

## Grand Prairie Harmonical Institute

By HARRY EVANS, Superintendent of Warren County Schools

IN 1851 a company of people who felt that their best interests could be better served by a community form of living, organized the "Grand Prairie Harmonical Institute," or, as it was more generally known, "The Community Farm." This was located in Prairie township, Warren county, Indiana, where Wiliam Goodacre now lives. This farm at one time comprised about 350 acres. It was the intention of the founders of the institution to teach handicraft, especially blacksmithing, carpentry and allied trades, and to allow students to work their way through the school.

The country was entirely new, much of the soil was still covered with the native verdure; game was plentiful, deer, geese, ducks, cranes and prairie chickens could be seen in great numbers at almost any season of the year. Their attempt, at this distance, seems unique. An unimproved country where there was little need of skilled labor was to become the seat of an institution of learning where the pupils were to be taught various trades. To us it seems that such an attempt was the limit of the visionary. The Transcendentalists at the Brook Farm in Massachusetts and the Owen experiment at New Harmony seem now to have been as vague as this little colony set down in the midst of a vast prairie country with no neighbors and no demand for their work.

The first president and one of the moving spirits in the enterprise was John O. Wattles, a man who had a more than ordinary education and who had spent some time at New Harmony, where he may have imbibed some of the communistic ideas of the Owens's. The Wattles family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Wattles and their three daughters, Lucretia Celestia, Harmonia and Pheano (or Theanna, as it is spelled in a deed). Lucretia Celestia was born at "Fryback Hall," an institution similar to the Harmonical Institute and located in Pine township, a few miles east of the "Community Farm." She had a right to such a name, for her mother had travelled

all day in the rough conveyance of that time and had reached Fryback Hall in the evening. That night, during a most severe storm, the little one made her entrance into the world about two o'clock in the morning.

Horace Greeley was said to have been a silent member of the Grand Prairie Harmonical Institute company, one deed showing him to be a trustee. John Gass, father of Will Gass, of Attica, was another prominent member and at one time the treasurer. Alvin High, Cyrus Romine and a number of others were connected with the movement. The school was managed by a board of trustees, of whom Ida Greeley, Thomas Truesdale, Alvin High and John Gass were the last to hold office. For a time a number of families seemed to have lived the common life, but, like all such experiments, it failed. While the race is gregarious, there must be a certain amount of rivalry to make life a success. We seem to need the stimulus of competition to spur us on to do the best that is in us. Whatever the cause of failure in this particular experiment of community living, it lasted little more than a year.

The property remained in the hands of the trustees for nearly twenty years, when an order from the United States District Court for Indiana gave possession of the land to Mrs. Wattles. The family had been away for some time, going to Kansas, where Mr. Wattles had tried to carry out his favorite idea of common living. After his death, which occurred about the beginning of the Civil War, his widow, desiring to educate her children, moved to Oberlin, Ohio, where she placed them in the college at that place. Later she sold to Isaac C. Anderson and James McDaniel the land the court had decreed to her and thus ended another altruistic experiment.

For years the "Community House" was a noted landmark. Its site on the top of what was the highest ridge of land anywhere near made it conspicuous. Then there is always a sort of charm and at least a little air of mystery about such a place. Fancy may build golden dreams of higher forms of life where competition shall be forever banished, rivalry unknown and the Golden Rule the measure of our actions.