academy and Harvard College. As an undergraduate, he studied diligently enough to graduate with honors, and moved comfortably through the best circles of Boston and Cambridge society. A bulky scrapbook contains hundreds of items from the Harvard scene: football tickets, bread and butter

Mr. Janitz is an assistant archivist in the Manuscripts Department of the George Arents Research Library.

notes, invitations, theater programs, photographs and report cards. There are also several notebooks which contain Osborne's record of lectures in philosophy, history and music. As always during these years, the correspondence flowed to mother, sisters and friends.

After graduation, Osborne returned to Auburn where a niche awaited him in the D. M. Osborne Company. When his father died a few years later, "T. M. O." was suddenly in charge of the family fortunes. The added responsibility did not deter him from civic duties and cultural uplift in Auburn. In addition to serving on the school board for a decade, he organized and conducted Auburn's symphony orchestra and sometimes delivered lectures on Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner before performances. Among his correspondents were Walter Damrosch and Melville Clark, and on one occasion Osborne conducted a performance of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra. In spare moments he read, built his library, and wrote essays and closet drama which are in the collection with diaries, travelogs, speeches and his published works in manuscript form.

Apparently Osborne felt tied down as president of the Osborne Company. By 1903 he had succeeded in selling the firm to J. P. Morgan, who made it part of the International Harvester Trust. Once free of that burden, Osborne moved into political and social reform on a full-time basis. In 1903 he assumed political office as the mayor of Auburn and was elected for a second term. From his files students of urban history may learn how one reform politician at the turn of the century tried to wipe out corruption and instill efficiency in local government. There are annotated drafts of a home rule charter, which was accepted eventually by the New York Assembly, and several folders concerning city departments of water, fire and police, and public utilities such as the gas and trolley car companies.

Except for recurring instances when his natural independence carried him into third-party ranks or into the Republican camp, Osborne remained an active upstate Democrat to the end of his life. In 1894 he was a candidate for Lieutenant Governor. When the Buffalo Convention of Democrats (1906) nominated William Randolph Hearst for governor, Osborne bolted with the "Honor Democrats" and stumped for Charles Evans Hughes. In speeches around New York Osborne denounced Hearst's "hysterical journalism" and described the publisher as a self-proclaimed savior who played to the ignorance of urban masses while trading secretly with Tammany Hall and the trusts. After the election Hughes rewarded Osborne with a seat on the Public Service Commission. More than two years' correspondence between Osborne and the other commissioners is present in his files.

Osborne resigned from the Public Service Commission to convene the Saratoga Conference, out of which emerged the Democratic League with Osborne as its chairman. Cayuga County then boomed him for governor, but another Democrat, John A. Dix, went to the Governor's Mansion. Dix tucked

Osborne away as Forest, Fish and Game Commissioner, a post he soon resigned.

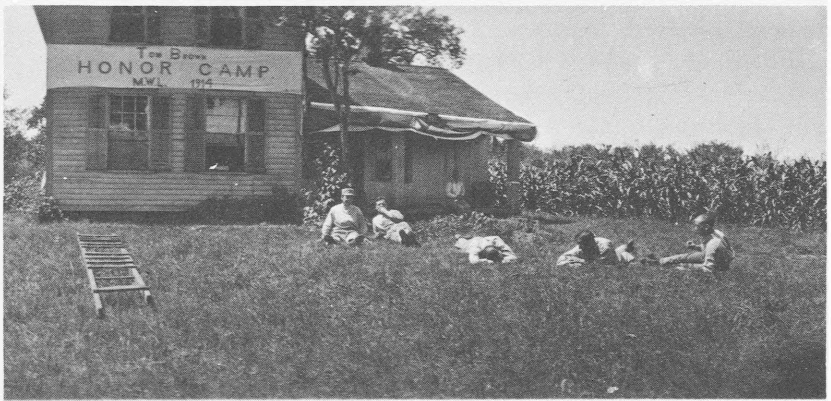
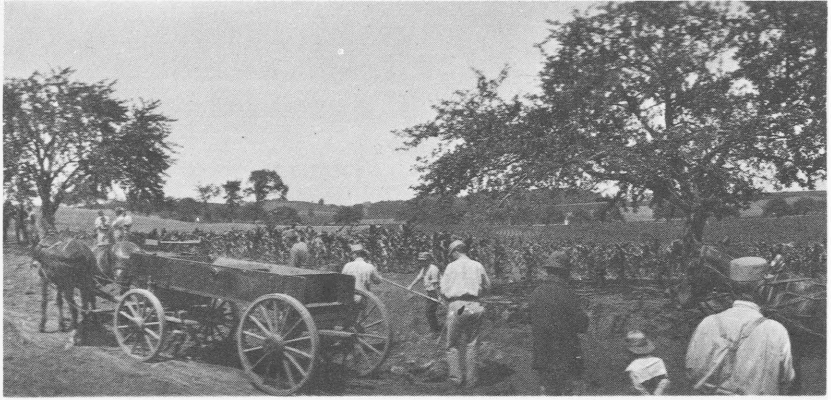
After a vacation in Europe, Osborne returned to New York to canvass the state for Woodrow Wilson. Among his political papers are periodic reports in 1912 from field men like Louis M. Howe, who took stock of the Wilson appeal in upstate cities and towns. About the same time, Osborne's correspondence with Franklin Delano Roosevelt became more regular and their close relationship endured through the heyday of the Progressive years.

