

## **ROBERT OWEN AND THE NEW HARMONY SOCIETY**

As discussed above, Robert Owen, the Scottish industrialist, deist, and social engineer, bought the Rappite village of Harmony, Indiana, lock, stock and barrel, in 1825. Owen, well-known in Britain, desired to come to America, where resistance to his experimental ideas would be minimal.

In April of 1825, then, Owen and his colonists took over a ready-made community with

. . . one hundred and sixty houses, churches, dormitories, flour mills, textile factory, distilleries, breweries, a tannery, various craftsmen's shops, over two thousand acres under cultivation with eighteen acres of vineyards and orchards, as well as additional pastureland and woods.

(Rexroth, page 234)

Could Robert Owen and his followers produce social harmony in a secular communistic setting? Time would tell. The communitarian spirit during the first quarter-century had been running high in the United States. A reform spirit was evident. Apparently a well-thought out theory ready for application was all that was necessary for the "good life" to be realized. Were the utopian ideals of the New Harmonists capable of producing a workable system that could be made adaptable in other locations as well? Robert Owen was born in northern Wales in 1771, and was only ten years old when he left home for London to make his way in the world. At nineteen, he had risen to the job of managing one of the largest cotton-spinning mills in Manchester, at the height of the industrial revolution in England. By 1800, he was appointed manager of Scotland's New Lanark mills, where he remained for the next twenty-five years.

As Owen experimented with factory reforms to raise the living standards of his impoverished workers, he became convinced that society needed to be transformed through a communitarian approach. At New Lanark, Owen improved working and living conditions, reduced working hours, raised wages and built a progressive school for the children. In Owen's own words,

'An idle, dirty, dissolute, and drunken population was transformed by the application of proper means into one of order, neatness and regularity.'

(Quoted in Rexroth, page 219)

There were, admittedly, limitations on Owen's success. The business went through several reorganizations, most goods and services had to be brought in from the outside (including food), and most of the two thousand employees were women and children.

Despite drawbacks, New Lanark continued to make a profit even in depression years. According to Owen, improvements in human character were the real success story. Owen came to believe that people were almost totally a product of their environment. By establishing the proper surroundings, lives would change for the better. New Lanark was proof that Owen's ideas could work a dramatic change in the behavior and attitude of the workers. Owen concluded that

'Any character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large.'

(Quoted in Bestor, page 67; emphasis added)

Because of the outstanding success of New Lanark, Owen became well-known in England among businessmen, politicians and nobility. Even the House of Commons asked for his views on factory reform. Owenite “clubs” began to meet to discuss Owen’s ideas, and several communal settlements were formed. His rejection of the “free enterprise” economy and his open hostility to organized religion continued to cause many to oppose him.

The New World seemed to Owen the obvious place to set up his New Moral World on a grand scale. The open frontier beckoned. Perhaps one successful communitarian experiment would be the example which would cause the entire nation to become converted. Alter the environment and people’s baser nature will be transformed. In 1825, then, Owen’s experiment began on the banks of the Wabash River in Ohio.

Initially, there was an immediate number of people who joined Owen and his followers from the surrounding Ohio countryside. Evidence suggests that this was partly because of the positive impression the Rappites had made. Americans, already familiar with the communitarian views of successful religious communities such as the Rappites and the Shakers, could adapt the experience to fit a purely secular mold.

In effect, what these men and women thought they discovered in Owenism . . . was a way of achieving the prosperity, the security, and the peace of a Shaker village without subjecting themselves to the celibacy and the narrow social conformity exacted by Shaker theology.

(Bestor, page 59)

Robert Owen’s first few weeks in America were spent meeting influential business leaders, publishers, university professors and politicians. After negotiating the purchase of the Ohio property from the Rappites in January, 1825, he spent the next three months touring the east, making speeches which outlined his radical “New System of Society.” Members of Congress, the Supreme Court and even President-elect James Monroe attended his lectures. Meanwhile, with Owen’s son William in charge, people began to arrive at “New Harmony,” as the community was named.

By May, 1825, over eight hundred persons had arrived. Owen was ecstatic as he predicted the beginnings of a new order for society.

