

## The Harmonist Movement in Indiana

By ELIZABETH SMITH DENEHIE, Terre Haute

The Harmonist movement was a practical lesson in sociology and though not entirely successful, it nevertheless has left a marked influence on the people and communities in which it worked. There are four cardinal types in the institutions of civilization, namely: the family, civil society with its division of labor, the state and the church. Society seems to be a "give and take" proposition. It is like a larger individual; an institutional person. Communism or socialism, of which Harmonism was a type, aims to substitute civil society for the family and for the state.

Harmonism in the United States began its career in Pennsylvania in 1803, under the leadership of George Rapp, a German farmer of plebian descent, one hundred twenty-five families left their homes in Wurtemberg, Germany, and came to America, hoping to find freedom from the religious restraint then existing in their country.<sup>1</sup>

Religion has ever been a powerful motivating force of immeasurable value; it has had strange and various results. In our quiet hours we like to read of the martyrs in the early days of Christianity, who gave their lives for the sake of their religious beliefs; it is interesting to ponder the troublesome days of the Reformation and the outgrowth of them; and again we enjoy teaching our children of the religious motives underlying the coming of the Pilgrims to our shores. All of these movements are carefully chronicled in the world's history and all of them took their rise in religious convictions.

So it was with this Rappite movement, the forerunner of Harmonism in Indiana.<sup>2</sup> Since the initial movement centers about Rapp, a description of the man is of value. He was a German peasant, farmer and vine-dresser by occupation. He was six feet tall, with a long white beard that gave him the bearing of an old patriarch and prophet. He was a cheerful, kindly, sympathetic man and made a strong appeal to the

<sup>1</sup>1. George B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, Preface.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-12.

ignorant peasants under his charge. As has happened many times before, George Rapp gained great prestige by working on the superstitions of the peasants. He told his followers of the many visions he had in which the Lord gave him explicit directions for the construction of great buildings. One vision, in particular, revealed to him the plans for constructing a building in the form of a Greek cross. This came directly from heaven, he told his flock.<sup>3</sup>

Rapp was a careful Bible student and when he was thirty he gave talks to ardent listeners on religious subjects. He acknowledged no written creed, and insisted on the dual nature of Adam. Interpreting Genesis in his own peculiar way, he believed that Adam contained within his own person both sexual elements and he held that both the creator and the created had this dual nature. Furthermore, Rapp said that if Adam had been allowed to remain in his original state, he would have begotten offspring without the aid of a female. But Adam became discontented and God separated the female part of his body from him. This is the Rappite interpretation of the fall of man.<sup>4</sup>

Following this deduction on the fall of man, Rapp renounced marriage and celibacy became a rule of their community life. Exception is taken to this statement, however by some authors. One says that when the families in Rapp's community still lived together there were a few marriages. Between 1805 and 1807 John Rapp, the founder's son, was married and there is no doubt that the elder Rapp performed the ceremony. Later there was a deep religious fervor and revival came upon the Rappites, the rule of celibacy was firmly established.<sup>5</sup>

The keynote of Rapp's creed follows: "Love to God above all and thy neighbor as thyself, without laying much stress on ceremony." He believed in future rewards and punishments but those of the latter were to be but temporary; happiness would ultimately triumph.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with this creed Rapp taught humility and simplicity, self-sacrifice, neighborly love, regular and perse-

<sup>3</sup> Geo. B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 21 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Geo. B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Geo. B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 11.

vering industry, prayer and self-examination. "Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath" was literally enforced. He did all the preaching, allowed no visiting ministers, and thus held an autocratic power over his followers. He was an absolute ruler; he had imbibed this idea of government from Germany and he always insisted that he ruled by "divine right."<sup>7</sup>

This phrase "divine right" is not new to us Americans any longer. It is easy to see how Rapp could have tried to implant his sort of rule in a new country. The World war has changed forever the "divine right" of kings and potentates, and all future reformers shall have to adopt new phraseology.

By 1815 Rapp had developed a thriving community in Pennsylvania and the poor hard-working peasants of a few years before were now living in plenty, although luxury was always barred from the door. Thinking that life was now too easy, Rapp moved his settlement to a new home in Indiana. Toil and suffering had left their traces on the faces of the German peasants and, although they were well-fed and well-clothed they had bought this satisfaction at the cost of heart and soul; with their lives.<sup>8</sup>

The Rappites moved to a tract of land on the Wabash river, a few miles above its mouth. They purchased twenty thousand acres of government land, several adjacent improved farms and founded the village of Harmonie. The name chosen for their new home is very suggestive of peace, harmony, and brotherly love, the trinity which symbolized the desire of Father Rapp.