Osborne's salad days in reform dated from the 1890's, when he worked closely with William "Daddy" George, Frederick Almy, George Foster Peabody and others in the George Junior Republic, an educational and philanthropic experiment for underprivileged youth. The goal of the Republic was to encourage responsible behavior through paid labor and self-government. "Uncle Tom" Osborne's extensive correspondence with these young people manifests his personal concern for their welfare. Many careers were followed with counsel and cash, which was sent almost as often as it was asked for. Osborne went so far as to finance the brightest young men through preparatory school and then on to Harvard, as he did his own sons.

Disappointments in politics and his early experience with the marginally delinquent seem to have led him into a concern for prison convicts. In 1913 he was appointed first chairman of the New York State Commission on Prison Reform. Casting about for a device to arouse public indignation over the plight of prisoners, Osborne resorted to his lifelong idiosyncrasy of assuming a role: he put on the uniform of a sentenced criminal and entered Auburn Prison as "Tom Brown—X33333."

His account of the experience provided the first of a large series of papers which document prison reform between 1913 and 1926. According to the current state of bibliographic knowledge on the subject, the papers of Thomas Mott Osborne are unparalleled for their scope and continuity regarding one Progressive's labor in the field of penology. After leaving his cell in Auburn Prison, Osborne published a book about his ordeal and that of the men forgotten there, *Within Prison Walls*. A draft of the book and the diary which he kept in prison are among his papers in the collection.

With the cooperation of Warden Charles Rattigan of Auburn, Osborne organized a self-governing body among the prison population. The Mutual Welfare League, as it was called, took over large shares of prison management from the guards. Officers of the League were elected by the prisoners. The purpose was to foster responsible behavior where previously prison administrators had merely controlled convicts by intimidation. According to Osborne, the "old penology" had only generated resentment in convicts, who became repeaters in crime. In the two prisons where Osborne was warden the mixing of diseased men with the healthy, or of hardened criminals with youths, was stopped, and the general atmosphere of repression was changed to one of trust. From the correspondence and papers of Thomas Mott



Honor camp for prisoners, 1914, established by Thomas Mott Osborne in keeping with his concepts of the "new penology."

Osborne in this collection it is clear that he also influenced prison management in several other states. For a decade at least, Osborne succeeded in breaking the cycle of revenge between society and the convict in a handful of penitentiaries. Near the end of his life, he summed up his program before an audience in Tennessee. The quotation is from a Nashville newspaper clipping in the collection:

What I have been trying to get at in my lifetime is that in the vast majority of instances a prisoner is bound to take his place again in society. He can either be prepared for that obligation in a manner that will deter him from being a future menace, and make him a useful member, or he can be so treated during his incarceration that when he gets out again he will be a positive evil and tenfold more troublesome than before. My position on the problem is that criminals are prepared for a return to society neither by brutality and harshness, nor by sentimental, slushy treatment. My program has been to find out what good qualities the prisoner has and to work on those qualities until his point of view toward life has been changed.

But Osborne's attacks against the "old penology" were often resented by the men who staffed correctional systems; many of them were political appointees and therefore not committed to the aims of enlightened penology. At the same time, precipitous action by Osborne in the name of reform alienated officials whose support was crucial to the success of his "new penology." As records of the collection show, political forces were marshaled against him, and a chorus within the press never let him off for "sentimental coddling."

In December, 1915, he was summoned into court on trumped-up charges. After an indictment by the Westchester Grand Jury, the case went to trial. The absurdity of the charges soon became apparent to the judge, who terminated the proceedings after the prosecution rested its case. Osborne's vindication was not absolute, however, and he understood that the allegations were fastened to his name. The atmosphere between Ossining and Albany remained hostile as he resumed his duties at Sing Sing. Rumors continued to circulate about his character until he felt compelled to speak out in defense of his work. He accomplished this in an open letter of resignation in October, 1916, when he also blasted Governor Charles S. Whitman for his lukewarm support of prison reform.

With George W. Kirchwey, Harry Elmer Barnes, Samuel A. Eliot, Austin McCormick and others, Osborne continued to advance the cause of enlightened penology, but through private agencies such as the Prison Association of New York, the National Society of Penal Information, and the National Committee on Prisons and Prison Labor. Minutes of the executive meetings of these associations are to be found in the collection. Among the correspondence files of the same period are Osborne's inquiries to governors

of Maine, Maryland, Pennsylvania and other states where he sought a new appointment as a prison warden.