‘This country is ready to commence a new empire upon the principle of public property and to discard private property and the uncharitable notion that man can form his own character . . . I believe the whole of the district north of the Ohio River comprising all the free states will be [ready] for the change before the [end] of the year 1827. Our operations will soon extend to the blacks [ free and slaves] and the Indians’ (Quoted in Bestor, pages 113-114)

Owen clearly believed a new era in history was at hand. Would he be the “chosen prophet” to open the door to a socialistic “Promised Land”? In practical terms, how would the system work? How would free and equal privileges for all be translated into everyday reality? How would the “common property” be shared according to need? Owen had developed a proposal in England called “Rules and Regulations of a Community,” which he proposed to adapt to the specific set of circumstances in New Harmony. Meanwhile, however, he proposed a temporary constitution which contained plans for a “Preliminary Society,” which would eventually wither away into complete communism. As Director for the first year of operation, Owen would appoint a

committee of member-directors who would replace him eventually. Joining members would be expected to furnish their own furniture and tools, and would be given “credit” for anything they brought with them (cows, horses) to donate to the community. Records would be carefully kept of people’s labor for which they would receive credit at the community store. The store would be the supplier of all community necessities (food, clothing, farm and work supplies, etc.)

After only five weeks of operation, Owen felt the need to leave the experimental community for a lecture tour in England, supposedly to recruit more skilled workers, managers, and farmers. He left his thirty-five year old son William in charge of managing community life for a group of several hundred persons from a wide variety of backgrounds and abilities. All that was asked of new members was to sign the new constitution. Confusion reigned. While Owen, the father, talked to European audiences of expansion plans, Owen, the son, wrote letters complaining of an almost complete lack of any suitable building materials to expand with. Already there was a severe housing shortage at New Harmony and little capital, materials or skilled labor with which to solve it.

What was life like at New Harmony? During the seven months that Owen was lecturing, there was a general optimism which united the group. All looked forward to Owen’s return. Meanwhile there were difficulties—fundamental ones. Housing was a problem. There was also a severe shortage of managers, factory supervisors, skilled craftsmen and farmers. In the first year, manufacturing and agricultural production was far below expectations. Some factory buildings were not being used due to lack of experienced help. People who might have been productive were idle, due to lack of organization plans. The accounting system was complicated. Everyone who had financial needs was given free credit, so that work incentives remained low. A weekly “allowance” was allotted, with individual increases granted by a committee as needs arose. The heavy losses due to underproduction had to be subsidized from Owen’s personal fortune.

Upon Owen’s return in January, 1826, things began to improve. A free public school was organized under excellent progressive leadership. Weekly dances and concerts were scheduled; public lectures and discussions were held regularly. Parades and marching drills provided color. Society meetings and libraries were organized. A newspaper, the New Harmony Gazette, discussed freely all points of view on a variety of social, economic and political questions.

Even with Owen’s return and a new constitution, things continued to get worse. Members of the executive board could not agree on some basic economic issues and Owen was put back in charge to try to hold back a groundswell of discouragement. More constitutions were adopted, more impassioned speeches were made to try to promote unity and keep morale up. In March, two factions broke off from the main community: one in a dispute over religious policies; a second over agricultural methods and alcoholic restrictions (Owen rationed the supply of alcohol). Later, a Third Community broke off to maintain the independence of the Community School. By mid-1826 there were even personal attacks on Owen’s leadership. There were disputes among the splinter communities and a refusal to cooperate with one another. Even Owen’s two sons headed up a dissident group of intellectuals, unhappy with the loafers who were a constant drain to the community’s resources.

Owen’s speeches sometimes tended to make things worse. On July 4, 1826, Owen persuaded the New Harmonyites to approve a “Declaration of Mental Independence,” which “forthrightly denounced religion, marriage and private property—all of which led to further and more serious schisms.” (Rexroth, page 227)

In September, 1826, a fourth reorganization plan signalled the beginning of the end. By early 1827, eighty members left to form a new experiment further west, and most of the town was either up for sale or operated as a private business enterprise. Only the School Society remained true to the original community principles. A fifth and final reorganization plan included the expulsion of certain “undesireables.” (Bestor, pages 197-200)

Owen said farewell to New Harmony in June, 1827, for England. His legacy at New Harmony was (1) a model for future social experiments; (2) an ongoing progressive educational enterprise which would greatly influence public education; (3) a blueprint of “do’s and don’ts” for community administration.