Harmonie soon showed evident of German thrift; many log cabins, orchards, vineyards, a large church, many manufacturing, a cocoonery, a distillery, woolen mill, saw mill, brick yard, oil well and well built houses testified to the willing spirit of the Rappites. Fred Rapp, the adopted son of George Rapp, looked after the outside affairs of the community, leaving the elder man to give his entire attention to the community itself. Under their joint leadership Harmony became "like some quaint German village transported from the Neckar or the Rhine and set down in this western waste like an Aladdin's palace."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Chas. Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of U. S.*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Geo. B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Geo. B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 29.

The Harmonists wore very plain dresses as the Quakers do and made no pretense to style. The cloth was rough homespun and fashioned to give the greatest amount of wear with the least possible amount of attraction.

The result of Rapp's harmonist movement shows well in dollars and cents at least. When they had left their homes in Germany, the wealth of each individual did not exceed twenty-five dollars and in twenty-one years a fair estimate gave them two thousand dollars each man, woman, and child. This is probably ten times the wealth of an average person in the United States.

The community of Harmonie was bought from Rapp by Robert Owen, an industrial and socialistic worker from New Lanark, Scotland. When Owen and his followers arrived in Harmony they found what was to them, a vision of promise. Arriving in New York from Scotland, Robert Owen gathered a number of intellectual people about him and embarked down the Ohio for their new home. The trip was made in a keel boat and ever since this has been called "The Boat Load of Knowledge."

To understand more fully the Owenite movement in Indiana it is to the point that we glance back in perspective to the rearing of Robert Owen, this leader.

From casual readings at different times on the early life of Robert Owen, I have received the impression that as a child he was a serious, sober, eccentric and precocious child. He did not enjoy the plays of childhood as others did; but he would wander off alone and ponder over great truths and great mysteries of life, some of which the greatest thinkers of the present day have not solved.

When Robert Owen was ten years old he went to work as an apprentice to a London draper; hence he got a very limited education. His father had a large library and Robert had liberal facilities for wide reading. It is said he read five hours a day, a great part of the reading being the big London daily papers. He was peculiarly gifted in possessing a fine business instinct and a persevering spirit of industry. From the position as apprentice at the age of ten he made his own way and showed remarkable capacity for saving money, helping others and getting things done. He made a number of partnerships

from time to time as money and experience allowed. He married Miss Dale of Glasgow, daughter of David Dale, owner of an extensive manufacturing estate at New Lanark, Scotland. In 1800 when he was twenty-nine years of age, he bought this large manufacturing business from David Dale for three hundred thousand dollars.

We here see Owen mixing "business and pleasure," as he set about to get himself a wife.

In 1806 there was a United States embargo declared on cotton and Owen closed his large cotton mill that he had purchased from Dale. During this period of non-employment, Owen paid his workers their wages, thus establishing a very close bond of sympathy and friendship with them. This move on the part of Owen met with the disapproval of his partners and he bought them out for seven hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars. Owen kept fighting bad factory and living conditions and thus inspired manliness, hope and confidence in his employees.

The industrial revolution in England then, in the last years of the eighteenth century caused by the competition of machine labor against manual labor, resulted in a great number of unemployed men. The factory workers lived in squalid homes, had no education, ignored sanitation and simply continued to exist. To the fertile mind of Robert Owen these things presented a problem to be investigated; reform was needed along many lines and he felt himself called upon to work out the solution of the problem.

In the next session of Parliament, Robert Owen urged a bill to regulate child labor and stipulated that no child under ten be employed in factories. The House of Commons took up the matter but it took four years to get its final passage. About this time, Owen made a public declaration of religious principles. From now on his popularity waned; but Owen pushed valiantly on in his studies of social reform.

Up to this period, Robert Owen had accomplished much good in the way of social reform, especially among the mill workers and their families. However, as soon as he began to air his religious views, his influence lost weight.

It seemed as if Providence were in close touch with Owen in his attempts to found a new kind of social world, for at this

time Richard Flower arrived in England. He had been commissioned by George Rapp to sell the great Harmonist estate and so he suggested to Owen that he purchase Harmony in Indiana. So in 1824 Mr. Flower and Robert Owen returned to the United States where the transfer of property was made. By the spring of 1825, Owen became owner of nearly thirty thousand acres of ground, nineteen detached farms, six hundred acres of improved land occupied by tenants and fine orchards, eighteen acres of bearing vines and the village of Harmony. In the village were factories, a church, houses and machinery all waiting for the magic touch of Owen to become the ideal social structure of the world.