While many avenues of Progressive reform may have been closed by World War I, Osborne was given a fresh start for testing his theories. He accepted a commission as a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy and received the assignment of salvaging sailors filling the Portsmouth Naval Prison in New Hampshire. The job was obtained through the good offices of his friend in the Navy Department, Assistant Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt. In addition to the Roosevelt correspondence, there are a few letters from Harold Stark, at that time a young naval officer who was accepting ex-prisoners into the fleet, and hundreds of letters and memoranda from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels.

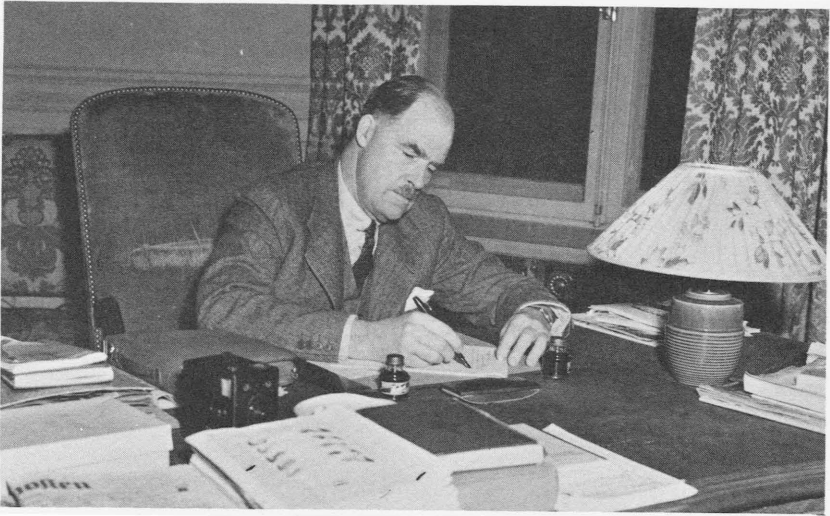
In 1920 Osborne resigned from the Navy and returned to his work with the prison associations. He produced a film about prison life and introduced it to moviegoers across the country. He also visited a score of American and British prisons and published reports which were often critical of their management and facilities. Near the end of this busy retirement his health gave way and he died in 1926 on his way home from an evening at the theater.

His ideas did not entirely supplant the "old system," but neither was there a total rollback to the former institutionalized brutality. The Progressive Era remains a watershed in prison reform, and Thomas Mott Osborne was in the van of that change after 1913. Like dramatists in the theater of commitment, Osborne—an agitator more than an organizer—illuminated a narrow aspect of the human condition, and his success hinged on a response to conscience by his audience. Now that the record of Osborne's work is open for inspection, scholars may begin to measure with precision his contribution to penology. From his correspondence, researchers may also discover the core motives which inspired him to forceful or eccentric behavior.

The last major group of records among the Osborne Family Papers consists of the correspondence and papers of Thomas Mott's son and the donor of the collection, Lithgow Osborne. When he was in the middle of his senior year at Harvard, Joseph C. Grew of the State Department lured him away from college for an assignment to the American Embassy in Berlin. That was 1914, when American overseas bureaus were badly understaffed to meet the crisis of the European War. The correspondence and "Berlin Journal" of Lithgow Osborne provide a vivid account of diplomatic and social life in the German capital between 1914 and 1917. These records are supplemented by photographs and scrapbooks. When President Wilson broke diplomatic relations with the Kaiser, Lithgow Osborne was transferred briefly to Cuba, then back to Europe, where he was Secretary of the American Legation in Copenhagen until the end of the war.



Lieutenant Commander Thomas Mott Osborne,
Warden of Portsmouth Naval Prison, Portsmouth, N. H.



Ambassador to Norway Lithgow Osborne at his desk in the Oslo Embassy

After the Paris Peace Conference Osborne worked in Washington for a year, then became vice-president of the Auburn *Citizen*, a newspaper founded by his father in 1905. At the beginning of the New Deal, he went to Albany as Governor Herbert Lehman's Commissioner of Conservation. Many of his speeches for this period are present among the papers. Near the end of the Second World War he worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

In 1945 President Roosevelt made Osborne Ambassador to Norway, where he remained until May, 1946. In addition to records from his assignment at the Oslo Embassy, Osborne's papers include hundreds of letters from his work a decade later in the Declaration of Atlantic Unity. The DAU was both a statement of purpose and a private agency designed to lobby for a strengthening of political ties in the Atlantic Community. Statesmen, generals and journalists from several western nations are represented in the correspondence, which opens in 1954 and closes in 1968.

Many significant items in the Osborne Family Papers must go unmentioned here, but an inventory, available at the repository, lists all the folder titles from nearly 400 boxes of manuscript materials. A bibliography on correctional history and prison reform since 1800 will be published (elsewhere) within the coming year. When copies are available, the records of Thomas Mott Osborne will be seen in better perspective beside similar materials in Progressive prison reform. The Osborne Family Papers also are valuable for the study of subjects from other periods of American and European life. In the years ahead this large body of manuscripts, rich in social and political history, may be judged among the prizes of Syracuse University Libraries.