Owen had proven to be an enthusiastic visionary with a poorly thought out plan of action. The colonists had very little, besides the force of Owen’s personality and ideas, to bind them together. Owen’s well-publicized success with factory workers in New Lanark did not guarantee a successful socialistic experiment in the United States. Owen’s failure resulted in no new secular communitarian communities being established for over a decade. It wasn’t until the 1840’ s, with the Brook Farm and Fourierist Phalanxes, that secular communitarianism would see a revival. In the end, the failure at New Harmony was generally seen as a failure in leadership rather than principle; it was the failure of one man’s plan, not the failure of an ideology. The dream was still alive, carried on by the religious groups such as the Rappites and Shakers, who demonstrated the continued economic feasibility of communal living. It wasn’t until the sectarian groups fell behind economically in the 1860’s that the communitarian faith was finally shaken. Until that time, however, social and religious reformers would continue to plan and dream.

Could it still be possible, they wondered, that in this American “land of opportunity” a small community of hope might still emerge to lead the world into a new societal order, a theoretical “New Age?”

## **THE ONEIDA PERFECTIONISTS**

John Humphrey Noyes was the founder of a religious utopian community known as the Oneida Perfectionists and remained its leader until the group abandoned the system of complex marriage in 1879. In 1881, Oneida became a joint-stock company involved primarily in the production of silverware which has continued to the present day.

Noyes attended Dartmouth where he studied law. After graduation, he studied theology at Yale and received his preaching license in 1832. It was in New Haven that Noyes first announced his radical belief that he was morally perfect and incapable of committing sin: New Haven Perfectionism was born with the establishment of a Perfectionist church in 1834. He subsequently set up a Bible School in Vermont, married a Vermont congressman’s daughter, and left New Haven to set up the Putney Community in 1841. His letter of proposal to his future wife Harriet, reveals Noyes views on love and marriage:

‘I desire and expect my [wife] will love all who love God . . . with a warmth and strength of affection which is unknown to earthly lovers, and as free as if she stood in no particular connection with me. In fact the object of my connection with her will not be to monopolize and enslave her heart or my own, but to enlarge and establish both in the free fellowship of God’ s universal family.’ (Quoted in Kern, page 215)

In 1846, the community in Putney decided to live together with all things (and marriage partners) held in common. In 1847, the good citizens of Putney had had enough of Noyes' strange and eccentric ways and threatened to arrest him on charges of adultery and sexual immorality. Noyes and a few of his followers quickly left town and crossed into New York, where, in 1848, they were able to purchase forty acres of land in Oneida, in upstate New York. Later, they set up branch communities in Brooklyn, New York, and Wallingford, Connecticut.

Noyes' radical views on community life were partly a result of personal tragedy. Noyes had witnessed his wife, Harriet's suffering during five extremely painful pregnancies, with the result that four were stillborn. He vowed that never again would he subject his wife to such needless suffering. He discovered a practice he called "male continence," which led later to "complex marriage."

Noyes believed that the physical pleasures of sex were a God-given blessing. Pleasure, however, was often motivated by selfishness, which must be eliminated if the communal system were to succeed. If a husband, Noyes reasoned, would seek his marriage partner's physical pleasure and not his own, the man could "atone" for the sin of selfishness. According to Noyes' philosophy, a man needed to subject his body and sexual desires to the will of God; in doing so he would be seeking "perfect" self-control. Communal fellowship depended on successful performance. The male had to learn objective detachment through control of the will, or he would fall under the control of selfish passion, a threat to the well-being of the entire community.

In 1846, a year before the Putney lawsuit was filed against him, Noyes announced the workings of "complex marriage," or pentagamy, where every male was declared married to every female (and vice versa). Noyes believed that he and his followers were living in the Millennial Age, when monogamous marriage would cease to exist. What appeared to the pious citizens of Putney to be adulterous "free love", in actual practice, was not, since all sexual activity was intended to be supervised and highly regulated. Until 1867, living quarters were communal, and certain rooms designated for "social purposes." A change came about when Noyes' plan for scientific reproduction, called "stripiculture" was introduced. Coincident with stripiculture came the institution of individual rooms, which provided welcome privacy.