Here we may well take up the thread of our story, forgotten a little distance back when the "Boat-load of Knowledge" arrived from New York, with Robert Owen as pilot in the grand new adventure.

Sociologists tell us there are three kinds of reformers in the social work of the world: the pure theorists who picture an ideal state without suggesting practical effort, as Plato in his *Republic*; the practical architect as the Rappites, Shakers, and others who establish societies in imitation of the supposed communism of early Christians; and the combination of theoretical and practical architects, who have combined social theories with practical experiments. Robert Owen christened his new home New Harmony and it became the scene of the most notable architects of sociology of two of these three classes given.

As to the general attitude of Robert Owen to the world, we might quote his words from *The New Moral World*, a periodical of that day to which he contributed, "Civilization! How the term is misapplied! A state of society based upon ignorance, deranging the faculties of all." It was never evident to Owen that he, himself, might be ignorant of some fields of knowledge, and herein was the cause of his failures.

On April 27, 1825, Robert Owen called a meeting in the old Rappite church and there changed the name of the settlement to New Harmony. He pointed out the fact in his address that for a while it would be impossible to avoid a certain degree of inequality because money would have to be spent to

induce men of big intellectual caliber to settle in New Harmony.

Certainly all will agree that Owen showed wisdom in laying the foundation of his new experiment on the grounds of intellectual guidance and attainments.

Feeling his way cautiously, Owen organized "The Preliminary Society of New Harmony," thus placing his followers on a term of probation before admitting them as fullfledged communistic members. As a sort of preamble to the constitution of this preliminary society we read: "the society is instituted generally to promote happiness of the world." Again we feel the effect of Owen's altruism in setting forth such an aim for his society. A critic has asked, "Wherein, then, was the failure of such a noble purpose thwarted?" In the constitution itself Owen called himself the proprietor of the settlement and founder of the system; he claimed the right to appoint committees to direct and manage the affairs of the society. The manner of living in New Harmony was quite significant of his socialistic tendencies:

The members shall occupy the dwellings which the committee may provide for them.

The livestock possessed by members will be taken and placed to their credit if wanted for the society, but if not required it shall not be received.

The living shall be upon equal terms for all with the exceptions hereafter to be mentioned.

Each member shall, within a fixed amount in value, have the free choice of food and clothing.

He added further, that as far as possible each family consume products of America in order to build up New Harmony more speedily.

To those of us who look for a man's good points and strive to cover up his weak points, the statement of Owen in which he suggests the consumption of home-grown products appeals as a patriotic project and worthy of emulation. It is pleasing to note the difference between George Rapp's egotistic claim to govern by "divine right" and Owen's plea to buy and consume American made goods.

The religion of Robert Owen was perhaps at the bottom of most of his failures, so far as I am able to judge from read-

ing. In speaking of his father's religion, Robert Dale Owen said:

My father, a Deist, or free thinking unitarian was tender of my mother's religious sentiments and did not in those days interfere with instructions to try to undermine our belief—My own father! kind, indulgent to us all, and loved and respected by everybody.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Dale Owen in his autobiography calls his mother: a devout Presbyterian, though too gentle to be bigoted and thoroughly imbued with the belief that the most orthodox form of Protestantism is essential to happiness if not to virtue.

As readers we are interested in the home life of a great man and as we look into Robert Owens' home we find him kind to his wife and four sons, sympathetic and charitable. He liked to read but never made notes or engaged in intensive study of books. He is quoted as saying, "the radical errors shared by all men make books of comparatively little value."<sup>11</sup>

This statement then seems rather inconsistent when we learn later that Owen wrote a great number of tracts and editorials himself. Surely he thought people would be moved by these messages of his pen, while they might be deaf to the entreaties of other writers.

Some of Owen's ideas are far in advance of his day, however. In the matter of sanitation it is of interest to note that Owen had worked on the problem of sanitary living conditions for his employees in New Lanark. In 1803 in this mill town of Scotland, "each house had a single room and before each door was found a dunghill." Robert Owen added an additional story to each house and saw that the dunghills were removed. The village streets were also swept every night.

Many people hoped for a better attempt in the second community at Harmony. The people who came to New Harmony were a very intelligent, cultured, refined people while those of Rapp's Harmony were ignorant, uncultured, superstitious people. Surely Owen's work would be a success thought many.

It is interesting to note some of the brilliant minds who came and worked with Robert Owen in New Harmony. First

<sup>10</sup> Robt. Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 57-59.

<sup>11</sup> Robt. Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 57.



there was William Maclure, born in Ayre, Scotland, in 1763. He had come to the United States to make a geological survey of this country. He had tramped on foot every state and territory then within the limits of the United States and he is known as the father of American Geology.

Maclure had a great interest in education and he visited Pestalozzi's school in Switzerland. He was the first to introduce the system of the Swiss educator into the United States. He was also one of the earliest champions of the idea of industrial education here. Investing \$150,000 in the New Harmony experiment, Maclure said that he and Owen would make New Harmony the center of American education.

Another eminent man, who contributed largely to the scientific education in New Harmony was Thomas Say, father of American Zoology. He was a charter member of the association which founded the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences. He edited about one hundred scientific papers.

To Charles Alexander Leseur, we are indebted for our early knowledge of the moundbuilders in Indiana. He was one of the New Harmony educators and he was the first to classify the fishes of the Great Lakes. Some of his sketches are still found in the New Harmony library.

Professor Joseph Neef came and took charge of the education of New Harmony children. With the help of Madame Fretageot he introduced the workings of the Pestalozzian system in the schools.

Frances Wright was one of the notable women in the New Harmony movement. She was the first American advocate of woman's rights and one of the earliest abolition advocates. She wrote and made many speeches in the Hall of New Harmony to set before the people her views, belief in which would help revolutionize the social world. Hoosiers may be proud to claim Frances Wright the first advocate of woman suffrage.

There were other famous persons in New Harmony who contributed to the culture of Owen's settlement, but this paper will not permit a discussion of all of them. These mentioned are types of the minds, with which Owen purposed to bring forth a new moral world.

Robert Dale Owen was for many years in hearty sympathy with his father's plans of social regeneration. As he grew older and studied the situation more closely, he began to inquire into the reasons why his father's plans didn't mature.

One form of government after the other failed in the New Harmony community and the constitution was changed seven times. For business reasons Robert Owen left the community several times and went back to Europe. Each trip seemed to be the cause of dissension among the Harmonists. The executive committees finally asked Owen to become the head of the government, which he did. Still success seemed but temporary. Itinerant preachers were welcomed by Owen; they were entertained at the hotel and then they were at liberty to give free discussions of religion to the communists. With Owen's unorthodox religious views and many different views of traveling preachers, the minds of the Harmonists were sadly disturbed. Then the most natural thing began to happen; new communities began to form around New Harmony as a nucleus.

The greatest progress made in the social world according to Owen is made possible when there are no armies, churches, lawyers, doctors, and exclusive universities. He said further that the practice of religion includes a knowledge of the laws of nature and efforts to do good to our fellow men.

As regards to education, Owen had very original ideas. He did not believe in cramming book knowledge into the child's brain. He aimed to give training that should be vital and harmonize with the social need. He said once in speaking of an educated person, "The bookful blockhead ignorantly read, with loads of learned lumber in his head."<sup>12</sup>

When Maclure arrived in New Harmony there were no public schools in the United States [?] save those of New England where the provision for education for girls was very meagre. So Owen with the aid of Maclure set out to remedy this condition and formulated an educational curriculum.

The program for the children of New Harmony follows:

For children 1 to 5 years, well clothed, well-fed and exercised; 5 to 10 years, light employment, and continued education; children from 10 to 12 years, assist in gardens and house; 12 to 15 years, begin tech-

<sup>12</sup> Wm. Lucas Sargent, *Robert Owen and His Social Philosophy*, 381.

nical training; 15 to 20 education continued, help instruct younger children; 20 to 30 members were to act as superintendent in department of education; 30 to 40 govern the homes; 40 to 60 assist in management of external relation of communities or travel abroad as suited the will.

This program sounds interesting and quite inclusive at any rate.<sup>13</sup>

The status of woman in New Harmony sounds advanced also, in the light of the present day. Owen advocated equal privileges of the sexes. He advocated the right of married women to own property and a number of other things.