The stripiculture system necessitated a Stripiculture Committee, which had to give approval to all couples selected to be "parents", of an improved race of children. The parents were to be morally "perfect"; the children of these parents would progress even further beyond sinlessness. Noyes believed that learned moral characteristics would be transmitted to the children through the parents. The discipline and education of these children was not the parents' responsibility but a communal one. When the child was about a year old, he or she entered the community nursery during the day, and spent only nights with the mother. Then, at four years old, the child was placed in children's quarters, separate from the parents.

The system of mutual criticism was another unique feature of Oneida life. Mutual criticism required a community member to appear before a group of older members who would evaluate his or her personal strengths and weaknesses. Perfectionism was seen as a gradual process whereby individual human failings could be eliminated through collective correction. A rotating committee of four "criticized" each member of the community; then after three months the committee was replaced so that everyone would take turns being critic and criticized. This method served to discipline commune members, provided a forum for individual "testimony," and provided a way to help members (particularly new members) to adjust to community life. The overall goal, according to Noyes, was correction, not punishment. What was best for the life

of the community was the evidence in the lives of community members of an heartfelt commitment to the principles and practices of "Bible Communism" as espoused by Father Noyes. They believed that whatever problems they identified, God would help them solve, whether that problem be spiritual, physical, sexual or emotional. Even the landscape and climate, Perfectionists believed, could be modified under the process of mutual criticism! Arriving at agreement was essential; mutual criticism should serve to unite the communal members and promote a spirit of renewed cooperation.

At first, the Oneida community believed it could recreate an environment much like the Garden of Eden, with fruit-growing their primary occupation. They believed they could bring horticulture to perfection, with God's help.

After ten years, however, the Perfectionists abandoned dependency on horticulture and turned to business and manufacturing for their primary means of economic survival. In the year 1873, they sold over three hundred thousand dollars' worth of manufactured goods and farm produce. They built not only well-planned wooden frame houses, but also large brick buildings, including two central Mansion Houses, the later one (1870) built with twin towers enabling residents to overlook their vast domain. Adaptation was a key concept in their building efforts; there was a constant need for improvement in technique and function. Additions were always being constructed, and interior walls removed and repartitioned. One building, constructed in 1850, served at different times as a granary, chair factory, dormitory, broom factory, sawmill, silk spinning factory, and storage shed. (Hayden, page 199)

The achievements of the Oneidans were these: first, they were able to define an image of a community which had meaning to the members of the community. A collective spirit was cultivated and maintained by strong leadership and group decision-making. A second major achievement was in designing and building the community which they desired. Individual as well as group skills were fostered and utilized. There was a spirit of progressive experimentation in designing and perfecting practical things. They exercised control over their environment which was consistent with their moral and religious principles.

In the end, the Oneidans could not overcome human nature. In attempting to create an "Eden of heart-love" where all could enjoy the "feast of joy forever," (Nordhoff, page 299) Noyes had tried to create' an unselfish socialized system which went against the grain of personal sexual preferences. For over thirty years, John Humphrey Noyes had managed to maintain a utopian-religious experiment that served as a model community. Noyes was a remarkable leader who worked as administrator, cattle-breeder, farmer and blacksmith, and was involved in virtually all aspects of the community's economic life. But in the end, even Noyes' charastatic leadership was not enough to avoid the eventual breakup of the Oneida Perfectionist Community. In 1879, threatened legal action against Noyes for immorality forced him to flee to Canada. Before his departure, Noyes proposed a resolution to abolish complex marriage, which was accepted by the general meeting. With Noyes absent, the colony rapidly broke up, with Oneida becoming a joint-stock corporation in 1881. Looking back Noyes commented, "We made a raid into an unknown country, charted it, and returned without the loss of a single man, woman or child." (Quoted in Hayden, page 190). After thirty-five exciting years it was over. And it had been a fascinating building process.

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