The relations existing between the youth and maidens in New Harmony is happily put by Robert Dale Owen. He says:

There were free and simple relations existing between youths and maidens; we called each other by our Christian names only; we spoke and acted as brothers and sisters might, often strolled out by moonlight in groups; sometimes in single pairs; yet withal, no scandal or other harm came of it, either then or later.<sup>14</sup>

The one innovation in education added by Maclure was the industrial school. He believed there should be free, equal and universal schools to which at an early age children should be surrendered and in which they could be clothed, fed, sheltered and educated at public expense. Properly managed the labor of the child at his trade in the industrial department would more than pay for his maintenance and entirely relieve the public from the financial burden of supporting the schools.

Having grown up among the laboring classes, Owen always took an active part in the labor questions of New Harmony. He had peculiar ideas about the currency in this connection too. He proposed to substitute labor in place of gold or silver as a means of exchange. Little bills were issued saying John Smith was indebted to Samuel Johnson for two hours of labor or its equivalent in corn.<sup>15</sup>

Since the recent prohibition law went into effect it will not be amiss to examine Owens' ideas on this subject. When he was twenty years old he applied to a Mr. Drinkwater in New Lanark for a position. On being asked, "How often do you get drunk," Owen replied, "I was never drunk in my life." It

<sup>13</sup> Robert Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 287.

<sup>14</sup> Robt. Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 250.

<sup>15</sup> Wm. Lucas Sargent, *Robt. Owen and His Social Philosophy*, 172.

is needless to add that Owen got this position at several times the amount of salary first tendered him. In New Harmony he allowed no liquor to be distilled, because he thought it detracted from the possibilities of man's highest development. In a speech he made April 13, 1828, he said:

I can only feel regret instead of anger because monopolies have been established in certain departments without my indorsement; it was not my intention to have a petty store and whiskey shop here.

Evidently there were traces of what we term "blind tigers" in Owen's community, though it was much against his wishes.

With this much understanding of Robert Owen and his Harmonistic plans the question as to the cause for its failure arises. Many answers have been given. A few of these are:

Owen lived too long, had he died in middle life before he earned the antipathy of society by the loud proclamation of his ill-considered moral philosophy his memory would have been revered.

The absence of Robert Owen from New Harmony for long and protracted intervals gave rise to dissensions among his people. No central authority perhaps was a factor in the failure of his plans.

Robert Owen saw the errors of orthodox theology and felt their mischievous influence; but he did not clearly perceive the religious needs of the world.

He limited his view of man to the first three score and ten years of his life, ignoring the illimitable future beyond.

The devil is blamed in this poem it seems for Owens work, if not for his failure:

The devil at length scrambled out of his hole,  
Discovered by Synnes at the freezing North Pole,  
He mounted an iceberg, spread his wings for a sail,  
And started for earth with his long barbed tail.

It is well to see both sides of a question, however, and a word or two that places a different estimate upon Owen's work is to the point.

Sargeant says:

Owen had a shallow philosophy; he wasted power in his long life; he had a narrowness of mental vision; his schemes of social reform were crude and mischievous; with all these faults and even though he was not a great man, he was great among self-educated men.

English communism is best represented by Robert Owen.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Wm. Lucas Sargent, *Robt. Owen and His Social Philosophy*, 446.

The co-operative movement in society is rapidly becoming a national movement now, sustained by the development and activity of an ever increasing popular knowledge. Owen's ideas and ideals were passed on and many of them are at work now.

Whatever may be the exact result and influence of the Harmonist movement in Indiana is difficult to state; yet we all may praise Owen for his unfaltering courage in pursuing his ideal steadfastly, through a period of years that ended only with the grave. Robert Owen died in 1858 in the house next to the house in which he was born in the little town of Newton, England.

Robert Owen left four sons, all sturdy industrious men, who lost nothing of their father's courage and perseverance. Robert Dale Owen came to New Harmony with his father when he was twenty-four years and his life is intimately connected with the later life of New Harmony. He was one of the notable men who signed the second constitution of Indiana. Although by 1830 there was not an association to continue the movement so auspiciously begun five years before by Robert Owen, there are still many landmarks whereby the history of the Harmonist movement can be traced. Robert Dale Owen worked tirelessly in the political interest of Indiana for several years and especially did he urge that women be given the rights due them. He pays a very beautiful tribute to women in the following:

I owe to woman as wife and friend, all the best, happiest—yes, the purest hours of my life. I have no associations connected with the name of woman save those of esteem and respectful attention. I owe to her a sense of gratitude that can never be paid though my days were extended to the term of life assigned to the ancient patriarchs and though all those days were devoted to the vindication of her rights.